

DAYS  
WITH  
MY  
STEP  
SISTER



Ghost Mikawa

illust Hiten

Days with my Step Sister

presented by  
ghost mikawa

9

# DAYS WITH MY STEP SISTER



Ghost Mikawa

illust Hiten

"Asamura-senpai?  
I might be inexperienced,  
but please take care of me!"





"I'm not going  
anywhere. I'll stay  
right here with you."

RAINY NIGHT



LAST SUMMER

# ABOUT CLUB ACTIVITIES



Hey, why didn't Asamura and the rest of you guys join any clubs?



I wanted to focus on study and work. Plus, there wasn't really a club I was into.



Same here. Some of them also force you to do group stuff.



Gotcha.

Well, that's pretty on brand for Asamura and Ayase, but why is Narasaka in the Go-Home Club?



Probably 'cause she has to take care of her younger brothers?



Wrong! Surprise! I'm not in the Go-Home Club!



Plot twist: even though it might not look it, I'm in the video production club.



I had no idea... So when do you guys meet?



We don't.



What's up with that?



Well, I just thought it'd be cool to make some YouTube videos and stuff, so I kinda just joined to borrow the equipment.



A ghost member?



More like an honorary member!



What kind of vids are you shooting?



A deep dive into the exciting sibling life of Asamura-kun and Saki!... or something.



Aw, c'mon!

Rejected.

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# Message From Translator

Fan translation by Fungus Translations. **Not for resale.**

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## June 12th (Saturday) — Asamura Yuuta

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My old man, dragging a large suitcase, stood side by side with Akiko-san at the front entrance.

I could see the blue sky behind them from where I stood in the hallway. The rainy season would probably start in just under a week, but today, it was sunny and pleasant. If you listened close, you could hear sparrows chirping from the treetops below.

“Um... So, Yuuta, we’ll be off now.”

“Take care of the house, okay?”

My old man looked worried, while Akiko-san seemed rearing to go.

“Yes, everything will be fine.”

I turned a forced smile towards Akiko-san and shot my old man an annoyed look, as if to say, “You don’t need to worry so much.”

“Are you absolutely sure? Don’t forget to lock up, alright? And don’t skimp on your meals just because it’s a hassle, you have to eat properly. It’s not cool to skip them just because it’s a pain, you hear?”

“Yes, yes. Leave it to me.”

Ayase-san, standing beside me, chimed in too.

“Don’t worry. I’ll cook, and lock the doors too. Yuuta-niisan and I will make sure to watch over the house while you’re away.”

*Yuuta-niisan.* Just hearing that got my heart racing a bit.

“Yuuta-niisan” was a special way of addressing me that Ayase-san and I decided on about ten days ago, to use exclusively at home. We told our parents some vague reason like, “We’ve been living together for a year, so it’s a good time to change.”

It wasn't *technically* a lie, but not the whole truth either. We were just supposed to be step-siblings, but our feelings for each other have grown beyond that. After an undefined relationship over the summer, we confirmed our feelings for each other on Halloween. Since then, our relationship had changed from just being step-brother and step-sister to also being lovers.

On the flip side, though, there was my old man and Akiko-san's relationship to consider. They'd both been single parents for a fair while before remarrying and had finally created a family together. It wasn't something Ayase-san nor I wanted to jeopardize. It's not like we could be shameless enough to ignore the fact we were step-siblings, even if it *was* just by marriage.

That was probably why, ever since we were put in the same class at school, we'd struggled to gauge the proper distance between us. Without realizing it, we'd reached a point just shy of codependency. We couldn't go on like that. We felt that something had to change, hence why we decided to reconsider our boundaries at home. So, at home, Ayase-san would call me "Yuuta-niisan." It's a bit more intimate than "Asamura-kun," but by adding "niisan," it serves as a reminder of our roles. Ayase-san wanted to tone down the excessive displays of affection at home. As for me, I chose to close the gap a bit and call her "Saki," sans honorifics.

But, even though we decided on it together, I'm still not used to Ayase-san calling me "Yuuta-niisan."

"It sounds a bit awkward, doesn't it?" Akiko-san pointed out, causing my blood to pump faster.

"W-what does?"

"You seem a bit uneasy whenever she calls you 'niisan', Yuuta-kun."

"It's not like that, right, Yuuta-niisan? That's right, isn't it, Yuuta-niisan? You're used to it now, aren't you, Yuuta-niisan?"

She was being a little too forceful. Repeating it over and over again feels kind of counterproductive. My old man was giving us a weird look, too.

"Uh, well, yeah. I guess I'm used to it."

I tried to just brush it off with a vague answer, and Akiko-san sighed, saying, "Well, it's fine."

"Anyway, you two don't need to worry about Saki and me. It's a rare chance for you to go on a trip alone together, so just enjoy yourselves."

My old man and Akiko-san were about to go on a one-night, two-day trip, for the first anniversary of their remarriage.

The first I'd heard of it was five days ago, on the anniversary of us all living together. Though, I'd since heard my old man's feelings on it from Ayase-san—via Akiko-san. Apparently he'd intended to cancel this trip. Although they'd planned it, the fact that both of them had remarried and each brought along a minor from their previous marriages (Ayase-san and I) made him consider giving up on the trip. Us preparing for entrance exams might've been another reason. But that's when Akiko-san had told him it would only make us kids feel bad if they canceled.

"But still, leaving the two of you alone at home feels kind of irresponsible..."

"It's fine, Taichi-san. There've been times when both of us weren't home, haven't there? Isn't that right, Saki?"

Ayase-san gave her a sharp nod in response. Akiko-san smiled warmly when she saw her daughter's face. She playfully smacked my still-reluctant old man on the butt to hurry him along.

"C'mon, Taichi-san. If we don't leave soon, we'll get stuck in traffic."

He finally started to wheel the suitcase towards the elevator. Even then, he glanced back at us. Ayase-san and I waved until the two of them got onto the elevator. Once they were out of sight, we went back inside.

"My old man's such a worrywart."

I locked the front door as I thought about the look on his face.

For the next two days, it'll just be Ayase-san and me. Alone.

"Should we eat now? If we wait too long, it'll be lunchtime already," Ayase-san said.

"Sounds good."

I took out my phone to check the time—just past 7:30.

Cooking on weekends usually falls on Akiko-san and my old man. But since both of them were away, it was up to us to cook for ourselves. Today was Ayase-san's turn, and tomorrow would be mine.

We both headed to the dining room.

"I'll help with prep."

“Nah, it’s mostly done, so just sit down at the table.”

I felt guilty about doing nothing, so I took care of the little tasks I could do. I wiped down the table, served up the rice, and got us drinks as per usual. I took out a pot of barley tea we’d been chilling in the fridge. When I poured it into a glass, beads of condensation quickly formed on the surface. It was already mid June, so it was warm even in the mornings. We had the air-con going.

As I sat down at my seat, I snuck a glance at Ayase-san’s back while she cooked. She was wearing an off-shoulder white top under her apron, adorned with small ribbons on both upper arms. Instead of comfortable loungewear, it looked more like an outfit for going out, minus her accessories—like a choker and earrings. Just like a year ago, she looked *impeccable* as always. That being said, our relationship had changed a lot since then.

“Alright, should we eat?”

I quickly looked up, startled by Ayase-san’s voice. Everything was ready. The two of us put our hands together and said “*itadakimasu*” before digging in.

Grilled salmon slices, rolled omelet, rice, and miso soup—probably the most standard combo we’ve had over the past year. It was the kind of breakfast you’d find at a ryokan<sup>1</sup>. I was curious about the ingredients peeking out from the miso soup, so I stuck my chopsticks in and stirred it lightly before speaking.

“There’s cabbage in here.”

“Yep. Spring cabbage and new potatoes<sup>2</sup>. It’s miso soup with seasonal veggies. Is it weird?”

“Nah. I’m just not used to having cabbage, let alone potatoes, in miso soup.”

When I think of cabbage, for whatever reason I picture it shredded and served next to tonkatsu<sup>3</sup>. Or cut into bite-sized pieces and stir-fried with onions, carrots, and pork.

“I figured it was normal to put it in miso soup too. Anyway, if it feels strange, you can think of it as stew.”

“You mean like, think of it as a miso-flavored stew?”

“Exactly.”

I swapped my mental image of the miso soup in front of me to Western soup and looked down at it again, and strangely enough, the weird feeling vanished. *Ah okay, so this is what prejudice feels like.*

“By the way, is it cabbage season at the moment?”

I got a nod in reply.

Spring cabbage, as the name suggests, is cabbage sown in autumn and harvested in spring.

“It’s more like early summer than spring now, but it’s still in season.”

“It’s around that time in the north, isn’t it? I don’t really know, honestly. But they had it labeled ‘spring cabbage’ at the shop, so I’m sure it’s right. Same for the new potatoes. Besides, it’s fine if it’s off by a month or two, right?”

*I feel like if it’s off by two months, the season would have changed, but that’s fine I guess. What matters is whether it’s delicious or not.*

I lightly stirred the soup to even out the flavor before taking a sip.

“This miso soup... or should I say miso stew? Either way, it’s delicious. You can really taste the sweetness of the veggies.”

I picked up some cabbage and new potatoes with my chopsticks and took a bite. They were cooked just right, with the cabbage retaining its crunchiness and the potatoes maintaining their fluffiness. That meant the timing for cooking them had been spot on. And that subtle taste on my tongue was...

“Ginger?”

“Yeah, just a touch.”

“Wow, it’s refreshing.”

“Thanks for saying that.”

Maybe I’d overdone it with the compliments, as Ayase-san’s response was a bit indifferent as she quietly started eating too. Over the past year, I’d learnt that when Ayase-san acted like this it was likely down to her shyness.

“So, Asa—Yuuta-niisan, what’re your plans today?”

“It’s okay, you can call me Asamura now. Our parents aren’t around.”

“No. If I call you that, you’ll feel too much like a stranger. That’s the reason I decided to call you ‘Yuuta-niisan’ in the first place.”

So, for Ayase-san, this was like some magic spell she used to avoid getting too touchy with me at home.

Abracadabra. Alakazam. Brothers and sisters shouldn't hug each other and what not at home, off we go.

But just keeping her away from me won't solve anything. If I do that, she won't see me as "special and close family." So, I have to get a little closer.

"Uhm, my plans... I have work in the afternoon. What about you, Saki?"

Hearing me use her name, Saki's face relaxed and she smiled, her usual poker face crumbling. If changing the way I address her relieves her stress, I'll gladly do it... at least, I think I can.

"I'm just going shopping today. We're running out of detergent, and we need more veggies too. I also have homework to do, so I figured I'd get it done on Saturday."

"I'm gonna be near the station for work anyway, so why don't I buy what we need?"

"Alright then, I'll make a list of what we need later. If anything comes up, I'll shoot you a message."

"Got it."

"..."

Huh? She's looking at me with such expectant eyes.

"Got it, Saki."

"Uh-huh. Thanks, Yuuta-niisan."

*Alright. I think this is probably the appropriate distance between me and Ayase-san right now. I feel like that worked.*

"What's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"You have this look like you've just finished a task or something."

"Do I?"

"But you know, in times like these, you tend to forget the important stuff. You sure you're okay?"

"I think I'm okay... I hope."

I was feeling a bit anxious now, if I'm honest.

After that, we chatted about what had been going on in our lives over the past few days while eating the typical Japanese breakfast.

We talked about how our throats were dry when we woke up in the morning, how summer was already here, and how swimming classes were starting. Speaking of, Ayase-san mentioned that she might need to buy a new swimsuit this year because the old one might not fit anymore. Midway, Ayase-san seemed to realize who she was talking to and hesitated. Her candidness was probably a remnant from when her only conversations at home were with Akiko-san. It goes to show how I've become someone she trusts and can be comfortable around. Though, even if I were her *real* brother, swimsuit sizes probably wouldn't be on the list of conversation topics. Perhaps this was a manifestation of her uncertainty about our closeness.

To avoid any awkwardness, I decided to change the topic. Anything would have done, but what came to my mind was...

“How you feeling about the sports festival on Tuesday?”

“Not too bad, I guess. But, I mean, at the very least I don’t want to hold everyone back. You feel that way too, don’t you Yuuta-niisan?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty rubbish at basketball.”

“Oh really? Honestly, I never thought you’d choose basketball.”

Hearing her call me “you” threw me for a loop. Is it because she recently stopped calling me “Asamura-kun”? She occasionally mixed in the pronoun “you” when addressing me now. Maybe “Yuuta-niisan” was too long for her, or perhaps she subconsciously didn’t want to address me as a brother. Regardless, my brain hadn’t adjusted to the unfamiliar phrasing yet.

“Yoshida invited me.”

“Oh, you guys have been pretty close lately.”

“We have, yeah, since we were together on the school trip.”

“I saw you two practicing hard. Your shots were on point.”

I chose basketball, and Ayase-san chose volleyball, so we both practiced in the gym. Meaning, we could see each other’s progress.

“You saw that? I just got lucky with that one shot.”

“But if you did it once, you can do it again.”

“To do that, I need *a lot* more practice.”

I’m not good at it, after all. Being more of an indoor person, I can’t keep up with sports club members like Yoshida. That said, my endurance might be at least above average. Working at a bookstore is pretty physically demanding. It was a relief that I wasn’t *completely* hopeless at sports.

“It probably suits you better than tennis though, right?”

“Now that I think about it, Saki, you nailed both receiving and returning the ball at practice. You’ve got some skills, I must say.”

In basketball you only need to grab the ball, but in volleyball you need to return it, which seems more challenging to me. In fact, when I played it in PE, I was hot garbage at receiving the ball.

“I’m not good at it either. But if I’m going to do it, I don’t wanna weigh down my teammates,” Ayase-san said with a wry smile.

“Well then, let’s just give it our best shot.”

“Agreed.”

In truth, both of us were surprised by our individual choices. Me choosing basketball and Ayase-san choosing volleyball. Until last year, we both chose tennis, a solo sport where we didn’t have to interact with other people. And I remember when Ayase-san used to skip or slack off in the PE classes meant for sports festival practice.

To be fair, Narasaka-san, who *claimed* to have practiced, once showcased a spectacular home run during tennis, so the jury’s out on how committed she was to it. I digress. The point is, both of us used to say we absolutely despised team sports.

And yet, both of us were participating in team competitions this year.

We shared a meal together in the morning light, occasionally trading words between bites. Time seemed to flow slowly. The TV in the living room was off, and there was no news or music to disturb us.

Every time she reached for the big salad bowl in the center of the table, Ayase-san’s hair would cascade down from her shoulders. *It’s gotten longer*, I thought. Her once-short hair had returned to its original length. Its brightly colored tips looked almost translucent as her hair caught the morning sunlight streaming in through the window.

“What is it?”

I quickly looked away after realizing I’d been staring. This was the first weekend I was spending alone with the step-sister who popped into my life a year ago. As Akiko-san rightly pointed out, there were definitely days when both of our parents didn’t return home until late at night. In that sense, it was just like any other day really. But, I couldn’t remember a single time both of them had been gone for an *entire* day. It was just the two of us. Whatever Ayase-san and I did, there was no one to stop us or tell us off. Not that we planned to do anything in particular, mind you.

“Thanks for the food,” Ayase-san said.

“Looks like you finished eating quickly while I was spacing out. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. It’s Saturday after all.”

Ayase-san unhesitatingly put the kettle on, likely to make some tea or coffee to finish up the meal.

“But I have work.”

“What time are you leaving?”

“Like, 10. I start at 11.”

Time was ticking. After cleaning up after the meal, I washed and hung up my work uniform. By the time I packed it into my bag, it was already time to leave. Ayase-san handed me a bento, saying she’d made it for me to eat during my break. I’d just planned on grabbing something from the convenience store, so I was more than happy to accept it. *I should make something for her when she works tomorrow*, I thought to myself.

I pedaled my bike towards the station. The noise of the bento box rattling around in the basket annoyed me, so I couldn’t ride as fast as I normally did. I hope Ayase-san’s handmade bento isn’t ruined.

I walked into the bookstore where I work. I changed into my uniform and went to the office, where I saw an unfamiliar girl talking to the manager. But before I could wonder who she was, the girl looked at me and bowed.

“Nice to meet you. Starting today, I’ll be working here. My name’s Kozono Erina.”

The girl bowing and introducing herself looked to be about one or two years younger than me. Most likely two, so maybe a first year at high school. The new school term had only started two months ago, and she still had a junior high schooler vibe about her.

She was short. Among the girls I knew—excluding cousins—the shortest I'd ever met was Narasaka-san. But this girl looked even shorter than that. I felt like I'd have to bend my knees a bit just to make eye contact with her. That's probably why she seemed even more like a small animal than Narasaka-san. The way her soft hair was tied up high on both sides of her head added to her childlike appearance. I wasn't up with women's hairstyles, but I'm pretty sure this was what they called "twin tails." The interesting part to me was that her hair was two different colors. It was mainly black, with dyed pink strands mixed in.

I had a hunch she might be a new part-timer, honestly. Yomiuri-senpai, who the store manager relied on most, said she'd be busy with job hunting and her graduation thesis. Seeing the drop in work hours coming, the manager mentioned he wanted to hire more student part-timers for weekends.

"Good morning, Manager."

"Uh-huh. Good morning, Asamura-kun."

The manager greeted me back with that usual gentle smile of his. I guess he'll introduce me.

"That's Yuuta," he said, nodding in my direction.

I bowed my head slightly to her and glanced at the girl. It looked like he understood the meaning behind my gaze.

"I mentioned it before..."

"About a new student part-timer, you mean?"

"Yeah. She'll be helping us out starting today. Umm... Kosono, no wait, Kozono... is that right?"

"Yes, it's Kozono. In Kanji it's written as 'small garden'."

"Garden... Ah, isn't that written as 'sono'?"<sup>4</sup>

"Yes! Like 'ko-mado' is small window, or 'ko-bune' is small boat, 'ko-zono' is 'small garden!'"

"Got it. Kozono-san it is. I'm Asamura."

“Asamura-senpai? I might be inexperienced, but please take care of me!”

“Ah, no, same here.”

Wait. What did she mean by “please take care of me”?

“I was only just telling her, but I’m thinking about leaving Kozono-san’s mentoring up to you, Asamura-kun.”

“Me, ah, wait, myself?”

“*Haha.* You don’t have to force yourself, Asamura-kun. You’re always so polite. It’s okay to just say ‘me.’ No one’s going to care, in *this* store at least.”

I’ve been working here since my first year of high school, so it’s been a full two years. That’s a long time for student part-timers, sure, but there are people like Yomiuri-senpai and others who have been here longer than I have. Plus, in terms of age, Ayase-san and I are the youngest. That’ll change though, with Kozono-san joining.

“I think it’s easier to get advice from someone close to your own age.”

“Well, I’m not that great of a teacher—”

“But Ayase-san seems to rely on you, so why not give it a try? And you must’ve learnt a lot from Yomiuri-san the year before last, didn’t you? Just remember all that. I don’t expect you to do everything on your own, of course. I’m planning to ask Yomiuri-san to help as well, and I want you to get advice from her if you run into any problems.”

The manager continued, saying that Yomiuri-senpai would be starting her shift in the evening today, which might not give her enough time to mentor Kozono-san very well.

When it was all laid out like that for me, I couldn’t find a reason to refuse.

When I started working at the bookstore in my first year of high school, it was Yomiuri-senpai who took on the role of training me. Now, apparently, it was my turn to train someone else. One good turn deserves another, I suppose. What goes around comes around.

I was told that for Kozono-san, not only was this her first time working in a bookstore, but her first actual job in general. That’s exactly how I started a few years ago. Knowing that my actions could shape her first impressions of working felt like a big responsibility to shoulder... but I guess I’ve just gotta do it.

“I’m not sure how well I can teach, but I’ll do my best.”

“Yes! Thank you so much!” She replied energetically, giving a little bow.

Bright and polite—that was my first impression of her. Almost like sunshine. No, that’s not quite right. Narasaka-san always reminded me of a squirrel or a puppy. Kozono-san, on the other hand, seemed even smaller, kind of like...

“A hamster...”

“Pardon?”

“Ah, no, just talking to myself.”

I was about to say that she was like an energetic golden hamster, but I quickly shut my trap. That was my first impression of this new small animal-like part timer.

“Would it be best to start with showing her around the store, Manager?”

“Yes, please.”

With his instructions in mind, I started by showing her the layout of the store. I handed her the provided uniform and guided her to the changing room. While she was changing, I did a quick lap of the shelves, thinking about the order in which to show her everything.

Since it was a Saturday, I’d asked for a slightly longer shift today, and the manager had given me the green light. I’m sure it’s fine to set aside time this time for Kozono-san’s training.

After finishing my lap, I saw that Kozono-san had just finished changing and had come out of the changing room. She’d correctly pinned a “training” badge to her chest.

“Alright, come this way. I’ll start by showing you the back of the store.”

“The back... that sounds kinda sketchy.”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. By “the back” I mean, um, the place where we keep our backup stock.”

“Oh, the storeroom! I misunderstood when you said ‘back’.”

That misunderstanding was definitely on me.

I took Kozono-san to the warehouse.

“The books delivered by the distributor are stored here. A distributor acts as a middleman between publishers who produce the books and bookstores like ours.”

“So like, a wholesaler, right?”

“Right, yeah.”

I briefly explained the role of the warehouse and then returned to the shelves.

“The room where you and the manager were earlier is the office. During breaks, you can rest in the break room next door, the office, or even go outside for a little while. If you want coffee, tea, or water there’s a vending machine and a water cooler in the break room.”

“I don’t really like tea, it’s too bitter.”

“Then you might wanna use the vending machine. It has juice too. But if you go outside the store, it’s probably best to take off your apron and badge. If it’s your meal break, you have to change before heading out.”

After explaining all that, I shot a glance at the store’s clock—just past 11:30. If we kept dawdling, lunchtime would sneak up on us.

“Alright, let me give you a rough tour of the store.”

“Yes!”

I took Kozono-san towards the store’s entrance.

“Every store has what’s called a ‘customer path’.”

“Ah, umm...?”

“It means how people move around inside the building, the path they take.”

“Oh, that’s why we came back to the entrance.”

From talking to her, I picked up that Kozono-san was a smart girl.

“I thought it’d be easier to remember if I showed you around following our store’s customer path. You don’t have to remember everything, but just try to get a rough idea.”

“Understood.”

What kind of people visit this store near Shibuya station? I told her that, while also explaining how the books were arranged according to customer demographics. We did one full lap. I remembered that, two years ago when I first started, Yomiuri-senpai had guided me just like I was doing now.

It was her first job, so she must've been feeling nervous too, and there's no way she'd remember everything I told her all at once. So, I didn't expect her to remember everything I've shared. There's a method behind the madness of how the shelves are arranged. As long as she got the gist of it, that was good enough.

After that, I started teaching her the basic tasks and greetings. Lastly, I guided her to the cash register counter and briefly explained the cashier's duties.

Though, there was a bunch of stuff to remember about modern cash registers, so for a while, she'd start with tasks like standing next to the cashier and putting covers on books.

As expected, when I went over stuff like how to handle credit card payments, Kozono-san looked totally lost.

*Well, this is probably the limit for the first day.*

We returned to the office. It was just about 12 pm.

I should add, I also taught her how to punch the time card during breaks. Nowadays, some companies manage entry and exit with IC cards, but our store still used paper time cards.<sup>5</sup>

Insert the rectangular paper into the narrow hole of the machine. Push it in lightly, and the card slips in. There's a *click*, and the current time is stamped on it, before it smoothly comes out again. Your actual working hours are calculated based on this stamped time.

“It’s interesting, isn’t it?”

“Well, I think IC cards would be more convenient, though.”

Even though payment at the front was becoming electronic, employee management was still analog. Well, that will probably change little by little too.

“With all that said, it’s time for our lunch break. You get a whole hour. You can go out to eat if you like, but what do you wanna do?”

“I have a bento. Can I eat it in the break room?”

“That’s fine.”

“...I wonder what I should drink,” she muttered.

*Come to think of it, she did mention she doesn’t like tea.*

“You can buy something from the vending machine outside, or if you’re okay with plain hot water, you can drink from the hot water dispenser.”

“Thank you.”

Kozono-san ran off towards the lockers where she had left her stuff.

The bookstore was usually open during meal times, so someone had to work during that time. I don’t know how other stores manage, but here we staggered our lunch breaks according to who’s available. We usually do it like that, but today I thought it might be better to eat too. Taking a peak at the crowd inside the bookstore, I saw that customers from downtown were also heading out to have lunch, meaning there were fewer of them. I figured I should eat now. If I waited, Kozono-san would just be hanging around twiddling her thumbs after finishing her meal.

I grabbed my lunch and headed back to the break room, but Kozono-san wasn’t there yet. I decided to just start eating without waiting for her.

With some tea I made from the dispenser, I opened the bento Ayase-san had made for me.

“Oh, a three-color bento, huh?”

From the top, it was beautifully divided into three sections, like a flag. The middle white part was rice, the right was orange, and the left was yellow. The orange was flaked salmon layered over the rice. Clearly the grilled salmon we’d had for breakfast had been reused for lunch. She must’ve been thinking about what to put in the bento while she was making breakfast. The yellow part was scrambled eggs. I grabbed some with my chopsticks and tasted it; it had a dashi<sup>6</sup> flavor, was slightly sweet, and simply delicious.

There was a small Tupperware container that’d been stacked on top of the bento in the lunch bag. You could tell from the outside that it was filled with salad. It was packed with lettuce, onions, and shredded carrots. There was also a single cherry tomato. In the corner of the container was a tiny fish-shaped dressing bottle filled with an opaque liquid. Probably dressing. I drizzled it over the top and took a bite.

After polishing that off, I started on the bento. I scooped up the scrambled egg and some rice underneath it with my chopsticks and placed it on my tongue. The slightly moist egg combined perfectly with the somewhat dry rice, making it neither too dry nor too wet when chewed.

It was delicious. But also frustrating.

Ayase-san will work tomorrow, and I'd love to make lunch for her, but I reckon something on this level is way beyond me.

I heard the sound of the door opening and looked up. Kozono-san came in, holding her lunch bag.

“Excuse me. Oh, you have a bento too, senpai?” she said, walking past me and moving to the seat across from me.

As she sat down at the long rectangular table, Kozono-san glanced at my bento.

“It looks delicious. Did you make it, senpai?”

“Uh...”

What should I do? It feels wrong to lie.

“My family made it for me.”

That was my response. It wasn't a lie, at least. But just because something isn't a lie doesn't mean it's the truth.

“Really?”

“What about you, Kozono-san?”

I might've been a bit too transparent in trying to change the subject, but fortunately, Kozono-san didn't pry any further.

“My mama made it for me,” she said, opening her small bento with a *snap*. Kozono-san immediately froze.

The rice inside was covered with pink furikake<sup>7</sup>.

“Ugh, I told mama I'm in high school now, so should she stop using sakura denbu<sup>7</sup>...”

It seemed like she was bummed about not being treated her age.

But, despite her complaints, she put her hands together, said “itadakimasu,” and got stuck in with a cheerful smile as she moved her chopsticks contentedly. Seeing her like this, I kind of understood why her parents would sprinkle pink furikake on her rice.

The rest of our break went by without much chit-chat.

I showed Kozono-san how to organize the shelves again, and before I knew it, it was time to clock out. *Well, that's probably how it is for the first day of a job.*

We both headed back to the office. No one was around. Given it was nearly evening, the store was getting crowded. No doubt the manager and everyone else were rushed off their feet.

It's not like saying goodbye before leaving was mandatory or anything, but...

Just as I was wondering what to do, the door swung open, followed by the sound of humming.

“*Hmm, hmm, hmm~♪*. Goooood mornin’! Junior-kun. How’s it hanging!?”

It was Yomiuri-senpai, her long hair gathered in a bundle at the back, and dressed in a suit.

“Well, you’re in a good mood.”

“My interview went pretty well. Now you can praise me.”

“Good job.”

“That ain’t really praise, now is it?”

“You did well.”

“C’mom Junior-kun, that’s so weak... I’m happy with your kindness and support, but it wouldn’t hurt to hear ‘You’re amazing’, ‘You did so well’, or ‘You’re a genius’ once in a while. Seems to me like you’re not giving me enough senpai service.”

“What the heck is ‘Senpai service’...?”

“I mean, it was real tough, y’know... hm? Oh my, who’s this cute girl? Oh my, oh my, oh my.”

Her voice rising an octave, she walked towards Kozono-san, who was shrinking back as if trying to hide behind me. She pulled back a bit as the unidentified creature—I mean unfamiliar senpai—descended on her.

Perfectly understandable, honestly.

“U-uh. Umm...?”

Yomiuri-senpai circled around Kozono-san, spouting things like “cute” and “adorable.”

After fully appreciating the cuteness of her new junior, Yomiuri-senpai snapped back to her normal self and gave the confused newbie a warm smile.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Yomiuri Shiori,” she said with a bow of her head.



She took off the clasp that held her hair together at the back, giving it a little shake and letting her long black hair cascade onto her shoulders like a fan.

As she straightened herself up again, the middle aged man vibe she had just moments ago was nowhere to be found. A classy traditional Japanese beauty with long black hair stood there instead, looking ready to head off to uni at any moment.

“N-nice to meet you, I’m Kozono Erina.”

“Are you, by chance, the new part-timer?”

“Yes. Um, starting today I’ll be working here, and um...”

“It’s all good, we’re both girls, so you don’t needa be so formal. Relax a bit.”

If you really don’t want her to be nervous, don’t gawk at the junior you only just met.

“U-uh...”

Kozono-san just looked confused. Clearly, she wanted an explanation about who this strange person was, who’d suddenly appeared and said whatever she damn well pleased.

“This person is Yomiuri Shiori-senpai. She’s been a student part-timer here for a long time. I guess she’s a senpai to you, Kozono-san.”

“Don’t make it sound like I’m an old timer.”

“So then, you’re a veteran?”

“Feel free to just call me ‘senpai’, okay♡?” Yomiuri-senpai said, punctuating the end of her sentence by marking a heart symbol.

“O-okay then. Um, Yomiuri-senpai!”

“Yeees! Uh-huh. So cute, so very cute.”

“Really?”

“First off, your innocence is just lovely! And that hair! The inner color looks so good on you.”

“Thank you.”

Was she talking about the inside of her hair being dyed a lighter color? I just had to ask.

“So that’s called an inner color?”

Yomiuri-senpai gave me a quick rundown. An inner color was a fashionable way of dyeing the underside of your hair a different color. Most Japanese people have black hair, which tends to give a gloomy impression around the face. But by dyeing the inside a brighter color, it can brighten up their complexion. That was the logic behind it, apparently.

“I do it too,” Yomiuri-senpai said, casually flipping her hair with one hand.

“Huh? It just looks like a very natural black to me, though.”

“Dear Junior-kun, you’re the type who doesn’t notice when things change in a display window, aren’t you?”

...I remember Ayase-san saying something similar to me.

“I tried adding a bit of brown around my ears before the interview.”

“Oh... really?”

That one had gone completely over my head.

“It brightens up the face, making facial expressions more visible to others. It’s important in interviews that the interviewer can clearly see your facial expressions. It’d be a waste if you were smiling, but they couldn’t see it.”

True enough.

“But it’s a kind of fashion thing, right? Won’t strict companies get mad?”

“They might.”

“You’re okay with that?”

“You see, Junior-kun,” Yomiuri-senpai said with a surprisingly serious face. “I know how I look to others, and I’ve maintained it because it’s advantageous to me. But when it comes to long-term relationships, being two-faced just doesn’t cut it.”

“Ah, yeah, senpai, you’ve never been big on rigid things.”

Right, yeah. Yomiuri-senpai’s appearance as an elegant, long-haired, Japanese beauty was just for show. Kozono-san, who’d been listening into our conversation, chose that moment to chime in.

“Aren’t you scared? What if you fail the interview?”

“You too, huh, Erina-chan. Oh, can I use your first name?”

Kozono-san nodded.

“Yes.”

“Erina-chan, you had that hairstyle too when you went for the interview here, correct?”

“Well, I thought... even if I didn’t get it, I’d just look for another job.”

“Ditto.”

“But—isn’t that different? I feel like proper employment is different from a part-time job.”

“If you’re trying to be sincere, don’t you think it’s more sincere not to show a fake side of you?”

Kozono-san started to mull that over. She was apparently taking what Yomiuri-senpai said seriously, but the jury’s out on if Yomiuri-senpai herself had given it that much thought. She might’ve just forgotten she even had an interview and dyed her hair on a whim.

“Mmm. Ah, well, I... up until junior high I just had completely black hair. I never even thought about changing my hair color or anything. But, once I was accepted into high school and saw myself in the mirror wearing the school uniform, I felt like... this isn’t really me. Once I felt that way, I couldn’t resist,” she said, reflecting on her past.

“Yep, yep. That hair color suits you. It’s perfect for the bright and energetic Erina-chan. Dontcha think, Asamura-kun?”

“Yeah, I think it really suits her.”

“Thank you.”

*She really is a genuinely sweet kid,* I thought to myself as I watched Kozono-san bow with a delighted look on her face.

And it made me realize that a person’s appearance is made up of various things all tangled up together. Yomiuri-senpai and Ayase-san were both the type to have a different inner and outer appearance. But, their perspectives on their appearances couldn’t be more different. Yomiuri-senpai doesn’t care if she’s seen as a quiet girl and leaves it at that, while Ayase-san doesn’t want to be seen that way and be underestimated. And then there are types like Kozono-san, who actively try to bridge the gap between appearance and inner self by changing their hair color.

It's probably meaningless to symbolically look at appearances and apply stereotypes to them. By the same token, I thought it might be rare for someone like me to not care about "how I'm seen." Well, that might be why I stand out when I'm standing next to Ayase-san. Maybe I should care a little more.

"...Anyway, I can't stay any longer. I have a curfew, so I have to head home now!"

"Oh, curfew! What a nostalgic word. Mmhm. Well, in that case, hurry up and go!"

"Yes. Um, Yomiuri-senpai, I look forward to working with you!"

"You too. Take care on your way home."

"I won't be here tomorrow, but I'm sure someone else will probably help you."

"Yes!"

She bowed deep, her twin tails bouncing with the movement of her head. She spun around and quickly *pitter pattered* her way out of the office.

"Ah, well then, I'm going home too."

"Alrighty. Say hi to Saki-chan for me."

I left the office, leaving behind a waving Yomiuri-senpai.

Before getting on my bike, I checked my LINE and saw a notification from Ayase-san, asking me to buy groceries. It was mostly veggies—potatoes, cabbage, and other heavy stuff.

While shopping, I thought ahead to tomorrow's meal, my turn, and grabbed some extra stuff not on Ayase-san's list.

When I got home she was flipping through flashcards in the living room. As I washed the bento in the sink, I told her, "It was delicious."

"Really? Glad to hear it."

"I'll make one tomorrow, so if you'd like, you can take it with you."

"...*You* are going to make a bento, Yuuta-niisan?"

"Yeah, I am."

"...Should I watch you make it?"

“It defeats the purpose if I get your help. Don’t worry. I’ll look up the recipe and make it exactly as it says.”

Despite my insistence, Ayase-san looked like she was thinking, “Can he actually pull it off?”

“If worst comes to worst, I’ll make rice balls.”

“Ah, okay. If you say so.”

Does she think I can’t make anything more than rice balls? I was a bit shocked at first, but then I remembered the times I was on cooking duty and I messed up so much that Ayase-san had to step in and help. Like, for instance, when I overcooked the fish and more than half turned into an inedible charred mess. Or when the ingredients I put into the pot were too big and took forever to cook, leaving our stomachs growling. There was also the time I miscalculated the amount of vegetables needed for a stir-fry, and it was stir-fry for breakfast, lunch and dinner after that.

“You don’t trust my cooking skills, huh...”

“*Hmm*. Are you just eyeballing it when you cook?”

“I try to measure everything according to the recipe, both the amount and the time.”

I was met with a look that said, “You must be kidding.” To be fair to her, it’s true that when a recipe says “to taste”, I tend to use *more* rather than *less*.

We chatted away like that as I washed the dishes, and Ayase-san came into the kitchen and began putting the groceries away in the fridge. More than likely she noticed the stuff I’d bought that she hadn’t asked for, so she probably had a good picture of what would be in her bento.

“You’re gonna study now, right? I’ll make you some coffee.”

“Thanks. Should I grab your cup too, Saki?”

“Yes please.”

We chit-chatted while brewing the coffee, and then, cup in hand, I retreated to my room. I had to study hard to make up for the time lost to work.

I had a feeling I’d need to either quit or cut back on my job after summer, but for now, I wanted to save up as much money as possible. Truthfully, a high schooler’s part-time wage wouldn’t go very far towards paying for uni, but depending on which one I got into, I might need to start living on my own.

I still have tomorrow, Sunday, so I'll put off preparing for the lessons. I had already finished my homework.

I pulled up my study schedule for entrance exams on my computer. I used spreadsheet software to list down all the subjects I needed to review for them. Nowadays, you can save files online, and there are apps for it too, meaning I could pull this spreadsheet up on my smartphone. Although, it was way easier to manage it on my computer.

“Maybe I’ll study physics today...”

I put a checkmark to track my progress, opened the textbook from my first year, and started reviewing the sections marked with sticky notes.

Roughly speaking, my plan was to review the first year material from April to June, the second year material from July to September, and of course, the third year material from October to December.

The problem with that method was I might forget the stuff I reviewed at the start when I reached the end. My plan to avoid that was to tackle some anticipated questions from the older stuff every now and then. If I made a mistake, I could just re-study the summarized part.

I started my study session by reading through the textbook, referring to my old notes, and solving the example problems.

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“A new part-timer?”

Sitting across from me, Ayase-san’s chopsticks stopped in mid air.

I nodded and continued talking.

“Remember, the manager mentioned it before. That Yomiuri-senpai can’t work as much because of her job hunting, so he wanted to hire another student.”

It was dinner time. As usual, we chatted about our day while eating. Today, however, aside from when I went to work, Ayase-san and I had spent the entire day at home together. That meant there was a limit to the interesting topics we could talk about. So, when my conversation repertoire ran out, I started talking about the new part-timer.

“A girl?”

“Yeah. She’s a first year high school student. Kozono Erina, I think.”

“Kozono? Oh, like ‘kozo’ plus ‘no’ for ‘field’ in kanji?”

“How do you write ‘kozono’ in kanji anyway?”

“I’m not sure. Wait, was I wrong?”

“It’s ‘small’ and ‘garden’.”

Ayase-san used the tip of her chopstick to write kanji in mid-air, then stared at me with a face that said, “*Aha!*”.

“First of all, there’s no such word as ‘kozo,’ is there?”

“...No, apparently there is.”

The stuffed goya<sup>8</sup> she was about to put in her mouth stopped inches from it. She hesitated, before eventually biting into it. After silently chewing and swallowing, Ayase-san spoke.

“What does ‘kozo’ mean?”

“It’s an old word, but apparently it was used to mean ‘last year.’”

I looked it up on my smartphone on the table then turned the screen towards her.

『Last year: Kyo-ne-n. Synonym: Sakunen.』

“Oh, you’re right. Wait, did you just look it up in the dictionary?”

“Well, yeah.”

Isn’t this a common thing for novel readers? When you see a word you don’t know, you get curious, and as you search, you end up down the rabbit hole.

“I guess that’s why your vocab is better than mine, Yuuta-niisan. Maybe I should start looking up words in the dictionary?”

“Online dictionaries make it easy these days. I do recommend it. I think knowing more words is definitely an advantage for both modern and classical literature.”

For me, it’s more like a hobby thing, though.

I also took a bite of the stuffed goya. The outside was seared and crispy, and when I bit into it, the trapped juices from the ground meat slowly seeped out. The onions and the egg, used as a binder, combined with the bitterness of the goya. All those flavors came together to strike a perfect balance in my mouth.

I used to dislike the bitterness of goya when I was a kid, but at some point, I started to find it delicious.

“But anyway, I don’t think there’s a last name that writes ‘field’ with ‘last year’.”

“‘Small’ and ‘garden’ is more common, right? I wonder why I didn’t think of that.”

I’m not sure why either...

“So, I’m supposed to show the new girl the ropes. You’re working the same shift I did tomorrow, aren’t you, Saki?”

Ayase-san nodded slightly.

“You might be the one training her tomorrow then.”

“That’s... fine. But that means you’ll be spending all your shifts with her for a while...” She said, glancing up at me.

“Ah, I don’t think it’ll be the *entire* time.”

I have my own job to do, too. But why was she glaring at me like that?

“I’m jealous.”

“Huh?”

“Sorry. It’s just jealousy.”

Hearing that word, it finally clicked. Outside, we’re closer, but at home, we’re farther apart. When I’m outside, I always wanted to be close to Ayase-san. But now our work shifts were all over the place, meaning we had less chances to talk. And at work, Kozono-san was physically closer to talk to me than Ayase-san. That’s how it must look to Ayase-san.

“But, given the circumstances, it can’t be helped, can it?”

Even as I said that, I could tell from her face that she was feeling a bit anxious.

This is the first time I've seen Ayase-san being so openly jealous about me having a female coworker. I mean, Yomiuri-senpai is a female coworker, too. And there'd been jealousy-worthy stuff with her—like when we went to the movies and hung out at night. It wouldn't have been strange for her to be jealous about that, but she never really showed it. On the outside, at least.

Obviously, back then, we'd just become step-siblings, and there was no romance to speak of, so the circumstances were different now. But still, she seems a bit oversensitive.

I mulled it over as I alternated between miso soup and rice, coming to the conclusion that it was just better to ask than to keep guessing. *I think it's better to clear things up.*

“You don’t have to worry so much, I’m not doing anything more than just interacting normally with a coworker.”

“I... know that.”

“So—”

Before I could ask why, Ayase-san sighed and said, “It might’ve had a bad influence on me.”

“Huh...? What did?”

“A special feature.”

*Special feature?*

When I tilted my head in confusion, Ayase-san started explaining that she had watched TV while I was at work. She was fine with being alone while studying in her room, but apparently, she felt lonely while she was cooking or doing chores, so she put the living room TV on for background noise.

“It’s called a wide show, I think? Something like that.”

“Ah... the one that airs in the afternoon?”

“Wide” means wide-ranging. In Japanese, we call them “wide shows” because they cover a wide range of topics. It’s a term that probably doesn’t translate well in English-speaking countries. Seems they named it that because they wanted to cover a variety of topics without sticking to one genre.

“They were doing a special feature on cheating.”

“Cheat—Well, yeah, if they’re covering all sorts of topics, I guess that makes sense? It really is wide, huh.”

I feel like they didn’t really have to go down that route, though.

“They were saying that the workplace is a common place for infidelity and cheating to start. Apparently, sixty percent of cheating is with coworkers!”

Gotta wonder where they pulled those numbers from.

“I think that’s probably what stuck in my head. I’ve always wondered if it’s easy to get close to coworkers at work, but we’ve always tried to keep a certain distance from each other. We even made sure not to be on the same shift… And yet, here’s this girl who’s always close to you now.”

“We’re not… we’re not that close.”

“I know, but…”

“So, when I brought up Kozono-san, you thought about that wide show’s special feature and worried about us getting too close?”

“I think so. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s better if you tell me when you’re worried. Well, I don’t really see my junior coworkers that way, and I don’t have any intentions like that in the first place.”

“Okay. If you say so, Yuuta-niisan, I believe you.”

Ayase-san calmly explained the reason behind why she was feeling anxious. And, after we ate and each had our turn in the bath, she didn’t seem bothered by it anymore. I let out a sigh of relief, believing it was put to bed now.

*If you say so, Yuuta-niisan.* If a brother says so, it’s different from when a lover does. If a brother gets all cozy with a coworker, it might be uncomfortable for his sister, but it doesn’t go much further than that. Generally, a brother isn’t a romantic interest for his sister.

But, if it’s her *lover* Yuuta, it’d be more than just uncomfortable for Ayase-san. She started calling me Yuuta-niisan to make sure we didn’t go beyond just a brother-sister relationship at home. But back then, I didn’t realize that in some situations, it might end up restraining Ayase-san’s feelings.

Words hold power. They might merely influence one’s mood, but that mood can guide one’s actions.

But at the time, I felt pretty good about being able to keep a decent distance—not being too clingy but also not avoiding her.

The night with just the two of us ended without much happening.

Or so I thought.

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<sup>1</sup> A traditional Japanese inn, often with tatami-matted rooms, onsen baths, and traditional meals.

<sup>2</sup> Shin-jaga, or “new potatoes”, refers to young, early-harvest potatoes with thin skin and a sweeter, waxier texture.

<sup>3</sup> Breaded and deep-fried pork cutlet.

<sup>4</sup> The kanji for garden is “園” (sono), but when “小” (ko), meaning small/little, is added it changes to “zono”, which is what Erina is explaining here.

<sup>5</sup> Little known fact: for a country outsiders perceive as being technologically advanced, Japan still uses dated technology for many everyday things. City offices still use paper forms mostly instead of computers, fax machines are still common, and cash is still king over card payments. And of course, this example with the paper time cards.

<sup>6</sup> Japanese soup stock, typically made from fish and seaweed.

<sup>7</sup> *Pink furikake*: A colorful Japanese rice seasoning. Its playful appearance is often associated with children’s meals, which is why Erina is complaining. *Sakura Denbu*: Sakura colored condiment. It’s wet, while furikake is dry.

<sup>8</sup> A dish where bitter melon (goya) is filled with various ingredients, often meat and seasonings.

## June 12th (Saturday) — Ayase Saki

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On a sunny Saturday morning in June, I stood at the entrance of our flat to see off my Mom and Stepdad, Taichi-san.

They were setting out on a trip to celebrate their first wedding anniversary.

Seeing Mom's smile light up in the early summer sunlight as she stood next to him made me feel genuinely happy for her.

She'd raised me all on her own after her previous marriage fell to pieces. And, she was the one person in the world I most wished happiness for. I truly believed she deserved it.

When she told me she wanted to remarry a year ago, I didn't oppose it, thinking that if she chose him, it must be the right choice. A year on, that thought surfaced again.

She really did find a good match for her in my Stepdad. I can see that in the way he acts. He always says he trusts us kids, but as soon as they planned this trip together, he was a worried mess about leaving us at home by ourselves. It'd likely even look a little embarrassing from the outside.

There was probably a small part of him that liked to show off, but he wasn't nearly as prideful—in a bad way—as my biological father. My biological father always seemed so obsessed with maintaining his image as a man and husband, never wanting us to see him in an unflattering light at home. That's probably why he resented Mom after his company failed and she became the family's main breadwinner. He was just that kind of touchy guy, I guess.

But my Stepdad was different. He's the kind of strong person who's okay with letting other people see his weak side. That might've been the most important thing for Mom. It's something I could never copy myself, as I'd feel anxious if I didn't have my armor on to protect myself from the society around me. Deep down, I think Mom isn't so different from me, so it must be a blindingly beautiful thing in her eyes.

"C'mon, Taichi-san. If we don't leave soon, we'll get stuck in traffic."

At Mom's urging, my Stepdad finally got a move on.

Someone might think Mom was the more responsible one from listening to their conversation. But, in reality, my Mom can be a bit of a scatterbrain at unexpected times. It was just a one-night, two-day trip, but traveling with her might be more tiring than it appears to be.

*Good luck, Stepdad.*

After saying goodbye to them, Asamura-kun and I finally went back inside the flat.

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Jolted by the sound of the alarm, I looked up. The clock read 12 pm.

I closed both the reference and exercise books in front of me and headed to the kitchen.

Asamura-kun had already left for work, so I'd be having lunch on my lonesome. It hadn't been long since breakfast, and I'd just been sat studying all morning, so I wasn't really that hungry.

"Leftovers from breakfast should be enough," I muttered to myself as I whipped up the meal.

It's not that I dislike cooking; I actually quite enjoy it. But, it kind of feels like a pain when I'm just cooking for myself. Cooking's more fun when you have someone to share the food with.

After finishing my food and washing the dishes, I planned to return to my studies—when I suddenly froze.

"It's annoying me..."

I was staring at the living room floor. When did we last clean it? Once I started thinking about it, I couldn't get it out of my head.

We didn't have a schedule for cleaning. Everyone cleaned their own rooms—that was a given. But the issue was the communal spaces. We had an unspoken rule that whoever noticed the mess first would clean it up (except when we did a big cleanup). Thankfully, neither Asamura-kun nor my Stepdad were messy people, so there were rarely things left on the floor. So, I'd often just give it a quick once over with the floor wiper. I couldn't remember the last time I used a vacuum cleaner.

“Can’t be helped. Guess I’ve gotta do it.”

Telling myself this was a break from studying, I decided to clean the kitchen and living room. Since a thorough cleaning would take more time than I had, I decided to just do some vacuuming. Otherwise, I might end up wasting the whole day cleaning.

First, I started with some simple tidying up. I did say my family members weren’t the types to leave things on the floor, but you could still find some things scattered about if you looked closely enough. Like the remotes for the TV, streaming service, air-con, and ceiling light... There were so many.

...It’d be easier if all of these were combined into one remote.

Now that I think about it, wasn’t there a device that could control all household electronics at once? The voice operated one. *Maybe I should ask Asamura-kun about it when I get the chance.*

I collected all the remotes and put them in a remote holder on the table. I thought it’d feel a bit lonely to clean in silence, so I decided to put on some random TV program as background noise before I got started. I thought about streaming a movie, but there wasn’t anything in particular I wanted to watch. Plus, if I put on something interesting I might get distracted. So, I just opted to turn on regular TV and let whatever was on run.

I brought the vacuum cleaner over and was about to turn it on when I caught a glimpse of the show on TV.

It looked like an afternoon program targeted at housewives. After the host said something, a caption popped up: 『Special Feature on Affairs.』

My eyes were drawn to the screen. I had never really watched daytime TV before, so I didn’t know they aired stuff like this.

Some TV celeb with a weird bow tie and suit combo started talking with a serious look on his face.

He started with a lead-in: The wife was at home, devotedly supporting her husband by doing household chores. And yet, the husband cheated on her. Why?

With that, a reenactment video began to play. A woman, presumably a housewife, appeared on the screen with the caption『Ako<sup>1</sup>, Full-time Housewife, 27 years old.』

The video showed her busily doing the dishes, laundry, and cleaning, then sighing at the dining table after finishing everything. She muttered that she wanted a little more of a break, but shook her head and stood up. In her imagination, her husband was shown at work, organizing documents and working on a computer. The husband returned home, and when the wife took his suit jacket, she noticed lipstick on it.

*Wait, would lipstick really end up there? Wouldn't it be more plausible if she smelled another woman's perfume? But maybe that's just nitpicking.*

Some commentator or other gave his two cents, then the host turned to someone who was apparently an expert to get their take on it.

The expert said about sixty percent of cheating happens at work.

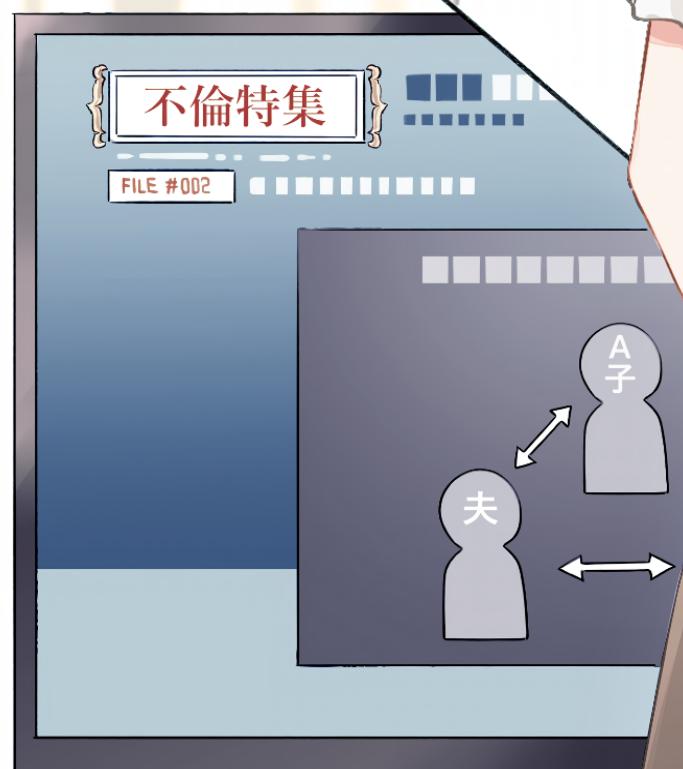
*Huh? Do men and women really get that close at work? Just because they're doing the same job?*

I found myself engrossed in the show, but then, shaking my head like the woman on TV, I stood up and turned the vacuum cleaner on. It was the latest cordless and quiet model, but it still made a fair bit of noise as the suction nozzle slid across the floor, as if licking it. It was enough to drown out the TV anyway.

The program moved on to another reenactment, this time a mother with a kid—*No, I refuse to watch*, I told myself. But the captions on the screen still caught my eye from time to time.

As I cleaned, I couldn't help but imagine myself in the shoes of the woman in the program, who found out her husband was cheating.

Asamura-kun had a part-time job. Part-time or not, it was *still* a job. So while I'm at home doing household chores, my beloved husband could be coming into more frequent contact with a female coworker, until eventually...



I killed that train of thought, wondering what had gotten into me.

I mean, Asamura-kun isn't even my fiancé or anything, and it's not like there's someone at work he's particularly close to...

Well, that's not entirely true. There's Yomiuri-san, a woman who looks like a beautiful Japanese doll. And, besides her, there are a few other female student part-timers too. Well, they're all older, and one of them is a grad student, so she's probably like a decade older than him. But age doesn't really matter in relationships. Asamura-kun is the chill type, so he's kind to everyone equally. That's one of the things I like about him.

So, why am I overthinking things then? There's a saying that where there's smoke, there's fire. But if I start suspecting a fire before I even see the smoke, isn't that just being emotionally unstable? This anxious feeling, like a fishbone stuck in my throat, must be a sign of my dependency on him. Probably. So adjusting our relationship slowly should eventually settle things down... I hope.

Anyway, why did I decide not to work the same shifts as him anymore? No, I do remember. I wanted to make sure I had time to study, and we were taking turns cooking. That was the reason, but I thought we decided to be closer together outside the house, so why does it feel like this?

*Sigh.*

I found myself zoning out, the vacuum cleaner moving back and forth over the same spot on the floor. I switched it off and returned it to its docking station, then turned off the TV too. I should study. I *am* a student preparing for entrance exams, after all.

I went back to my room and opened my study materials again. I was a bit behind on my study schedule because of the cleaning. I decided to quickly solve the problems up to the point I'd set for myself, then have a delicious snack. There should still be pudding in the fridge. Pudding... it kind of sounds like "affair" in Japanese<sup>2</sup>. Men at work tend to get closer to other women than their wives, huh?

*No, it's not like that.*

I put on my headphones and used the familiar beats of Lofi Hip Hop to drown out the distractions.

Outside the window, a thin crescent moon hung in the darkening sky.

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When Asamura-kun got home, I was flipping through my vocabulary flashcards in the living room.

I had a rough idea of when he'd be back, so I was waiting in a place where I could tell as soon as he got home. Not that I'd ever admit it out loud, of course.

As I got up from the couch, I heard him say, "It was delicious."

Huh? I was only just about to start cooking dinner now. I tilted my head in confusion, until I spotted him washing something in the sink and realized he was talking about his bento.

"Really? Glad to hear it."

And I *was* genuinely pleased to hear it too, even if the bento hadn't been anything special. It was just the leftover side dishes from breakfast.

Asamura-kun interrupted my thoughts when he mentioned he'd make one for me tomorrow. It'd be his first time making one, wouldn't it? I was thinking about helping him, but he shot that down, saying it was his turn.

As I put the groceries he bought into the fridge, I noticed a few items I hadn't asked for, so I could kind of guess what would be inside the bento.

Just as Asamura-kun was done with the washing up and about to head to his room, I called out to him.

"You're gonna study now, right? I'll make you some coffee."

"Thanks. Should I grab your cup too, Saki?" he said, as he pulled some cups out of the cupboard.

I checked the clock and saw we still had some time before dinner.

"Yes please."

I sat and watched him pour hot water into the dripper. *Drip, drip, drip.* A slightly acidic scent of mocha wafted through the room as it dripped down into the container.

"Can you call me when dinner's ready?"

"Sure."

Coffee in hand, Asamura-kun headed to his room. I watched him leave, then got back to preparing dinner.

When it was all ready to go, I called out to him.

He looked at the dishes lined up on the table and commented on how delicious they looked.

We swapped stories about our day as we ate. That's when he mentioned a new part-timer had started working at the bookstore.

"A new part-timer?"

In a relaxed voice, Asamura-kun said Yomiuri-senpai couldn't work as much because she was job hunting, so the manager planned to hire another student part-timer. Yeah, I think he did say something along those lines.

"Yeah. She's a first year high school student. Kozono Erina, I think."

I wasn't familiar with the name "Kozono," and mistakenly pictured it with strange kanji in my head. But I found out it meant 'a small garden' after Asamura-kun explained it to me.

"So, I'm supposed to show the new girl the ropes."

Oh, that's right, it was Asamura-kun who trained me when I started working there too. He's surprisingly good at teaching, so it makes sense that he'd be the one doing it.

"You're working the same shift I did tomorrow, aren't you, Saki?"

Every time he used my name, Saki, my heart skipped a beat. I nodded, trying not to let my feelings show on my face.

"You might be the one training her tomorrow then."

"That's... fine. But that means you'll be spending all your shifts with her for a while..."

A cute new girl. Wait, did he say she was cute? So, Asamura Yuuta will be taking care of this Kozono girl non-stop for a while?

Or rather, my *brother* will be...

"I'm jealous."

Those words left my lips before I could catch them. Unfortunately, I guess I'd let slip how I was feeling to Asamura-kun.

“Huh?”

“Sorry. It’s just jealousy. But, given the circumstances, it can’t be helped, can it?”

Besides, I’m “Saki,” not “Ayase-san.” Kozono is “Kozono-san,” so it’s not like I should worry about it...

So why am I feeling like this? Like clouds have covered the sun or something.

The serious face of that TV celeb wearing a bow tie flashed in my mind. A sound effect played and a large banner dropped down behind him reading,『60% of affairs happen at work!』

Women at work have more chances to get close to men than housewives stuck at home doing chores!

*No, no, stop that.*

“It might’ve had a bad influence on me,” I blurted out.

Asamura-kun looked confused. I told him about the wide show I’d watched while cleaning.

When I mentioned the special feature on cheating, Asamura-kun shook his head, looking a bit uncomfortable.

I told him how the show—with its uncertain sources—suggested workplace intimacy could lead to infidelity. And watching it might’ve made me feel anxious when a girl showed up who’d be spending more time with him than I would. Probably.

He just patiently listened to my concerns, as irrational as they were, and even said it was good we talked about it. He also said he didn’t look at juniors that way, and promised he didn’t have those kinds of intentions. My *brother*, Asamura Yuuta, promised.

“If you say so, Yuuta-niisan, I believe you.”

Honestly, I was relieved.

Asamura Yuuta and Ayase Saki are... lovers. But also brother and sister. In my heart, I told myself over and over that we have to maintain an appropriate distance and make the right decisions.

I took my turn in the bath after I finished eating. As I soaked in the tub, I tried to rid my mind of the disconcerting thought, “A younger female coworker is close to him at work.” *Stop thinking about it, just stop. Think about something else. Oh, like the sports festival this coming Tuesday.*

Class Rep had invited me. But unlike last year, I chose volleyball, a team game. I’d always avoided it, thinking it wasn’t really my thing. In tennis, no matter how bad I played, the only person who’d be embarrassed was me. In volleyball, though, a mistake could affect other people. I just couldn’t handle that.

And yet, both Class Rep and Satou-san (I still can’t call her “Ryo-chin” like everyone else) never got angry or looked annoyed—no matter how many mistakes I made.

In volleyball, the goal is to make sure the ball doesn’t fall on your side of the court, and to return it to the opponent’s side within three touches. It might’ve been second nature for a pro to connect those touches, but it’s pretty tricky for newbies. That said, getting the hang of that and returning the ball made me really happy.

If someone makes a mistake, someone else covers for it. And when we all try hard together to keep the ball in play, everyone is happy. That sense of collective joy was new to me. I found myself getting a little hooked on the depth and fun of team sports.

I touched my arm and legs muscles as they soaked in the warm water. It might’ve just been my imagination, but they felt firmer, more toned, than usual. Is it because of my training? Or maybe it was the surprisingly physical work at the bookstore.

“The bookstore...”

I won’t be on the same shifts as Asamura-kun for a while. And all that time, Asamura Yuuta, or Yuuta-niisan I should say, will be with that junior girl. Closer to her than he is to me.

As his sister, I shouldn’t be bothered by it. But as his lover... Maybe it’s natural to feel jealous.

So, when it comes to “Yuuta-niisan” and “Saki”, how should I feel?

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<sup>1</sup> Ako (あ子) placeholder name similar to “John” or “Jane Doe” in English.

<sup>2</sup> Affair = furin (不倫)

## June 13th (Sunday) — Asamura Yuuta

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It was Sunday, 7 am.

I found it odd to be bustling around the kitchen at this ungodly hour, when normally I'd still be in bed.

*Yawn.* I shook off the lingering drowsiness that clung to my mind. Making breakfast wasn't the only reason I was in the kitchen on my morning off, but to make Ayase-san's bento too.

*First things first, let's start with the miso soup.* The recipe said it took ten minutes to make, but I shouldn't trust that too much. To be fair, it was probably accurate for someone used to making it.

“Cooking really is like chemistry, isn’t it?”

I personally think it's like a chemical experiment. One could understand the principles, but knowing and executing it properly were two different things. Like, for instance, if it said to slightly submerge the ladle of miso, it's hard to gauge what “slightly” means. There were times I accidentally dropped the entire scoop of miso into the pot. This time, though, I've managed to get through the first step. Now, it's time for a taste test.

“Yep, just as I thought... maybe I'll add a little more.”

I knew Ayase-san preferred her miso soup a tad richer than the recipe I was using. But adding miso by eyeballing it was still a challenge for me. My method was to first follow the recipe, then adjust the flavor by adding a touch more miso as needed.

Today's miso soup ingredient was tofu. I took it out of the fridge, diced it up, and added it to the pot. I heated it up without letting it boil, then switched off the stove.

Now onto the bento.

I opened the fridge and took out the ingredients I bought on my way home from work, including a pack of sausages.

I unlocked my smartphone and pulled up a recipe I'd found the day before. I'd searched for 『Bento』 and 『Microwave』 and looked at the top results. It's not that I particularly wanted to use a microwave, but if I included 『Easy』 in the search words, I'd often end up with recipes that are “easy for advanced cooks.”

The recipe I'd found was for "Diced German Potatoes."

"Guess I'll start with the potatoes first."

I fetched a few from where they were wrapped in newspaper in a cool, dark spot. After rinsing them off and peeling them, I cut them into roughly one centimeter cubes. The pictures always showed them as perfect cubes, but when slicing a round potato, some pieces inevitably ended up rounded.

But, I couldn't get too caught up in that.

Just because the recipe says one centimeter cubes, it doesn't mean the dimensions *have* to be precise. That might seem obvious, but beginners tend to get hung up on those kinds of details. Although, it's essential to maintain uniform size so that the heat spreads evenly throughout.

I put them in a heat-resistant container and zapped them in the microwave. That's why it was listed as a microwave recipe online.

While they were heating up, I sliced the sausages to roughly the same size as the potatoes. Combined, it'd make German potatoes. So simple!

Personally, I felt they were good enough to eat as is, but the recipe recommended adding seasoning to the mix. Fair enough. Apparently consommé or salt and pepper were the seasonings of choice. I wondered if black pepper was okay since I preferred the taste.

Well, I'm making this for Ayase-san, not me. I was a bit scared, so I opted to play it safe and just follow the recipe for now. I could experiment when I was just cooking it for myself.

*When I was just cooking it for myself.* I'd really just thought that. I used to think doing household chores was such a hassle. I won't lie, I'd prefer to spend this time reading. And if Ayase-san wasn't around, I'd probably still be living off convenience store bentos and takeout. Still, I don't find doing stuff like this as annoying as I used to.

The microwave beeped.

I did a little taste test and, finding no issues, I began packing the food into Ayase-san's bento.

Recipes are truly marvelous things. Incidentally, Ayase-san's bento box was smaller than mine, to the point where I wondered if it was big enough to fit everything.

I filled half the box with rice and the remainder with German potatoes. I put salad in a small container and filled the tiny fish-shaped bottle with dressing, the same as she did for me yesterday. Then, I put everything into a lunch bag.

Ayase-san had left both the lunch bag and the box on the table the night before, saying, “Use these.”

I probably should have prepared everything myself, honestly, but I was grateful for her help all the same. Since it was my first time, I didn’t know where everything was kept.

The lunch bag she gave me was a different color from mine. Mine was red, while hers was pink... Pink?

“Good morning, Yuuta-niisan,” Ayase-san’s voice rang out as she entered the dining room.

“Good morning, Saki.”

“Oh, you’ve already finished making the bento? That was quick.”

“I haven’t made breakfast yet, though. How do fried eggs sound?”

“Sounds perfect.”

The bento’s salad was already made and on the table, and the rice was cooked, so all I had to do was serve it in a bowl. I’d reheat the miso soup later. I took out two eggs from the fridge and threw them in a pan. By the time I had plated them, Ayase-san had already wiped the table down, and served herself rice and miso soup.

“I feel like you had to do a lot.”

“You always help me too, Yuuta-niisan. Anyway, let’s eat?”

I took my seat at her urging, said “Itadakimasu,” and got stuck in.

“I can’t wait to try the bento.”

“Don’t expect too much. But I mean, everything I made should at least be *edible*.”

Ayase-san took a sip of the miso soup. I get nervous every time this moment comes around. Her miso soup is delicious. Letting someone like Ayase-san, who makes such tasty miso soup, drink something a cooking amateur like me made always makes me feel like I’m committing a crime.

“Mmm, this is delicious,” she said, her eyes narrowing in satisfaction.

I unconsciously patted my chest in relief.

There's a chance she was just being polite, though.

"I guess I should've made something more Japanese for breakfast. Ah, should I grab some seaweed?"

"Please. But personally, fried eggs with miso soup feels very Japanese to me. Besides..." she said as he picked up the sauce bottle. *Doesn't she usually use salt and pepper?* I thought as I watched her drizzle soy sauce on her fried egg.

"...See? If you put soy sauce on it, it becomes a proper Japanese dish."

I shot her a wry smile.

"By that logic, pouring soy sauce over anything would make it Japanese."

"Exactly my point."

"You sure about that?"

"I've always believed the essence of a country's cuisine lies in its fermented foods."

"Ah."

Japan's fermented foods include miso, soy sauce, and natto<sup>1</sup>. While they might be off-putting for the uninitiated, their strong, acquired tastes make them deeply nostalgic for those who grew up with them. Well, to be fair, even some Japanese people still can't stand natto.

Some even say the air after stepping off a plane at a Japanese airport smelled like soy sauce.

"Besides, I like Western food too, so you don't always have to make Japanese food for me."

Basically you're saying don't worry about it.

"Hate to say it, but your bento today can hardly be called Japanese food either... Oh right, about the lunch bag."

"There a problem with the one I got out?"

"No problem, I just thought it was pretty unusual for you to have something pink."

Ayase-san nodded with an, “Ah,” and then went to explain. As she did so, she tore open the pack of seaweed. She picked up a piece with her chopsticks, then put it on her rice, rolling it up like a sushi roll. She brought it to her mouth and munched away thoughtfully.

“You eat it just like that, without seasoning?”

She swallowed and gave me a curious look.

“Huh? The seaweed has its own flavor, doesn’t it?”

She said it like it was a no-brainer. Sure, it has its own taste: seaweed.

“Really? I always put soy sauce on it.”

“Doesn’t it get too salty?”

“Doesn’t your mouth get too dry?”

After that little back and forth, I remembered we had a similar argument in the past. About how Ayase-san just used salt and pepper to season her fried eggs, while I used soy sauce<sup>2</sup>. I said I don’t like it because my mouth feels too dry with just salt and pepper.

Apparently, Ayase-san remembered that convo too. By chance, fried eggs were on the menu today as well.

“I see. So you’d prefer your rice to be a bit moist, Yuuta-niisan.”

“I see what you’re getting at. Also, Saki, have you always eaten seaweed straight up, without adding any flavoring?”

“Yep. Adding anything else would mask the natural taste. That’s a waste, isn’t it?”

“It’s not something I’ve really paid attention to before.”

I thought about how the little things we do day to day can go unnoticed. I need to pay more attention, or I might miss Ayase-san’s preferences.

*Note to self: Ayase-san likes her fried eggs with salt and pepper and eats seaweed as is.*

“Anyway, back to the lunch bag. It’s an old one Mom bought as part of a set. She got them cheap because they were sold in pairs.”

“Ah, I see.”

So *that's* why they're the same type. She must have bought them before she remarried, hence why Ayase-san just had red and pink.

“I usually use the red one, and the pink was a backup...”

Now that she mentions it, the red one does suit her better.

“So, the pink one was meant for me?”

“You would've preferred it? I don't really care if it suits me or not, but then people might think you prefer that color, so I figured red would be the safer choice. You don't have many pink things, do you, Asamura-kun?”

“If you're asking whether I like pink, it's not my favorite, but I don't care either way like you.”

It's never crossed my mind to judge people based on the color of their possessions. People should just choose whatever colors they like.

“Did I overstep? I mean, I don't know if there'll be a next time, but maybe I should buy a new lunch bag?”

“If you tell me where they sell them, I can buy one myself. Or, if we have some free time, we could go together.”

Ayase-san flashed me a smile, but it faded just as quickly, and she pursed her lips.

“Free time, huh? I wonder when we'll have some.”

“Being an entrance exam student is tough, huh?”

“I just want it to be over already, but I also don't want the exams to come up too quickly.”

Ditto.

I've signed up for more classes at cram school<sup>3</sup>, and although I've started to recover from the drop in grades earlier in the spring, I still don't feel I've acquired the academic skills I need.

I'm running out of time. Maybe I should cut back my hours at work.

“Hm?”

A notification flashing up on the smartphone I'd left on the table caught my eye. When I tapped on the screen, I saw the forecast: rain in the afternoon.

“Rain and lightning in the afternoon...”

Ayase-san looked out the window when I mentioned it to her, and I did the same.

An early summer breeze flowed in through the half-open window. The visible stretch of sky outside was clear blue, without a single cloud in sight.

“Rain... doesn’t seem like it’s going to, though?”

“Forecast says it will. It could be a sudden shower or maybe even torrential rain. It says the probability of rain in the evening is ninety percent. I think you should take an umbrella when you head off to work.”

“That’s a pretty high probability. Got it. I’ll take an umbrella.”

“Be careful on your way home. It says there might be lightning too.”

“Really? Ah, um... got it.”

For a split second, Ayase-san pulled a face as she nodded. But the serious look vanished just as quickly.

I mentally raised an eyebrow.

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“Wait a sec, Ayase-san.”

I stopped her just as she was about to step out the front door.

“What?”

“I’ll go with you.”

“Yuu—”

Ayase-san, pausing with the door half-open, turned back and seemed to hesitate. Then she opened the door fully and stepped outside into the apartment building’s hallway.

“...What, Asamura-kun?”

“You don’t have to be so strict about using different names—”

Ayase-san’s eyebrows began to droop with each word.

“Ah, no, I’m not blaming you or anything.”

Inside the flat, she calls me “Yuuta-niisan,” and outside, “Asamura-kun.” I got that she was trying to differentiate, but surely it’s confusing to do that based on what side of the front entrance her feet were on?

I followed Ayase-san out the door, locked it, and then stood beside her.

“Look, since it’s supposed to rain today, I can’t ride my bike. So I figured we might as well leave together.”

Ayase-san was heading to work, and I was on my way to cram school.

“Maybe I’m a little too inflexible,” she muttered as we waited for the elevator to come up.

“Don’t get down on yourself. It’s pretty common, I think.”

She looked at me doubtfully, so I decided to give an example.

“Changing how you refer to things inside and outside of the house is common. During your last year of junior high, did you have mock interviews for entrance exams?”

“I did. I took exams for high schools that had interviews.”

“Weren’t you taught to refer to your parents as ‘father’ and ‘mother,’ instead of ‘dad’ and ‘mom,’ for those?”

The elevator arrived with a *ding*, and we stepped inside. I waited for the doors to close before continuing.

“It took some getting used to, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, maybe,” Ayase-san murmured. “But for me, Mom’s been telling me that since the end of elementary school. Sometimes there were phone calls from her work, and I was supposed to say ‘I’ll hand it to my mother,’ not ‘I’ll get my Mom.’”

“Fair enough. But at first, you probably just said it the way you always did, right?”

“Probably.”

“Now you can naturally switch between the two, right? So, it’s just a matter of getting used to it.”

“You might be right. Yeah, maybe.”

We got off the elevator. As we left the apartment building, I looked up at the sky. The clear blue morning sky was gone, replaced by an oppressive leaden gray. I could smell rain on the wind.

“This... definitely looks like it’s gonna rain.”

I looked up at the sky, then at Ayase-san next to me. She didn’t have an umbrella in her hand.

“Do you have an umbrella?”

“A foldable one, yeah.”

“Ah, okay then.”

“How ’bout you, Asamura-kun?”

“I have a foldable one in my bag too. It’s not very reliable if there’s a sudden downpour, but well, even if I had a big one, I’d still get soaked anyway.”

“I think I’d take shelter from the rain and before going home if that happens.”

We set off, walking side by side.

“But... this feels kinda new.”

Ayase-san responded with a small, “Huh?” before turning her face towards me.

“We’ve gone home together after work heaps of times, but we haven’t really walked beside each other from home to the station much, have we?”

She nodded.

“The last time might’ve been for our school trip.”

“Ah... yeah, I remember.”

Back then, it was just about dawn with almost no one around. We could only go out at times when no one from school would see us, so we basically avoided being together outside. But, in order to be “closer together outside,” I figured we should start leaving the house at the same time, which I’d been spacing out on purpose until now.

I just want to get a little closer to Ayase-san on my end.

We're not holding hands or having a fun conversation. But I get it. I walk a tad slower to keep pace with Ayase-san, and she probably speeds up a bit for me. It's clear we're both thinking about each other, even in these small ways. It's these moments, when we're subtly conscious of each other, that feel comfortable for us right now.

The sky overhead was gray. In stories, an overcast sky often implies future anxieties, but real-life events happen regardless of the weather.

I tried mumbling that observation to Ayase-san.

"Isn't that kinda obvious...? The sky doesn't clear up or get cloudy for our sake, does it?"

"In the world of stories, it's different. Like, a darkening sky might mean the protagonist is in for some bad luck, while a clear sky after the rain might symbolize the end of bad times. And rustling branches behind a woman who's waiting can express her anxious feelings that the person she's waiting for might not come."

That's what they call "indirect expression."

"Really? I mean, now that you mention it, I've seen scenes like that in dramas and such, but I just thought it was windy or something."

"Well, it's all about getting the audience to feel a certain way, like uneasy or optimistic. But interpreting those cues can also be fun."

"That's actually a thing?"

"Yeah. Though, even under a cloudy sky, enjoyable moments happen in real life."

After an, "I see," Ayase-san seemed to lose herself in thought.

"The weather does affect my mood sometimes," she started saying.

It wasn't the case right now, she explained, but the weather being gloomy could bring her down.

"When it's dark outside, I'd feel down. I'd curl up on my bed, rest my chin on my knees, and spend the whole day in a daze. My eyes would also look like a dead fish."

"That sounds... pretty rough..."

"Oh, that was back in the day. Don't tell Mom. She'll just worry."

“Got it.”

It was probably around the time her father moved out.

Feeling a bit worried, I glanced at Ayase-san.

“Are you okay now?”

“I’m totally fine. Whenever I feel down, there’s someone by my side to lift me up. You said it yourself, right? That lots of good things can happen even under a cloudy sky.”

“I did say that.”

“I think we’re very alike. Yet, you always say things I wouldn’t think of, Asamura-kun.”

“The same goes for you.”

Ayase-san’s approach of facing the world head-on was almost blinding to me, as someone who’d become adept at navigating through life’s rough waves with a go-with-the-flow attitude.

“That’s why, just walking beside you, Asamura-kun, makes me feel like I’m under a cloudless sky,” she said, her face breaking into a radiant smile. It reminded me of a sunny day in the middle of the rainy season.

But then, she quickly looked away—

“—Just kidding. That was kinda poetic, wasn’t it? So unlike me.”

Ayase-san scratched her forehead with her pointer finger, looking embarrassed. I thought it was cute and told her as much, making her blush even harder.

We exited the alley and stepped out onto the main street. Shibuya on a Sunday was overflowing with noise and people. As we got closer to the station, the streets were jam-packed, making it a challenge to walk without bumping into someone.

A young couple was strolling together, arm in arm, in the midst of the crowd. Junior highschoolers by the looks. I mean, if you're that close, it almost seems like you could move as one creature—*wait, aren't they hot?* It's June, and even with the sky being overcast, it was still near on thirty degrees Celsius. As I watched them with those odd things running through my head, someone who looked like a salaryman passed by the couple. He clicked his tongue loudly in annoyance, despite not actually bumping into them. The young couple, seemingly intimidated, quickly scuttled off to the side of the street.

“They seemed so close, it was nice.”

“If you want an arm to hold onto, you can have mine anytime, you know?”

Ayase-san thought about my offer for a second before gently shaking her head.

“Just the fact that we left the house together today is enough for now.”

Seeing me act like a stranger to her at school, Ayase-san had felt a distance between us. That led her to seek out excessive physical affection at home, and also caused us to lose sleep. The thing is, the distance between the two of us outside the house was just too great. That's the tricky part.

What's the appropriate distance between us, not just as lovers but also as step siblings...? Maybe I need to be a bit more assertive when we're outside? How close is “close” in this context? How close should I be to avoid nurturing Ayase-san's anxiety?

*Enough for now.* I hope she truly means it when she says that.

I snuck a glance at her face out of the corner of my eye. She looked calm.

“What?”

“Nothing, uh, Ayase-san.”

I got a, “You're weird,” before she immediately turned to face straight ahead again.

What face would she make if I whispered, “Nothing, Saki,” right next to her ear? I was a little curious to find out.

I had thought that with our parents gone, we'd have more alone time together. After dinner, I half-expected her to ask for another hug, but nothing like that happened. We simply went to our rooms and slept.

Looking around, I couldn't help but notice all sorts of couples on the street, each with their own comfort level for PDAs<sup>4</sup>. It didn't even seem to make much difference if couples were similar in age and pairings. Some walked with their arms tightly intertwined, bodies pressed closely together, while others just linked their pinkies. Every couple was different.

Meanwhile, Ayase-san and I walked just close enough for our shoulders to barely brush against each other. A perfectly balanced distance—close, but not *too* close.

This was the first time we had walked side by side amidst the midday bustle, and it felt surprisingly comfortable, at least to me.

"By the time I get back from work, our parents will have returned, won't they?"

"Yeah, they will."

While it's a bit sad that our alone time will be over, these two days have been peaceful.

The traffic light at the Scramble Crossing<sup>5</sup> changed. Ayase-san headed off to the bookstore, and I headed to cram school.

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I stretched in my seat and got up.

History isn't exactly my strong suit, and just keeping up with the lecture had taken all my mental energy. Maybe because I was so focused on not missing a thing, my body was all stiff now.

2.40 pm. There's a 10-minute break now, and then one more class after that.

I walked down the hallway and headed to the break room. Maybe a can of coffee would help me refresh.

I gave the can I snagged from the vending machine a light shake and headed into the second break room on the same floor. It was a small space, with just four round tables and chairs scattered around. Surprisingly, no one else was in there.

I set my can down on the nearest table and did a few squats.

“Maybe I should exercise more...” I muttered, stretching out my stiff body. I’ve always been more of an indoor person, and I never really cared much for sports. I only ever watch events like the Olympics.

That’s why I kept my distance from sports festivals, where athletic people shine.

Yet, for whatever reason, I’d decided to try basketball. Still, I can’t make a basket.

I mean, if I could master in a few days of practice for a sports festival what athletic club members took years to learn, I’d have been recruited to the basketball club a long time ago.

“Like this, right?”

Taking advantage of the empty break room, I pretended to throw an imaginary ball towards a hoop. There was a famous line from a basketball manga<sup>6</sup> that went something like, “The left hand is only for support.” Supposedly, if you push the ball with both hands, it’s harder to balance the power between the two, causing control issues.

Makes sense. Doing two things at once probably throws off one’s balance. It’s probably easier to control if you just focus on one thing.

I tried “shooting” the air ball a few more times.

In my mind, the ball always went straight through the net. But in reality, it’s never that easy, is it?

“Playing basketball?”

I jumped at the sudden voice.

Spinning around, I saw a tall girl standing at the door of the break room.

“Ah, Fujinami-san.”

She was dressed casually in an oversized T-shirt that hid the lines of her body, and jeans. With her cap pulled low over her eyes, her tall frame could easily be mistaken for a guy’s.

“I saw you through the window.”

“You can see in from the hallway?”

The thought of being seen made my face heat up, but I knew she wasn’t the teasing type.

“I didn’t expect to see *you* playing basketball, Asamura-san.”

“I got roped into it for the sports festival.”

She had a look of understanding on her face.

“Well, you did seem a bit awkward.”

“You could tell?”

“I’m tall, so people always tell me to choose basketball for the sports festival. I’m actually pretty good at dribbling and shooting. Well, for an amateur, anyway.”

This time it was my turn to nod in understanding.

Given her height, it made sense she’d be the first pick for basketball. It wouldn’t be the least bit surprising if she was recruited by the basketball team either. But since the first time I met her was at a golf driving range, it threw me off a bit.

“You were good at basketball?”

“Surprised?”

“Yeah. I always thought you’d prefer solo sports.”

“Well, I thought you’d say that. But actually, whenever I got the ball, I just dribbled it and took the shot myself.”

Ah, okay, so even in basketball, which was *supposed* to be a team sport, she’d still end up playing solo. I couldn’t hold back a wry smile.

“That means you made it work somehow right?”

“People seemed to like it that way.”

Her classmates apparently told her not to worry about being too considerate.

“It wouldn’t be a problem if everyone around me was a basketball club member, but in our sports festival, club members weren’t allowed to participate in their respective sports. So, in junior high sports festivals, everyone was inexperienced. Even if I thought a team member was open near the goal and passed them the ball, they wouldn’t receive it.”

“They wouldn’t catch it?”

“People were afraid of Fujinami-san’s fast and scary passes. They’d say, ‘Don’t throw it to me!'”

“Ah, I see.”

For someone not in the basketball club, it’d be terrifying to have the power of a basketball player’s throw flying right at you.

“So, I just kept getting passed the ball, and I couldn’t pass it to anyone else.”

“Which means you had to run with it on your own.”

I could picture her being passed the ball from every which way and charging forward each time.

“Well, I actually preferred it that way.”

“If it’s a win-win situation for both parties, it’s fine, isn’t it?”

“Maybe. But when you’re running around like that, you start to wonder if it’s really okay.”

“I guess it depends on whether you play a team sport to enjoy teamwork or choose to play as a team to win.”

“It’s a school-sponsored sports festival. I feel like doing that is an issue if it’s seen as part of education to foster cooperation.”

“Then we shouldn’t include solo sports in the festival.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of it that way. Still, it’s not *all* about winning in a school sports festival.”

“I mean, it’s not like we’re playing basketball just for fun. The point is to win, especially since it’s a tournament format. That said, doing whatever it takes to win might go against the school’s educational philosophy.”

“That’s a bit much, don’t you think?”

“Think of it this way: if the class *chose* to use you as their main attacker, then that’s a strategy in its own right, isn’t it?”

Fujinami-san looked convinced.

“That’s a good way to put it. Makes me feel better too.”

After talking for a bit, my conversation with Fujinami-san ended when it was time for class to start. But afterwards, I found myself reflecting on my own change of heart—wanting to participate in team sports even though I wasn’t being begged to like Fujinami-san was. So basically, I think I want to get better at teaming up with others—within reasonable limits, of course. Maybe I’m just itching to practice doing things with someone else.

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When class wrapped up and I stepped outside, sure enough, it started to rain just like the forecast said. I opened my folding umbrella and held it above my head.

“The forecasts you don’t want to be accurate are the ones that always are...” I mumbled, staring up at the dark clouds covering the sky and the silver raindrops pouring down.

The world follows Murphy’s Law. Bread always falls from the table and lands butter-side down, and the rain falls hardest when you least want it to.

The trip home was hilly, making it hard to walk back when it rained. And to add to that, the umbrella obstructing my view, and the thick rainclouds darkening the sky made it seem much later than 6 pm, when it should’ve still been bright out.

The apartment building I knew so well, visible beyond the winding alley, looked very different. Its colors had changed because of the rain. And under the bright street lights, the paving stones transformed from a pale to deep green as I stepped on them.

“I’m home,” I called out as I opened the front door of our flat. Before stepping on the floor, I peeled off my soaked clothes and socks. I headed straight to the bathroom, tossed them in the laundry basket, then swapped to comfy clothes. I wasn’t soaked enough to need a shower.

Neither Ayase-san nor my parents were home yet.

I could tell by the sound of the rain pelting the windows that it was getting a bit stronger.

“Should I heat up the bath?” I thought aloud.

I started preparing dinner. As I hadn't been shopping, I'd need to cook with the ingredients on hand. And obviously, it had to be a recipe I could actually make. Given it's a rainy day, something warm might be nice.

"...Curry, maybe?"

*That might be good.*

Spicy curry is perfect for seasons that drain your appetite. Plus, pouring warm curry over warm rice should be perfect for warming up a cold body. Just imagining it brings to mind that stimulating aroma. My stomach growled. Ayase-san doesn't like spicy food as much as I do. Since the spiciness can be raised later, I'll make it sweet to suit her taste for now.

I searched for a recipe on my smartphone. This time, I specifically searched for 『quick curry.』

Apparently, you can make curry without even using a stove. All you need to do is chop the vegetables and meat, then heat it up in the microwave. Should I give it a try?

It said to mix just the onions and vegetable oil and heat them up first. Then, add the remaining ingredients. Next came adding water and heating it up slowly. Easy peasy.

As easy as it sounds, you couldn't be careless. The time it takes to make it would definitely be longer than what it said in the recipe, and that's precisely what made a beginner a beginner. Furthermore, for beginners, recipes feel like ancient spell books written in some arcane language. Like, for example, when they say how to chop the vegetables. "Slice the carrots into half-moons." Half-moons? What does that even mean? Ayase-san would probably burst out laughing if she found out I was stumbling over basics like that.

After cutting all the vegetables and meat up, I added water and curry roux before zapping it in the microwave.

At my house, we always have both sweet and spicy curry roux on hand. This time, I used just the sweet roux. I did just as the recipe said, so it should turn out as normal sweet curry.

I gave it a little taste test after it finished heating up. *Seems like normal sweet curry to me.*

Recipes are truly marvelous. This should suit Ayase-san's taste perfectly. I felt my cheeks relax as I pictured her smiling.

I realized I was smiling too, which gave me a curious feeling. The curry wasn't exactly to my taste, meaning if I made it for myself, I wouldn't be satisfied with it. Yet, I was happy.

It's weird when you think about it, but also makes sense. If you're making something for someone else, you should cater to their preferences. But, *always* compromising could be stressful.

Regardless of if it's for a loved one, plucking your own feathers to weave cloth would make you thinner day by day. That would just worry the other person, defeating the purpose.

"Maybe it's a good thing that we could find common ground..."

It's probably too sentimental for me to be moved just because I can make something that fits Ayase-san's preference for sweet things.

It had grown completely dark outside, with just the sound of the rain filling the kitchen. Could this rain be the reason why I'm getting emotional over such trivial things?

I snuck a glance at the clock.

A robotic voice announced that the bath was ready. At the same time, I heard the front door open and Ayase-san's voice saying, "I'm home."

"Welcome back. How'd you go with the rain?"

She didn't come in from the entrance right away, so I assumed she was probably soaked.

"Drenched..." a faint voice replied through the door.

"The bath's ready," I called out a bit louder so she could hear me.

"..."

She'd apparently replied to me, but I didn't hear her.

There was no sign of her coming to the kitchen, even after waiting for a bit. I assumed she'd either gone to her room to change or to the bathroom.

I decided to finish making dinner so it'd be ready to eat by the time she got out of the bath.

I went back to the kitchen to prepare the salad and side dishes.

“It smells so good!” Were the first words out of Ayase-san’s mouth when she came in from her bath.

“You made curry, huh?”

“I thought it might warm you up.”

“Yeah. I’d be grateful.”

When I asked her how bad the rain was, Ayase-san stared out the window and bit her lip. She said she’d unfortunately come home when the rain was at its heaviest.

“The rain might get even heavier later on though.”

“Yeah, it probably will... But, do you think our parents will be okay?”

Our parents were traveling by car for their trip, so driving in the rain was far from ideal.

Despite appearances, they were actually pretty careful. I trusted them to drive safely, but I still couldn’t help feeling a bit worried.

“I think they should be on their way back by no—”

With almost perfect timing, Ayase-san’s smartphone vibrated.

“Looks like it’s from Mom,” she said, glancing at me for permission. When I motioned for her to check it, she peeked at the message and let out a small, almost voiceless, “Huh?”

“What’s wrong?”

I figured the news wouldn’t be serious. If it had been, I would’ve gotten a message too.

“They’re stuck in traffic. Apparently, they’re not moving at all. They said they might be pretty late, and depending on what happens, they might give up and stay another night.”

I looked up the traffic info myself. I knew where they were heading, so I searched the relevant routes for any updates.

“Ah... looks like there’s been an accident, so there’s a traffic jam.”

“It’s Monday tomorrow, will they be okay?”

“My old man mentioned he had a day off saved up. I don’t know about Akiko-san, though.”

“Mom doesn’t start work until night time anyway. So I guess it’s fine even if they come back late.”

“He probably took the day off anticipating something like this might happen,”

I suddenly realized our parents wouldn’t be home again tonight. Not that it really matters. It was the same deal as last night.

After dinner, we’d figure out who’d have a bath first, then go back to our rooms to study. We’d maintain a comfortable distance, not being too clingy nor too distant.

“The bath...”

“Huh?”

“Why the confused face?”

“Ah, sorry. I was spacing out.”

“As I was saying, since I’ve already taken my bath, you can go in whenever you want, Yuuta-niisan.”

“Oh, gotcha.”

Since Ayase-san had already taken her bath, I could go in whenever I wanted today. It’d been a while since I had that freedom, so I felt a bit lost when given the choice.

“Oh, by the way, I worked with Kozono-san today.”

“Hm? Ah, so you did end up working with her.”

The lightning fast change in topic made my head spin, but I quickly caught on that she was talking about the new part-timer, Kozono Erina. She’d been on the same shift as Ayase-san, as I’d thought she would be.

“Guess I’m also helping to train her now. They asked me to teach her a few things.”

“It’s your first time having a junior, isn’t it? She seemed to catch on quick, so she shouldn’t be too much of a handful, right?”

“Yeah... that’s true.”

Her reply was a bit hesitant, as if something was stuck in her back teeth.

Ayase-san tends to be like this when asked about her first impressions of someone. Ayase Saki hates putting people into boxes, so she struggles to summarize her feelings about someone in just a few words. I get that, but I also felt like there was more to it.

“Did something happen?”

“It’s not that something happened. She’s energetic and honest, so I think she’s a good person. But… Sorry, I dunno how to put it into words.”

“I actually had the impression she might be similar to Narasaka-san.”

Maaya Narasaka-san is probably Ayase-san’s closest friend.

It was surprising to see Ayase-san look so shocked.

“Maaya? No, I don’t think so. They’re completely different.”

“Really?”

“They might be complete opposites.”

I was even more surprised by that answer.

Opposites? My impression of both Narasaka-san and Kozono-san was that they were both friendly and energetic girls.

“Maaya won’t come to you.”

“Come to you?”

“Yeah. She’s like a sunflower, I guess. Konozo-san is like, um… the sun?”

I didn’t understand at all.

But, there was clearly a fundamental difference between the two in Ayase-san’s mind. It felt weird for two people to have such different impressions of the same person. But hey, Ayase-san and I are different people ourselves, so I guess we’re bound to have different takes on things.

The sound of rain pelting the windows grew louder.

“There’s not even a typhoon and it’s raining this hard.”

The water was flowing down the window as if it was being poured from a bucket.

“…I’ll clean up. It was delicious. Thanks for the food.”

“Just leave it in the sink, and I’ll take care of it.”

“Okay, thanks.”

After putting the dirty dishes in the sink, Ayase-san retreated to her room.

Yep, same as yesterday, we’re heading back to our rooms after eating, maintaining a comfortable distance.

Our parents still weren’t home yet.

“Guess I’ll study too...”

I went to my room after washing the dishes.

About an hour of concentrated study went by. When I looked up, feeling tired, it was already 11 pm.

I got up, thinking it was about time for a bath. When I opened my door with a change of clothes in hand, I noticed the light was on in the living room. I heard the TV and, curious, peeked in to see Ayase-san sitting on the couch.

“Watching the news?”

“Yeah. Weather news. They say it’s a torrential downpour.”

When I stepped closer to the TV and looked closely, I saw that the northern part of Kanto was lit up bright red on the screen.

“You think our parents are caught in this? Have they messaged you since?”

“They said they’re taking it easy at a service area.”

It didn’t seem as serious as I thought. They probably took the day off tomorrow, so apparently they didn’t want to push themselves.

The wind was still howling unabated outside, and every now and then, there was a bright flash. Apparently we were getting some lightning now too.

“Oh no. Has it turned into a full-blown storm?”

“Yes...”

Ayase-san, sitting on the couch hugging her knees, was staring intently at the TV screen.

“I think they’ll be alright. Don’t worry.”

“About our parents? Nah, I’m not worried about them.”

But her gaze was still firmly fixed on the screen.

“I can make you something to drink if you like.”

“I’ll be up all night if I have coffee now. Besides, you were about to take a bath, weren’t you? Don’t worry about me. I can make it myself.”

As she finished her sentence and stood up from the couch, it happened.

A flash of lightning turned the window white. *BOOM!* A deafening sound struck our eardrums.

Everything went dark, and Ayase-san screamed. It was the first time I’d heard her cry out like that.

“Ayase-san!”

I held her shoulder as she crouched down, and asked if she was okay.

A second flash of lightning pierced the pitch black room, followed by a thunderous roar. The room was illuminated for a split second before fading back into darkness. I couldn’t help shrinking back myself. Ayase-san clung to me as the thunderclaps came one after the other.

“The lights...”

“Calm down. It’s okay. It’s just a blackout.”

In the darkness, we relied solely on the feel of each other’s bodies for comfort. The rumbling of thunder continued close by, but surely being inside a building would protect us from being struck by lightning.

Looking out the window, the lights were out in all the other buildings. More than likely there’d been a power grid failure, affecting the whole area.

I couldn’t see Ayase-san’s face with it buried in my chest as she clung to me, but I could feel her body trembling.

“It might be a while before the lights come back on, so it might be safer to sit.”

“O-okay,” she replied, lifting her head.

Just the intermittent flashes of lightning made it hard to see, but her quivering voice gave away how scared she was.

Taking her hand, I gently guided her to the couch, then sat down beside her.

“Look outside. Everything’s pitch-black.”

“A blackout...”

“Could be a problem with the power plant, substation, or maybe the lines. Given the extent of this, I doubt it’ll be fixed quickly.”

“T-the lightning is really intense, huh?”

The TV screen had also gone completely dark.

Ayase-san leaned against me for a while, as quiet as a mouse. Maybe it was because she had just taken a bath, but a gentle, pleasant scent brushed past my nose. Feeling her weight leaning against me, she seemed lighter than expected. I was worried I’d break her if I held her too tightly.

It was the first time I’d seen Ayase-san freak out like this. I was more concerned about how to reassure her than about the lightning or blackout. But I knew that panicking would only make things worse.

I tried to keep my voice as calm as I possibly could.

“Is it the lightning you’re afraid of? Or the blackout?”

“...Both.”

It was news to me that she was afraid of both darkness and lightning.

“I’m really sorry. I’m clinging to you like a kid.”

“Everyone has stuff they’re afraid of.”

Hoping talking would take her mind off it, I kept the conversation going while letting Ayase-san cling to me.

I gave her a gentle squeeze with the arm I’d wrapped around her back.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’ll stay right here with you.”

*So there’s nothing to be afraid of.* That’s what I tried to convey to her.

Her trembling slowly subsided as my warmth reached her.

“Is there anything you’re afraid of, Asamura-kun?”

“Well, yeah. There are some things.”

I noted that she’d returned to using my last name, but chose not to point it out.

“Like what?”

“Like, graveyards at night. They’re pretty scary, just like anyone else would think.”

“Do you believe in ghosts and stuff?”

“No... But don’t you feel like something might appear in places where everyone thinks it will? Like, because everyone thinks it, it might *actually* show up?”

“What’re you saying?” She chuckled, and I finally relaxed a bit.

Outside, the sound of thunder gradually faded away. The flashes and booms began to spread out, the noise became fainter, and the wind began to die down.

“Was what I said *that* funny?” I replied with a deliberately clueless tone, making Ayase-san giggle and her body shake with laughter again.

She let go with the hand that’d been clutching me, and pressed it against my chest. She tilted her face up slightly. Our eyes met.

“So, according to you, ghosts and spirits appear because of the living?”

“Yep, that’s about right.”

A question mark formed in her eyes, so I explained.

“Don’t you think there are more graves than just the ones in graveyards?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, humans have been walking the land in Japan for thousands of years, right?”

“Well, sure. The Jomon period began over 10,000 years ago and lasted for about that long.”

“So then, there must be people who died and are buried in places other than graveyards. If ghosts and spirits appear in places where the dead sleep, it wouldn’t be strange for them to appear *anywhere* in Japan.”

The fearful look Ayase-san had just moments ago vanished. She scrunched up her brows, deep in thought.

“That’s... true, I guess.”

“Think about it. There might even be someone buried underneath the building we’re in right now.”

“Wh-what are you saying?”

“But we don’t usually think about it, do we? So it’s kinda strange we’re only scared of graveyards.”

“If that’s true, then isn’t it weird for you to be scared too, Asamura-kun?”

“A lot of people are scared of them, though. I used to be as a kid. I mean, if so many people are scared, it feels like something spooky is bound to happen.”

*The rain falls hardest when you least want it to.* Maybe I did believe in ghosts after all. One called Murphy, that is.

“...It seems like strange logic to me.”

Ayase-san did catch on that I was twisting the narrative mid-way. Well, either way, the chatter was just a distraction, so the logic doesn’t really matter.

“It’s okay to say something’s scary if it is. You don’t have to pretend. At least... not in front of me.”

“...Yeah. Thanks.”

The room was slowly getting muggy as the air-con had stopped. With the chatter from the TV and hum of the air-con gone, I realized how quiet a house could be. Occasionally the wind up and rain picked up, rattling the windows, but that was about it.

The lights were still off. We knew we could get a candle’s worth of light from our phones, but just chose to huddle together on the dark living room couch. It brought back memories of a night two months ago when we fell asleep in each other’s arms. The warmth of each other’s bodies was so comforting that we couldn’t resist the pull of sleep.

Ayase-san wasn’t trembling anymore.

“The reason I’m scared of the dark is probably because of *that* incident...”

She stopped speaking after her last two words. I waited patiently for her to continue, not wanting to rush her. After a pause, Ayase-san began recounting a memory from her past.

“I think... It was winter in my third or fourth year of elementary school.”

Back then, her mother, biological father and her all slept together in their small apartment. Though, her parents’ relationship was slowly going downhill.

She suddenly woke up in the middle of the night.

“The futon was cold, and Mom, who always slept beside me, was gone. Both Mom and Dad were gone, and I felt left alone in the darkness.”

She let out a sigh as she remembered how, as a child, she couldn't understand why she was left behind like that. It felt as if she had been thrown into the dark abyss all alone.

She was struck by an irrational fear that her parents had either died or abandoned her, and she was suddenly the only person left in the world.

"Maybe the fairy tales I read back then had an influence too. It was a story from some northern country or other, I think... The sun gets taken below the horizon, leading to a long, perpetual night. A girl is left behind in the never-ending darkness, and it's so cold that even time seems to freeze. As her heart turns to ice, she loses her humanity and becomes a winter monster or something."

In Ayase-san's young head, she believed she had become a monster in the darkness too. Thrown into the darkness, never to see her parents again...

"By that stage, the relationship between my parents had already grown cold. I had this vague feeling that things would never go back to the way they were. I even thought maybe it was my fault."

"Your fault...?"

"The way Dad looked resentfully at Mom... I felt he looked at me the same way..."

*You'll look down on me like your mother does one day, won't you?* Yet neither she nor her Mom had ever looked at her biological father in that way.

In hindsight, Ayase-san surmised that her parents probably just went outside. Whenever they had an argument at night, they'd take it to her biological father's car so as to not wake up their daughter in the small apartment.

She didn't know which one suggested taking it outside. It was more in line with her Mom's personality, so it was likely her, but she wanted to believe her biological father must've gone along with it because he didn't want their daughter to see them argue.

But there was no way a kid who'd just turned ten would comprehend all that. So, she burst into tears.

Her Mom came running when she heard her daughter sobbing, but Ayase-san just clung to her, crying almost the entire night. Since then, she hadn't been able to sleep in complete darkness, and always kept a nightlight on.

Ayase-san finally opened up and told me all that.

“Don’t you think it’s embarrassing for a high schooler to be afraid of the dark?”

“Not at all... So, you’re scared of lightning because it might cause a blackout?”

“That’s part of it. When blackouts happen, it’s often because of lightning, right? Plus, I think the loud noise is scary. You can’t control natural phenomena...”

“Everyone has something they’re afraid of. It’s just that not everyone talks about it.”

I, for one, have a fear of heights, which is why I hated the plane ride during our school trip.

“Being able to admit what scares you is actually quite commendable.”

“Even though I panicked and clung to you?”

“If it were me, I’d probably stubbornly deny being scared, even if I was terrified.”

“That would’ve been kinda cute.”

*I’m not sure what to think about the “cute” part.*

“Well, luckily for you, I’m not afraid of either the dark *or* lightning. So, you can always rely on me in times like this.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

When I replied with a playful, “You’re welcome,” Ayase-san smiled faintly, before burying her face in my chest again.

“...I was really happy earlier,” she whispered softly.

“Huh?”

“The thing you said. That you wouldn’t go anywhere. That you’d stay with me.”

“Oh, right...”

It was embarrassing to hear my own words repeated back to me.

“It comforted me.”

“Well, I’m glad. It looks like the rain is letting up, so hopefully the power comes back on soon,” I said, unlocking my smartphone.

With practice ease, I pulled up the Lofi Hip Hop stream I’ve listened to more times than I can count. The sound, reminiscent of an old vinyl record, filled the space around us. It had a nostalgic feel to it, a kind of scratchiness that’s different from the clarity of modern music.

“Let’s forget about the blackout. Don’t you think it feels kind of stylish and elegant listening to the rain and this music?”

Ayase-san chuckled quietly in the dark.

“That’s a bit pretentious, isn’t it?”

“They say even dogs become poets on rainy days.”

“Who’s ‘they?’”

Now, where *had* I heard that? I felt like I’d read it somewhere. But it was too hard to figure out, so I decided to bluff my way through it instead.

“Asamura Yuuta,” I said with a straight face.

She laughed silently, her face buried in my chest. Her shoulders shook with amusement. I guess my attempt at being an impromptu poet had failed. And just as she laughed, I remembered the original phrase: “When in love, even dogs become poets.” Alright, that’s quite different. Now I felt even more embarrassed, so I decided to just stay silent and go with it.

We felt the warmth of other bodies pressed together. We lost ourselves in silence, listening to the music and the faint sound of rain. The seconds ticked away, and it felt like our body heat had melded together into one.

Suddenly, Ayase-san looked up at me. Her lips moved, as if to say something—

—And the ceiling lights flicked on. The air-con made a single cough-like noise, and started blowing air as it tried to lower the temperature in the room.

Lights blinked on in the buildings outside too. Clearly, the blackout was over.

A LINE notification chimed. Not from my phone, but from Ayase-san’s.

“It says ‘The rain has stopped, so we’re heading home now,’ and, ‘We’ll come as soon as possible.’ They might be able to get home before morning.”

“That’s good.”

“It’s a shame. Our stylish and elegant moment is over.”

“Another time, then.”

“Yeah. Well then, goodnight, Yuuta... niisan.”

“Goodnight, Saki.”

And just like that, the two days without our parents, for me and Ayase Saki, came to an end.

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<sup>1</sup> Natto is a Japanese dish made from fermented soybeans known for its strong flavor and sticky texture.

<sup>2</sup> These kinds of things are common arguments around the dinner table in Japan. Ketchup or wostcher sauce are also brought up as the superior seasoning.

<sup>3</sup> Cram schools, known as “juku” (塾) in Japan, are private institutions that provide extra tutoring and exam preparation for students. They help students excel in subjects and competitive entrance exams, focusing on intensive study in small classes. However, they can be expensive and contribute to a culture of academic pressure.

<sup>4</sup> PDA = public display of affection.

<sup>5</sup> The Scramble Crossing in Shibuya, Tokyo, is a famous intersection outside Shibuya Station where pedestrians can cross in all directions, creating a busy and iconic scene.

<sup>6</sup> He’s talking about *Slam Dunk*, a popular Japanese manga and anime series about a high school delinquent who joins a basketball team and transforms into a skilled player. It’s celebrated for its impact on basketball’s popularity in Japan and its engaging characters and storylines.

## June 13th (Sunday) — Ayase Saki

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*Yuuta-niisan, Yuuta-niisan, Yuuta-niisan.*

I chanted that three times in my heart before opening the door. It's become my routine of late.

“Good morning, Yuuta-niisan.”

See, that wasn't so hard.

I could see Asamura-kun's top half from where I was across the dining room.

“Good morning, Saki.”

*Good morning, Saki.*

My heart still raced a little every time he used my first name instead of my last. Still, I've gradually gotten used to it, and lately, I think I've been able to respond without getting too flustered.

It was the second day without our parents.

I often worry I might forget that we're siblings when we're alone together. Because, despite Asamura-kun and I also being lovers, we can't behave like regular couples do. Feelings like that tend to surface more when we're aware we're alone. But, given that we're siblings, we can't act like regular couples either.

...Well, that also raises the question of what regular couples even do.

Umm, hold holds? Hug? Kiss? Maybe even more than that—

—*Yuuta-niisan, Yuuta-niisan Yuuta-niisan.* I repeated it in my head like some kind of spell to keep the wild fantasies at bay.

I made it through yesterday without a hitch. Today started off well too. I've got a good rhythm going, it seems.

“Oh, you've already finished making the bento? That was quick,” I said after seeing the lunch bag he'd set on the table.

*Now, what's inside, I wonder?*

There was something in the groceries that hadn't been on the list I gave him. Sausages. The coarse ones with some seasoning in them. Asamura-kun seems to like spicy food, but they weren't labeled as spicy. It's doubtful they were for my Stepdad, Taichi-san, so likely they were in my bento.

*I wanna try cute octopus-shaped sausages made by Asamura-kun!*

No, no, I shouldn't expect too much. They might just be in there as whole sausages. It's his first time making a bento, after all. Still, I never expected him to make a bento for me, so I'm really happy.

We sat down at the same table and ate the same breakfast as him. Rice, miso soup, and fried eggs. Asamura-kun's cooking repertoire may be limited, but everything tasted good. The miso soup, in particular, was just the right richness for me.

“Mmm, this is delicious.”

He visibly relaxed as I said that. You don't need to be that tense, Asamura-kun; you always put a lot of care into the things you make.

We chatted about this and that as we ate. Asamura-kun snuck a quick glance at his smartphone.

“Rain and lightning in the afternoon...” he muttered.

I nearly choked on my rice.

I couldn't help glancing through the window behind him. The sky was blue, and the weather was nice.

“Rain... doesn't seem like it's going to, though?”

But according to Asamura-kun, there was a ninety percent chance of rain in the evening. That means... there's a pretty high chance of a thunderstorm.

“Be careful on your way home. It says there might be lightning too.”

“Really? Ah, um... got it.”

Did my face give it away? I didn't want him to know I was anxious.

I can handle rain. It just gets you wet. Lightning was a different story. The deafening booms close by make me feel like I'm being yelled at. And lightning brings... blackouts. Which means darkness.

Not wanting to sour the mood after a delightful meal, I forcibly changed the subject.

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With breakfast done, it was time for me to head to work, and Asamura-kun to cram school.

His classes started later, and since he cycles, he would usually leave an hour after me.

But, just as I opened the front door of our flat, I heard him call out to me.

“I’ll go with you.”

“Yuu—”

I started to say “Yuuta-niisan,” but realized I was already halfway out the door. Normally, I’d mentally repeat, *from here on, it’s Asamura-kun*, three times before closing the door. But since my hand was already on the doorknob, I was stumped about how to address him.

First things first, I should step outside fully before turning around to face him.

“...What, Asamura-kun?”

“You don’t have to be so strict about using different names—”

I knew he was right. I’m too inflexible.

“Look, since it’s supposed to rain today, I can’t ride my bike. So I figured we might as well leave together.”

Ah, I see. That makes sense.

The impending rain this evening wasn’t the only reason, obviously.

I don’t like being scrutinized for acting like a couple, but on the other hand, I also don’t like being treated like a complete stranger by Asamura-kun. I can tell Asamura-kun knows that and tries to be considerate when we’re outside, where our sibling roles don’t apply.

Today, we just so happened to be going in the same direction. Unless someone we knew saw us leave the apartment building together, we could simply claim we ran into each other by chance.

After all, we’ve shopped together at the local supermarket before.

Honestly though, I often think I can be a bit of a pain.

How do normal couples figure out the right distance between them? I'd like to ask someone, but I've never heard any of my acquaintances—especially boys—discuss their relationships. Well... to be fair, I don't actually have many acquaintances to begin with. For female friends my age, I've got Maaya. But she doesn't really count. She's friendly to everyone, but she doesn't seem to have a boyfriend.

Lately, I've been chatting with people like Ryouko Satou-san and Class Rep, but those conversations are... different.

I looked up at the sky as I stepped out of the apartment building. It was covered in dark clouds. *It's going to rain, no doubt about it.*

"By the time I get back from work, our parents will have returned, won't they?"

They said they'd be back by nighttime.

My alone time with Asamura-kun was coming to an end. At least for now, let's just enjoy walking beside each other to the station. We set off in that direction.

It soon came time to part ways. We gave each other a small wave as we headed off to our respective destinations. Not too long ago, I wouldn't have been able to resist looking back at him as we parted. But today, I managed to resist and reached the bookstore without any such urge. Maybe changing the way I address him made a difference. I clenched my fist once, holding onto that tiny bit of satisfaction.

I quickly changed into my uniform and opened the door to the office.

There was a girl.

She was petite, with a cute swirl of hair on her head. A girl I hadn't seen before.

*Who could she be? Someone related to the store?*

I figured as much by the fact she was dressed in the same uniform as mine—not a school one, but the collared shirt and apron issued by the bookstore.

Could she be... a part-timer? She must be the new hire.

The girl tucked something into her apron pocket and looked up. As I thought, it was my first time seeing her. Oh right, she must be what's-her-name-san that Asamura-kun mentioned yesterday. The one who just joined.

Our eyes met. She smiled at me.

"Saki-senpai! You're Ayase Saki-senpai, right? Nice to work with you today!"

"Uh, ah, yes."

"Wow~, you really *are* beautiful!" she said, coming closer.

I flinched as her sparkling eyes fixed on me.

"Your hair is so bright and pretty! How many times did you bleach it? Which salon do you go to? It suits you so well, you look adorable... I mean, actually, you look like a model. You're stunning!"

The barrage of words left me dumbstruck.

Wh-what... What's happening?

Wait.

Did I even introduce myself? How does she know my name? I haven't even told her yet. And she just used my first name out of nowhere.

"Wow, wow, wow! You really are sooo beautiful!"

Wait, too close, too close, too close!

"U-umm..."

As I stood there, looking bewildered, the girl's expression turned to one of realization, and she quickly bobbed her head in apology.

"Ah, I'm so sorry! I heard from the store manager that, 'The senpai helping you today is a beautiful lady.' And then, well, I saw you, and you really *are* beautiful, so I thought... I wanted to be friends with you."

A beautiful lady... is she talking about *me*? It's nice to be called that, but the one in this store who better fits the description of "beautiful" is probably Yomiuri Shiori-san.

Besides, the girl in front of me was extremely cute herself.

She was quite short, probably shorter than Maaya. Her youthful face was accentuated by twin tails with red<sup>1</sup> inner highlights, which added a nice touch to her black hair. Her round eyes combined with everything else made her look just like a doll.

Her face still held hints of a junior high schooler's innocence, but both her hairstyle and clothes were trendy. She definitely had a good sense of style. She seemed to have a different taste in fashion than I do. Now that I think about it, Asamura-kun didn't mention anything about her appearance.

"Um... you're the new part-timer?"

"Yes. Um, nice to meet you, I'm Kozono. Kozono Erina."

"Kozono-san."

*Kozono Erina.*

So *she*'s the newbie Asamura-kun was talking about. She's in her first year of high school, I believe.

Oh, so the manager and maybe Asamura-kun must've mentioned my name to her.

I shot a quick glance at Kozono-san. Uh, I should really act like a proper senpai here.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Ayase Saki. Pleased to work with you."

As I bowed, Kozono-san rushed to follow suit.

"Same here! I look forward to working with you too!"

*She doesn't seem like a bad person, I thought. But I wonder if we'll get along.* She seemed overly familiar, and even if neither of us had any flaws, compatibility is still a thing. I was a little worried. I mean, I've probably never met a girl quite like her before.

I took Kozono-san to the shelves, even though my shift hadn't started yet.

The manager had assigned me to train her. Honestly, I don't think I'm experienced enough to train a new person, but I couldn't exactly say no when asked to do it.

Anyway, if the manager believed I could handle it, I should trust his judgment.

For now, I'll just pass on what I learned from Asamura-kun, Yomiuri-senpai, and the like. I don't mean in a bad way. It's more like passing down knowledge and experience. The best way to learn is by following good examples. In my opinion, that role model was Yomiuri Shiori-senpai, a favorite of the manager's. Asamura-kun was a close second.

Anyway, we made our way to the bookshelf near the store entrance where books were arranged in a stack.

Kozono-san pulled a small notepad and pen from her apron pocket.

*Wow, she's well-prepared.*

Come to think of it, whenever Asamura-kun had to remember something, he'd use his phone as a substitute for taking notes.

That's when it hit me. The thing she put in her apron when I entered the office earlier was this notebook. Maybe she was reviewing what she learned yesterday. When I asked as much, Kozono-san smiled shyly.

"You saw that, huh? How embarrassing."

Maybe she's the type who doesn't want others to see her hard work? Like a swan that appears graceful on the water's surface but is frantically paddling underneath. I can fully understand the feeling of having a side of yourself you want to show and another you'd rather hide.

"Um, have you been told about the layout of the shelves and stuff? How much did the person who taught you yesterday explain?"

"Oh you mean Asamura-senpai! He seemed super smart!"

"Huh? Ah, yeah, that Asamura-san guy told you."

Is "smart" really the first adjective that comes to mind for Asamura-kun? What about "kind" or something like that? Well, it's not wrong per se, so it's fine.

"Um, I was told about where everything is kept. Also, about the customer path."

"Ah, you mean the way customers move around? So you did get a brief explanation. We might go over some stuff you already know, but please bear with me, and let's double-check."

That's his way of teaching. Give a vague overview of everything to begin with, then go into detail later. It was originally Yomiuri-senpai's method.

Does that mean I can go into the nitty-gritty details now?

“So, this display you see right when you enter, is the new release section. You probably recognize a bunch of the books here.”

“Yes. He said that since it’s the first spot customers see when they enter the bookstore, that’s where the bestsellers go,” Kozono-san said as she nodded along.

“Exactly. Essentially, it’s the bestsellers’ shelf. There are actually two types of books put here. The right side has featured new releases, and the left side has trending titles.”

I raised one finger left and the other right to punctuate each point, forming a kind of peace sign.

“New releases are literally newly published books that are getting attention right now—this section only selects books by well-known authors. It’s impossible to put out *all* the new releases.”

I watched her scribble down some notes and nod along, before continuing.

“Trending books are just those that are popular in the industry or among readers. These days, some get popular because of social media. Like, business or self-help books can become trendy every now and then. So, they’re not necessarily new releases. New releases are recent publications. Trending books are currently popular ones.”

“Oh, I see. I understand,” Kozono-san murmured and continued jotting things down.

*Such a diligent girl.* I waited for her pen to stop moving, then pointed at a book with a white cover in a corner of the display. Apparently she recognized it.

“Ah, I see that one in train ads every morning!”

The book, about human relationships, had a band around it that boasted, “Over one million sold in the series!” I’ve rung it up at the register a few times myself.

“Books like this are popular, but they’re not necessarily new releases.”

“Really? It looks new, though.”

That’s because it’s been reprinted recently.

“To find out the release date of a book, you look at the ‘colophon’.”

I picked up the book and flipped to the last page.

“This is the colophon. Look at the date next to ‘first edition.’ That’s the date when this book was first published.”

“Wow, ten years ago! Wait, is this a secondhand bookshop too?”

“No, it’s not.”

I couldn’t hold back a wry smile.

Beneath the first edition date, the reprints are also listed. The date of the reprint is the date the current copy was issued. Books, when they get popular and sell out, are reprinted. The date of these reprints is listed accordingly.

“Heh, so this book has been popular all this time, has it?”

“It has been, yes. Of course, some books might not sell for ages, but then they’ll suddenly gain attention and become popular.”

“Huh, why’s that?”

“Well, do you know that right now, there’s this historical figure’s autobiography that’s getting a lot of attention again?”

I said the name of the person.

“That sounds familiar...”

His portrait was chosen to appear on the new banknotes.

“In cases like that, it sells even if it isn’t a new release. ’Cause it’s a topic of conversation.”

“Now that you mention it, it’s surprising how even old things can sell like that!”

I felt like facepalming at her innocent comment.

I mean, sure, in today’s world where new things are constantly emerging, the old can get washed away in the relentless flow of the time. But that doesn’t mean old things have no value. It might be because I love history, but I believe that if something is good, it remains good even if it’s old. At least, that’s what I think. I wonder if the younger generation feel the same way too.

...Wait, hold on a sec. I’m only two years older than Kozono-san, so who’s to say other first-year high school students don’t feel the same way?

But my thoughts were wandering.

“So, basically, we have books here that customers would likely be interested in. It provides a reason for them to come into the bookstore.”

“A reason... Oh, ’cause it’s at the start of the ‘customer path’?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“It’s just as Asamura-senpai told me! Once you understand the concept of the ‘customer path’, you’ll eventually get the layout of the shelves. It was a bit difficult though,” Kozono-san said proudly, holding up her notebook.

*She’s a quick learner.*

And, no surprise, Asamura-kun’s teaching method was effective. I feel like I tend to go too much into detail.

But knowing how a bookstore as a retail store tries to attract customers should be a plus in the long run. Yeah, it shouldn’t be a waste. It shouldn’t.

Still, I’d like to avoid overlapping with what Asamura-kun taught. Learning the same thing from different people is a waste of valuable training time. It’s best avoided for the sake of both of us and the store.

“Kozono-san.”

“You can call me Erina. Eri is fine too. Or even Eri-Eri!”

“Um, Eri... Kozono-san—”

It felt kind of awkward to suddenly use someone’s first name when I don’t know them well, so I just stuck to using her last name.

“—Can I ask what you learned yesterday?”

“Well, you see...”

While we were talking, a man tried to step around us to exit the store. He was holding a shopping bag, indicating he was a customer. Oops, we shouldn’t be blocking the entrance like that. Especially if it inconveniences a customer.

I stepped aside and bowed.

“Thank you very much.”

The man nodded in acknowledgment and left, and Kozono-san followed up with a bow of her own.

“Thank you very much!”

Her voice was so friendly and easy to understand, with just the right amount of warmth. It was probably better suited for customer service than my emotionless greetings. Plus, it sounded so natural.

I glanced at her. Kozono-san had a genuine smile on her face. Personally, I *tried* to maintain a soft expression, but I wasn’t really smiling. It’s not like I’m against showing friendliness, I’m just not good at putting on a fake smile. I’ve practiced lifting the corners of my mouth many times, but I just couldn’t get it to look natural.

Is it her innate personality that allows her to smile so naturally? Or maybe she’s just trying really hard to be liked?

Argh, I almost let out a sound of realization. I get it now. Kozono-san’s way of getting up close and personal might be her way of trying to connect with people. I was a bit surprised at first, but maybe she’s just naturally suited for customer service.

“Um, Saki-senpai? Is something wrong?”

Oops. I got lost in thought.

“No, it’s nothing. So, can you tell me what Asamura-san taught you? It’s not very efficient if we cover the same topics.”

“Understood! Let’s see...” Kozono-san started saying as she flipped through her notebook.

The rest of the training went smoothly.

As the lunchtime crowds began to thin, Kozono-san and I decided to take our lunch break together.

The other staff kindly suggested that we eat together since we were close in age. With no reason to refuse, we both ended up eating in the office.

I said “Itadakimasu” and opened my bento box. I silently thanked Asamura-kun—who’d made it for me—in my heart.

Lifting the lid revealed white, brown, and yellow: rice, sausages, and small cubes... probably potatoes.

Next, I reached for the Tupperware container. Salad. The colors were a vibrant green, white, orange, and red. Shredded lettuce, thinly sliced onions, julienned carrots, and cherry tomatoes. It's the exact same that I made yesterday. We do share recipes, so it's only natural. It's funny to feel our family bond in moments like this.

I drizzled dressing over the salad from the same tiny fish-shaped bottle that both Asamura-kun and I have. Though they were disposable, it felt special because they matched.

After letting a cherry tomato burst in my mouth, I ended my vegetable warm-up. Now, onto the main dish.

Sausages and potatoes cozily nestled against each other inside the bento. I started with a slightly rounded potato. Delicious. It tasted of consommé. *Did he remember me mentioning that powdered consommé was handy?*

He said not to get my hopes up, but it turned out great. Even the bite-sized sausages tasted good cold. While some meats can taste off when they cool and the fat solidifies, for some reason, sausages don't suffer the same fate.

I noticed that neither the sausages nor the potatoes had any grill marks, so they must've been microwaved.

He must've looked it up and did what he could manage. He really tried his best.

“Um...”

A voice brought me back to reality. Kozono-san, sitting across from me, was leaning forward.

“Is that a homemade bento?”

Her shining eyes were fixed on my chopsticks.

“Uh...”

I couldn't exactly say that Asamura-kun, whom she met yesterday, made it for me. Her bombarding me with questions would be tedious.

How about saying my boyfriend made it? Wait, no. That would imply that we lived in the same house. Living together, in other words. While we do *technically* live together, siblings sharing a house isn't actually “living together,” is it? People don't say that, do they?

“My family made it for me.”

It wasn't a lie, but not the whole truth either. I figured it was a decent excuse, but the moment I said it, Kozono-san looked like she'd been bewitched by a fox<sup>2</sup>—no, seriously, that's the perfect way to describe it.

"Hmmm."

"What?"

"Hmm, hmm, hmm♪. Maybe I'm reading too much into it."

She tilted her head and started humming. What does she mean?

"Did I say something strange?"

"Well, you see, I ate lunch with Asamura-senpai yesterday, and his bento looked homemade too, so I asked him the same thing. Then, he was like, 'My family made it for me.'"

I quite literally broke out into a cold sweat.

I made him lunch yesterday. Asamura-kun must've been at a loss for how to answer too, and gave the same response I did.

"H-heh... oh really?

"If it were me, I'd probably say 'Mama'... no, not that! *Ahem*, I'd specifically say, 'My mother' or, 'My father,' or whoever made it for me."

I thought so too. I almost said the same thing.

"Oh, by the way, my mother made this."

Kozono-san tilted her bento to show me. Her box, smaller than mine, was filled with colorful side dishes. The character-themed toothpicks stuck in it made it look cute.

"So I wondered why both Asamura-senpai and you used the phrase, 'my family'... But maybe *I'm* the weird one?"

"Oh, ha-ha-ha."

Then it hit me. My eyes darted to my bento. The salad in the container. He probably used mine as a reference, so the composition of the vegetables was identical. But that wasn't the only similarity. Although they're commonplace, the containers were the same design. Even our lunch bags were the same, just in different colors.

I quietly moved my lunch bag off the table to the seat beside me.

“Yeah, I think saying ‘my family made it’ is pretty normal.”

“Is it really? Ah, but I do think it sounds a bit more mature and quite nice.”



“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Whaaat? Really?”

She laughed as if someone had pulled the rug out from under her. Her smile was just as genuine as the one she gave to the customer earlier.

“Speaking of family, do you have any siblings, Saki-san?”

“Uhm...”

Thinking about explaining it all over again was a big headache. And, I wasn’t sure how Kozono-san would react to my response. Since I don’t know, I’d rather just avoid the topic entirely.

While I grappled with how to answer, Kozono-san directed her gaze upward and started muttering.

“Wait, I’ll guess. I think you’re an older sister, Saki-senpai, because you seem really responsible and cool. Hmm, but, just maybe you’re actually a younger sister? You have an older brother or sister! And every day you act all sweet, calling him ‘Onii-chan~’ and stuff! That kind of thing is what they call ‘gap moe’<sup>3</sup>, isn’t it? That’s why I said ‘just maybe’.”

What on earth is she going on about?

“I’m... not sure how to answer that.”

“Oh? Are you an only child?”

“Do you... really wanna know?”

“Not particularly.”

*What?*

“I don’t wanna know that specifically, just more about you, Saki-senpai.”

*What the...*

“I just can’t help but admire cool people who stand all tall and dignified, y’know. Given how I am,” she said, patting the top of her head with her palm.

Does she mean because she’s small?

“I think you’re cute, though.”

“Wow! Thank you so much! But I still admire cool and dignified people.”

With a beaming smile, Kozono-san returned to her lunch. She seemed content.

I, meanwhile, was sweating bullets internally.

*What's this girl's deal?*

At first, I thought she was a bit like Maaya—friendly and approachable. But she's different. Maaya, despite appearances, is good at reading the room. She's definitely friendly, but she's good at gauging what distance to keep just by talking a little. Take, for instance, the sports festival last year. Maaya didn't say anything to me when I skipped practice for it.

She's nosy, but she really pays attention to people, discerning whether they want company or to be left alone.

Kozono-san, in contrast, is quick to close the distance. She comes at you with such intensity you'd think her life depended on becoming friends. It feels like she's not paying attention to the other person.

I don't think she means any harm, though. I remember the lingering animosity directed at me and Mom after the divorce. But this feels different.

She probably wanted to get to know me better and tried to expand the conversation. But I ended up forcibly shutting it down. I feel bad about it, but—

“Um... Did I upset you?”

My head snapped up in surprise. Kozono-san, with a character-themed toothpick in her mouth, looked genuinely apologetic.

“Did I mess up by asking about your family?”

*She's surprisingly perceptive in some ways.*

“It's not that... It's just... I'm not very good at talking about that kinda stuff. I mean, hearing about me probably isn't all that interesting anyway.”

“Hm... Okay, I get it. I'll drop it!”

“Thanks. Sorry.”

“No worries!”

After that, we both ate our lunch mostly in silence, each of us engrossed in our phones until lunch break ended. Though our conversation was stilted, a part of me felt relieved that we didn't bridge the distance between us.

I closed the English listening video I was watching, got ready, and turned to Kozono-san.

“Should we get back to work soon?”

“Understood, Ayase-san.”

I felt a sudden sense that something was off in the way she addressed me, but before I could pinpoint it, the hectic afternoon shift started.

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I clocked out on my time card and finished my shift for the day.

I knew it'd started to rain because every customer who came into the store had an umbrella. I was the one who'd set up the umbrella bag stand at the entrance.

As soon as I stepped out of the building, I was buffeted by strong wind and rain blowing sideways.

I hurriedly opened my umbrella—only to panic when the wind almost whisked it away. Not good. I quickly ducked back inside the building to take shelter. Raining cats and dogs would be an understatement.

Looking up at the sky, I pondered my next move.

The only umbrella I had with me was a small foldable one, which didn't seem likely to withstand such strong wind and rain.

I'd underestimated the forecast: ninety percent chance of rain with the possibility of thunderstorms. My bad.

People passing by on the street were gripping their umbrellas firmly from the base to avoid having them blown away.

Some were still occasionally caught off guard by strong gusts of wind, their umbrellas flipping inside out.

“This is... I'm gonna get wet no matter what, aren't I?”

Even if I'd brought a bigger umbrella, it probably wouldn't have made a difference. Heck, with how little I weigh, I might've just been dragged away by the umbrella. There's always a silver lining, I suppose.

The rain showed no signs of letting up.

I clutched the sports bag I had slung over my shoulder tightly against me. I gripped the base of my umbrella, braced myself, and stepped out into the rain. I managed to stagger forward, despite feeling like my umbrella was about to fly away—and me with it.

The noise of the rain hitting my umbrella was so loud that even when I reached the bustling Shibuya main street, I couldn't hear any of the popular music. The rain had muted the usual hubbub of the city.

I began to hear faint sounds of thunder in the clouds above. Not a full-blown thunderclap yet, but enough to make me feel a little anxious and get my feet moving faster.

Soon, I saw the familiar apartment building up ahead. Ah, I'm almost home. I ducked under the overhang by the entrance, snapped my umbrella shut, and finally let out a sigh of relief.

“Haah...”

Only my head and upper body had been somewhat shielded by the umbrella. The rain had soaked into my shoes, and the squelching sound whenever I took a step was unbearable.

I rolled up the folded umbrella and took the elevator up.

Finally managing to open the front door of our flat, I called out, “I’m home,” in a faint voice.

I set down my bag in the hallway, took off my shoes, then my socks, and stood there barefoot. I wanted to change into dry clothes ASAP.

I sensed someone behind the door and immediately froze. I was drenched from head to toe, and my clothes were clinging tightly to my body. My immediate thought was that I didn’t want Asamura-kun to see me in such a sorry state. *What should I do?* As I was mulling it over, Asamura-kun, without opening the door, asked about the rain and mentioned that the bath was ready.

And, as if saying all he needed to, he walked away from the door.

“Thank you.”

I wasn’t sure if the tiny voice I managed to squeak out even reached the other side of the door.

I was careful not to drip water from my hair onto the floor, though I knew I'd have to wipe up my wet footprints later. I also needed to stuff newspaper or some dry cloth into my shoes to help them dry faster.

Thinking about the hassle of cleaning up was discouraging. But a hot bath was waiting for me!

Back when it was just me and Mom, she'd already be at work when I got home from school, so this was a new kind of luxury.

It's just what I wanted, so I'm happy he thought ahead for me. I felt my spirits lift a bit as I made my way to the bathroom.

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“Haaa...”

A sigh of relief escaped my lips.

My chilled body began to thaw in the hot water, the heating seeping into my every pore and warming me from the inside out.

I closed my eyes and let myself drift, the faint sound of the rain reaching my ears even in the bathroom.

Seems like it's getting heavier. There was thunder too. I just pray there's no blackout while I'm in the bath.

Though I'd managed to take a moment to relax, the storm made me so anxious that I washed up and soaked quicker than usual.

Dinner was already made when I stepped out of the bath. A delicious aroma wafted into my nose just by opening the door to the dining room.

I was grateful for Asamura-kun's thoughtfulness in choosing curry to warm me up.

I glanced out the window. *Huh? The rain seems to have let up a bit.* Maybe I came home when it was raining the hardest. That's kind of frustrating.

It was already dark outside though, so I couldn't actually tell the true state of the weather.

I wonder if Mom and my Stepdad are okay.

No sooner had I said that thought aloud, than my smartphone buzzed. A LINE notification popped up, and I could tell it was from Mom. She said they were stuck in a traffic jam and couldn't move.

Asamura-kun checked on his phone too, and it seemed that the storm had caused an accident and the subsequent traffic.

But, they won't be back until tomorrow—

Tomorrow is Monday, but will that be alright? Well, Mom starts work at night, so that should be fine. When I voiced my concern, Asamura-kun reassured me that my Stepdad, Taichi-san, had wisely taken paid leave tomorrow. So, I could relax.

Wait. Does that mean it's just me and Asamura-kun alone again tonight?

Well, that doesn't mean anything will be different, right? Right, we'll just take a bath, study, and go to bed.

Ah, actually, I've already taken my bath.

So, the usual ritual of discussing who'd have one first wasn't needed tonight. When I told him that, Asamura-kun looked a bit lost.

“As I was saying, since I've already taken my bath....”

So Asamura-kun can—

*No, that's wrong.*

“You can go in whenever you want, Yuuta-niisan.”

That was close. I'd completely forgotten our usual routine when I came home soaking wet. Um, right, the person in front of me is *Yuuta-niisan*, *Yuuta-niisan*, *Yuuta-niisan*.

“*And every day you act all sweet, calling him ‘Onii-chan~’ and stuff!*”

Why am I remembering *that* right now!? I won't say it, okay? Why do I have to act sweet anyway?

“Oh, by the way, I worked with Kozono-san today.”

“Hm? Ah, so you did end up working with her.”

Asamura-kun seemed confused by my sudden change of subject (though in my mind it was related), but soon picked up that I was talking about the new part-time girl.

I told him I'd been assigned to train Kozono-san. Asamura-kun complimented her, saying she catches on quickly.

"Yeah... That's true," I replied hesitantly.

I guess because I was kind of vague, Asamura-kun looked worried and asked if something had happened.

"It's not that something happened. She's energetic and honest, so I think she's a good person. But... Sorry, I dunno how to put it into words."

Asamura-kun responded to that by saying, "I actually had the impression she might be similar to Narasaka-san."

Implying that they might get along.

At first, I felt the same, but—

Maaya is like a sunflower. She always turns her head to follow the movement of the sun. No, I'm not saying something embarrassing like *I'm* the sun or anything. What I mean is, she watches her counterpart and responds accordingly. That's why she has such a diverse group of friends.

She's friends with someone like me, socially awkward and high-maintenance—though it's a bit weird to say that about myself. And, she's also friends with outgoing, social butterflies. She has serious friends and not-so-serious ones. Maaya can interact with all these different personalities, adapting her behavior to each one.

As for Kozono-san...

Asamura-kun was right in saying she was an excellent new part-timer. She's polite and a quick learner. There's no doubt she's a great asset at work.

But her focus might not be others.

I recalled a moment when we were eating lunch in the office. Oh, right, when I said, "Should we get back to work soon?" she replied, "Understood, Ayase-san." Until then she called me "Saki-senpai." I'm sure of it.

Why did she change how she addresses me? I don't know, and it bothers me.

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After dinner, I locked myself in my room to study for entrance exams.

I wore headphones to block out the noise, but my concentration was broken when my smartphone's screen lit up. A LINE notification. I checked it to find a message in the group chat I was in with Maaya and Satou-san.

We'd created this group to stay in touch during our school trip, when we shared the same room. It was the only LINE group chat I was in, aside from one for my family. Usually, we just message each other directly, so I don't really see the need to have group chats to be honest.

Anyway, this group chat hardly ever received any messages.

**Maaya:**【It flashed! It really flashed! Oh no, it's close!】

**Saki:**【Go to sleep.】

I shot back a short reply. *Seriously, why is she messaging me for something like this?* I wondered, but [Read] immediately popped up next to my message and another reply came quickly after.

**Ryouko:**【I'm scared. You're not scared, Ayase-san? That's amazing.】

It was from Satou Ryouko-san.

“Ah.”

It finally clicked. So that's what Maaya is trying to do.

This must be Maaya's way of showing concern, knowing that Satou-san is a scaredy-cat. She probably thought she'd be scared on her own. Instead of sending a direct message, which might make Satou-san feel like she's being fussed over, she used the group chat. Knowing you're not the only one who's scared can lessen your anxiety.

Well, usually.

**Saki:**【Is everyone ok?】

**Maaya:**【I'm locked in my room, blasting music through my headphones! Shutting out the light and sound!】

**Ryouko:**【I totally get it.... Maybe I should listen to music too.】

**Maaya:**【You should~! It'll make you feel better~】

**Ryouko:**【Ok.】

The messages stopped for a second.

**Ryouko:**【Thanks guys. Really 😻】

Reading Satou-san's sweet message with that smiling cat sticker made me feel warm inside. Maaya really is good at being thoughtful.

“I’m not scared? Not true *at all*. ”

Truth is, I’m *terrified* of thunderstorms. And the blackouts that often come with them. Apparently, not even Maaya realized I was scared as well. I left my room and made my way to the living room, flicking on the TV to check the weather report. On the Weather News channel, a female announcer was standing in front of a map scattered with thunderstorm icons. Captions were running in one corner.

“Watching the news?”

The voice made my heart leap. It was Asamura-kun. I was so absorbed in staring at the screen that I didn’t notice him entering the room. The weather forecast was showing the transition of rainfall now.

“I think they’ll be alright. Don’t worry,” Asamura-kun said after a brief exchange.

“About our parents? Nah, I’m not worried about them.”

Mom isn’t scared of storms, and right now, she has my Stepdad Taichi-san by her side. So she’d feel more at ease with him than with me.

I snuck a glance at Asamura-kun over my shoulder. It looked like he was about to take a bath.

He probably came to check on me when he saw the light in the living room. I didn’t want to keep him from his bath any longer. Plus, staring at the TV and stressing out wouldn’t exactly make the clouds simply disappear.

“I can make you something to drink if you like.”

“I’ll be up all night if I have coffee now. Besides, you were about to take a bath, weren’t you? Don’t worry about me. I can make it myself.”

I stood up just as the last word left my lips.

*Flash.* An enormous clap of thunder shook my body, making me scream.

The lights went out.

Thrown into darkness, I instantly panicked. I crouched down, covering my ears with both hands. It was better to close my eyes so I couldn't see by my own choice, rather than open them and see nothing. That way, it was my fault that I couldn't see.

“Ayase-san!”

A voice shouted as if it was near my ear, but I barely heard it.

He gently held my shoulder. I looked up, opening my eyes, only to be blinded by another flash. Unable to bear it, I clung to Asamura-kun in front of me.

*No more! I can't take it!*

I clenched the cloth I'd grabbed, closing my eyes tight as if determined never to open them again.

The booming sound of lightning made my heart constrict with fear. The sudden darkness was terrifying.

Asamura-kun tried to reassure me by saying it was only a blackout, but that did little to make me feel less frightened.

He said it was probably safer to sit down, so I let him lead me by the hand to the couch. Asamura-kun took a seat beside me.

“Look outside. Everything's pitch-black.”

I reluctantly opened my eyes to see. Beyond the rectangular frame of the window, lightning flashed, and I could barely make out the shape of it. All the lights in the other buildings were out. Definitely looked like a widespread power outage.

I was still clinging to him. My hand, which had crawled to his chest, was gripping so hard it was creating creases on his shirt. Letting go was out of the question. I felt like if I didn't hold onto something, I'd be left behind in this darkness.

Asamura-kun wrapped an arm around my back, gently stroking me with his palm. Although I felt embarrassed, being consoled like a little kid, the warmth from Asamura-kun's hand on my back was comforting. Slowly but surely, my overwhelming anxiety began to ease. But I couldn't bring myself to ask him to stop.

“Is it the lightning you’re afraid of? Or the blackout?”

“...Both,” I whispered, leaning into Asamura-kun’s chest.

I told him I was sorry for clinging to him like a kid.

Asamura-kun whispered back to me in a warm voice, saying that everyone has things they’re scared of. His embrace tightened ever so slightly, and I let out a relieved sigh, feeling comforted.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’ll stay right here with you,” he whispered soft but clear in my ear.

His gentle, yet firm reassurance melted away my stubborn anxiety, like calming down a kid who’d been crying.

“Is there anything you’re afraid of, Asamura-kun?”

I wondered how Asamura-kun could be so calm even when suddenly thrown into the darkness. *Maybe he’s not scared of anything.*

Surprisingly, though, he admitted that he did have ordinary fears. But he said he was unfazed by darkness or ghosts, so maybe he has a slightly different view on things than most people.

Probably to calm me down, Asamura-kun spouted some weird logic and continued chatting to me.

As I started to calm down a bit, something dawned on me.

When I freaked out, Asamura-kun had shouted, “*Ayase-san!*” He was so frantic that the promise to use my name at home had flown out the window. But maybe that was for the best. His familiar tone might’ve been what reached me.

With the air-con off, all I could hear was the wind and rain. The sound of thunder was slowly fading away, but the electricity was still out.

To distract myself from the storm, I began recounting a childhood memory. The reason why I became afraid of the dark.

I felt embarrassed, admitting to such a childlike fear. I didn’t often share my fears with others, but for whatever reason, I wanted Asamura-kun to know. I wanted him to know because it was him.

He listened to me stammer my way through my story until the end.

He said it was commendable for someone to open up about their fears.

*Is that really true?*

“Even though I panicked and clung to you?”

Asamura-kun joked that he might’ve acted stubborn and pretended not to be scared if it were him.

The image of a stubborn young Asamura-kun insisting, “I’m not scared” popped into my mind, and I couldn’t help blurting, “That would’ve been kinda cute.”

He seemed a little embarrassed to be called cute, though.

“Well, luckily for you, I’m not afraid of either the dark *or* lightning. So, you can always rely on me in times like this.”

Yeah. Thanks.

I was really happy earlier.

“The thing you said. That you wouldn’t go anywhere. That you’d stay with me.”

He replied with a playful, “You’re welcome,” and a hint of embarrassment.

Asamura-kun pulled his smartphone out of his pocket and put it on the coffee table in front of the couch.

With practiced movements, he pulled up Lofi Hip Hop. The scratchy sound echoed softly in my ears, drowning out the noise of the wind and rain.

**【*Maybe I should listen to music too.*】**

**【*You should~! It’ll make you feel better~*】**

My chat with Satou-san and Maaya earlier popped into my head. Yeah, you were right, you two. I’m not as scared anymore.

“Let’s forget about the blackout. Don’t you think it feels kind of stylish and elegant listening to the rain and this music?”

My lips naturally curled into a smile at his slightly pretentious way of speaking. And I almost burst out laughing listening to Asamura Yuuta the poet, only able to suppress my laughter by burying my face in his chest. *No, stop, stop, it’s too funny.*

I lost myself in the warmth of his chest and the arms holding me. All I could hear was the muffled sound of music playing.

Closing my eyes, I felt like I could forget that I was in our flat in the middle of a blackout, a storm raging outside. I could almost see a garden of hydrangeas blossoming in the rain behind my closed eyelids.

My heartbeat slowly synchronized with the steady rhythm of Asamura-kun's. I let go of the shirt I was holding and placed my hand atop his on the couch. Intertwining our fingers, I lifted my head and whispered to him ever so faintly, “Hey...”

Just then, the ceiling light flicked on.

I heard the hum of the air-con, and noticed that lights in the buildings outside were also turning on one by one.

The blackout was over. It felt like I was waking up from a dream.

A message came in from Mom on LINE. She said the rain had stopped and she'd hurry home as soon as possible. I didn't know how soon, “As soon as possible” would be, but if she was already close by, it might not take long.

“It's a shame. Our stylish and elegant moment is over.”

My fear of the dark hadn't disappeared. If I'd been alone, it would've been neither stylish *nor* elegant. But I was so grateful for Asamura-kun's companionship that I just had to tell him.

“Another time, then,” he said.

Another time. Like this, with just the two of us.

Yeah, maybe. But not in a thunderstorm. Not in complete darkness. I'd like at least *some* light. Like on Halloween.

But—someday. A day when I can finish what came after that “Hey...”

“Yeah. Well then, goodnight.”

...Because I couldn't say it. Not yet.

“Yuuta... niisan,” I said, as if seeking confirmation.

“Goodnight, Saki,” he dutifully replied.

Yeah, when I get used to being called “Saki.” When it feels strange to be called “Ayase-san,” I'll try again.

And just like that, the two days without our parents, for me and Asamura Yuuta, came to an end.

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<sup>1</sup> Saki uses 赤 (red) to describe the color of Erina's highlights, whereas Yuuta uses the loan word ピンク(pink). Not sure why they see it as a different color.

<sup>2</sup> Bewitched by a fox (kitsune ni bakasareta you ni) originates from Japanese folklore, where kitsune (fox-like creatures) are known for tricking and deceiving humans. It's used metaphorically to describe situations where someone's behavior changes unexpectedly, as if influenced by a kitsune's enchantment. The equivalent English saying would be, "Looked like they'd seen a ghost."

<sup>3</sup> Refers to the appeal that comes from a character displaying a stark contrast between their usual personality or appearance and an unexpected or contradictory one. This contrast can make the character more endearing or charming to fans.

## June 14th (Monday) — Asamura Yuuta

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The living room was bathed in white light. With the rain now gone, the following early morning was bright.

Sunlight from a newly risen sun shone through the room's lace curtains. Or maybe my mood has improved, and that's why I see it this way?

If your heart can be affected by the weather, then the opposite is also true. The world can look a whole lot different depending on your mood.

But it's way too poetic and kind of embarrassing to put that into words, even just in my head.

Still, I feel like I've gotten to know Ayase Saki a little better thanks to the time we spent together last night.

The way her expression softened every time our eyes met over breakfast warmed something deep inside me.

As we finished eating and were getting ready, my old man and Akiko-san emerged from their bedroom.

Apparently, they'd returned early this morning while we were still asleep.

"Good morning. And, we're back. Anything happen, you two?"

"Welcome back. Nope, just the usual."

Well, saying *nothing* happened would be a lie.

"There was the blackout, I guess."

"Huh? Really? Were you okay?"

"Yes. It was only out for a little while. Nothing in particular happened, and the power came back on quickly," Ayase-san said.

Akiko-san smiled as she stood next to my old man.

"See, Taichi-san? Told you so."

He gave her a wry smile and swiftly adjusted the rim of his glasses with his finger.

“Listen, Akiko-san. No matter what anyone says, if you’re worried, you’re worried. It’s not something you can just stop with logic. I, of course, thought everything was fine too.”

Seeing how proud my old man looked, I had to use all the strength in my abs not to burst out laughing.

“Yes, yes.”

Akiko-san waved off my old man’s dramatics.

Ayase-san giggled, her shoulders shaking. I couldn’t hold back anymore and cracked up too.

“C’mon you two, hurry up and go, or you’ll be late.”

At Akiko-san’s urging, we said our goodbyes and left the flat.

We began walking to school. The rain had stopped, and the sky was blue, as if last night’s thunderstorm had been nothing but a dream. Even the puddles shining brilliantly on the ground reflected the clear sky.

Ayase-san walked beside me, our steps in sync.

It’s interesting, if you think about it. My pace was slower than usual. Meaning, if you factor in movement efficiency per unit of time, my performance had dropped. If I prioritized efficiency, I should’ve taken my bicycle now that the rain had stopped. Yet, I enjoyed my current pace.

Again, it’s all about perspective.

This isn’t just about getting to school; I want to cherish the time I spend with her. Wanting to stay closer to her outside. I started doing just that yesterday.

I decided to abandon my bike for a while, especially with the rainy season upon us. From now on, we’ll leave the house together.

We stopped at a red light. This exact spot pulled up a memory from a year ago. Ayase-san didn’t notice a large vehicle running the light, and I barely managed to pull her away in time. Just the thought of what could’ve happened sends shivers down my spine to this day.

It seems she cottoned onto what I was thinking, nodding.

“Yes, I’ll be careful.”

The light turned green. After checking both ways repeatedly, we safely crossed the intersection.

I took a deep breath and looked up at the sky.

*It's so clear, without a single cloud.*

“With weather like this, there shouldn’t be any issues for tomorrow’s tournament. The forecast says it’ll be sunny then too.”

Ayase-san nodded in agreement.

The school grounds themselves might still be wet, making it tough for students doing outdoor sports to practice. Those of us practicing in the gymnasium will feel for them, of course, but we have to focus on our own final preparations.

I passed through the school gate. I changed my shoes at the shoe lockers, made my way down the corridor, and climbed the stairs to the third floor. Ayase-san and I were together the entire time. Even after reaching the top floor of the school building, we walked side by side to our classroom. It’d be weird to split up at this point since we’re in the same class. Ayase-san and I stayed close but not *too* close. We didn’t hold hands or anything; we simply walked shoulder to shoulder.

We opened the door and stepped into the classroom. We made eye contact for a second, nodded, then headed to our respective seats.

I’d just put my bag down and taken a seat when Yoshida slunk over to me. He sat down sideways in the empty seat in front of me and leaned in close.

“Oh man, you’re full of surprises, aren’t ya Asamura-san?”

I felt a shiver down my spine when he called me “Asamura-san” instead of the usual “Asamura.”

“Uh... Did I miss something here?”

Yoshida’s eyes narrowed.

“Dude, tell me I’m not seeing things. Didn’t you just come in with Ayase?”

I figured this would come up. That’s why I haven’t come to school with her until now.

Apparently, when a high school boy and girl come to school together, it raises certain expectations.

“We’re classmates, so it’s normal for us to chat, is it not?”

“How long has this been going on? I don’t remember you and Ayase ever having much in common?”

Fair question. It’d been two months since the semester began. Showing up all of a sudden with someone you’ve never even made eye contact with was bound to raise eyebrows. You need some event to change relationships. In novels, relationships between characters don’t just change without some sort of episode or event.

In reality, though, nothing so dramatic was needed. Like, for instance—

“We just happened to chat while walking to school today, alright?”

It wasn’t exactly a lie. I just left out the part about leaving the same house together, that’s all.

“Just happened to,’ eh? Since when were you the chatty type with someone you barely know?”

“Well, she’s not exactly a stranger. Last year, I went out with Ayase-san and some people from her class.”

That wasn’t a lie either.

“Where’d you guys go? Wait, don’t tell me you pulled off the legendary mixed-gender karaoke? Your Mom won’t allow it, young man!”

I don’t remember Yoshida ever giving birth to me.

“Summer public pool.”

“You mean the land of *dreams*, you bastard?”

“I just think it’s a regular public place...”

“Gotcha. And you two became close after that?”

“As you can see, more or less.”

I deliberately kept my answer vague.

Yoshida leaned in closer.

“I’m rooting for you, Asamura.”

“Rooting for what?”

“So, when you gonna confess?”

“Confess...”

Why do people always try to turn a guy-girl relationship into a romantic one... Well, to be fair, we already *are* in one. I've already confessed my feelings to her.

"You and Makihara-san are close too, aren't you, Yoshida? So it's normal to have close friends of the opposite sex."

"Man, that's exactly why I thought maybe you liked her."

"What...? I knew you two were close, but you like Makihara-san in that way, Yoshida?"

"Wha-! Y-yo, Asamura! Keep your voice down."

Yoshida looked around nervously, but I hadn't been speaking loudly. I'd asked him in a reasonably quiet voice. *Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you.* Fairness in relationships often means maintaining a balance.

Just then, the bell for class to start rang.

As Yoshida got up to leave, he whispered something in my ear.

"I need your advice on something later."

With that, he returned to his seat. What could he want to discuss? I never thought of myself as someone to go to for advice, especially about romance—an area I'm completely hopeless in.

I tilted my head in confusion.

I didn't find out what Yoshida needed advice about until PE that afternoon.

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The basketball thrown by my team circled the ring and bounced off again.

We were in PE class, split into two teams for a practice game in preparation for the sports festival.

I was under the hoop and caught the ball as it fell. I had an opponent sticking close to my back, so it'd be difficult to turn around towards the hoop. Now, should I forcefully turn and shoot, or—

"Asamura!"

A teammate called out my name. A classmate who'd backed away to the three-point line was signaling to me. Yoshida.

The floor squeaked as I stepped and passed the ball straight at Yoshida's chest. He launched the ball. It sailed through the air in a gentle arch and was swallowed by the hoop.

Cheers erupted from both friends and foes.

"Nice pass, Asamura!"

I replied, "Nice shot."

It's funny how I feel happy even though it wasn't my shot that went in. Ah, I get it now, so this is what team sports are all about.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand and took a quick breather.

I was reminded of the conversation I had with Fujinami-san at cram school recently. I have to focus on playing as a team. But when things go well, it feels really rewarding. It's not easy, but I'm glad I gave it a shot.

The whistle blew, signaling a break.

I was leaning against the wall of the gym when I heard, "Asamura!" I looked up.

Yoshida was coming towards me with an unusually serious look in his eyes.

"Can I talk to you for a sec?"

"Sure."

"I wanna confess."

"Geez, let a guy mentally prepare first."

"Yeah, fair enough. Springing this kinda talk on you... Wait, no! I don't mean to *you*!"

Yoshida was the kind of guy who'd play along with my jokes.

"I know. You mean to Makihara-san, right?"

He nodded.

"So, how's wanting to confess and asking me for help at all related?"

"Tomorrow's the sports festival, yeah?"

“Yeah, it is.”

“Well I wanna impress her, so I want you to pass me the ball as much as possible. Please, man!”

Yoshida clasped his hands together in front of his face.

“I don’t mind passing the ball, but what does showing off and confessing have to do with each other?”

“When they’re more into you, your odds of a successful confession go up.”

“Personally, I think a confession’s success is down to the rapport built up until then, and nothing to do with the mood in the moment.”

If you show a better side of yourself than normal to get a “yes,” won’t they like you less once you go back to your regular self, and then you’re basically dating with them thinking less of you?

As I told him my honest thoughts, Yoshida massaged between his eyebrows with a finger.

“Asamura, man, do you seriously overthink stuff like this every day? I mean, sure, you’ve got a point. Heck, you might even have a *hundred* points. But you just don’t get the innocent heart of a high school boy!”

“Your past actions speak for themselves, Yoshida. You two are close, right?”

“Uh... w-well, yeah.”

They invited each other to eat in the cafeteria and sat next to each other. They’ve even been openly together in front of the whole school. Of course, there’s the chance she’ll say, “I only see you as a good friend,” but... there’s not much point in overthinking that part.

“Roger. I’ll pass to you as much as possible.”

I don’t really care if I stand out or not. I don’t have any special skills anyway. I *can* be a team player, though. And as demonstrated earlier, Yoshida is pretty good at landing shots.

Yoshida’s face lit up.

“Thanks, Asamura. Alright, I’ll do my best tomorrow!”

His intense sincerity was so blinding I had to look away.

Across the gym, I spotted Ayase-san talking to our classmates.

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“It looked like you were trying hard,” Ayase-san said while I was breaking apart the grilled horse mackerel with my chopsticks at dinner.

The comment came out of nowhere, but I could kind of guess what she was referring to.

“During PE?”

“Yeah. It’s your first time doing basketball at a sports festival, isn’t it? Everything going okay?”

“I guess I’m managing not to drag the team down, at least. I’ve started getting better at reading my surroundings than I did at the beginning.”

It was interesting to get to know my teammates’ personalities as we played. Some of the more outgoing ones might prefer to play it safe, while some quiet ones might be good at flashy plays. As I got to know my teammates better, it became easier to figure out my own next best move. And that just made everything way more fun.

“I’m not sure I can pull off any flashy plays myself, though.”

“Really? But everyone was saying you’re good at basketball, Yuuta-niisan.”

“No way, I’m not.”

“You can dribble too.”

“Only slowly.”

“People did say you pass the ball a lot.”

“Well, Yoshida is better at shooting than me.”

“Really?”

*Why is she tilting her head like that?*

“Besides, you were working hard too, weren’t you? It looked like you were having a serious discussion.”

“Huh?”

“I happened to see it while I was taking a break. You were talking with your team, right? Near the end of class. I just happened to catch a glimpse.”

“Oh... yeah. Well, a bit.”

I thought her answer was kind of vague. The conversation soon shifted away from the sports festival, and dinner passed.

Incidentally, it was the evening after our parents returned from their trip, but only the two of us were eating dinner together. Reason being, Akiko had work as per normal and my exhausted old man was fast asleep.

They'd returned at dawn, caught in a major traffic jam during a stormy night. No wonder he was tired.

*Congratulations on your one year anniversary trip.*

After dinner, while soaking in the bath, I remembered what Yoshida said.

So he wanted to show off to the girl he liked and then confess, huh? I thought it was a risky method and told him as much. But when it came to knowing the best moment to confess, I drew a blank.

“He’d be better at this kinda stuff.”

The face of my bespectacled best friend popped into my mind. *I wonder how Maru would have responded to Yoshida.*

Anyway, since I've already promised, I'll make sure to pass the ball to him tomorrow. Doing so would likely increase our chances of winning. That's probably the kind of team work my teammates expect of me.

Lost in thought, I gazed up at the bathroom ceiling.

A cold droplet of water fell and landed on the tip of my nose.

I remembered Ayase-san tilting her head at dinner. I thought I was choosing the best play, but maybe it didn't look that way from the outside. But I'd probably have to ask someone from the basketball club if I wanted to know that for sure.

“Saying that, though...”

*I can only do what I can do,* I told myself as I spaced out while soaking in the tub.

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## June 14th (Monday) — Ayase Saki

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The morning was serene, as if the storm last night had been nothing but a dream.

The familiar morning sun filled the living room, and as always, the rice tasted delicious. Today's miso soup was instant, but still good.

During breakfast, my eyes met Asamura-kun's several times.

Remembering yesterday, my cheeks relaxed into a smile. He'd held me when I was frightened by the thunderstorm.

Thanks to him, I slept like a baby last night. It's been a long time since I felt safe enough to sleep on a stormy night.

I threw on my uniform, fixed my hair, and was preparing to leave when Mom and my Stepdad woke up. Apparently, they had come home just before dawn, both of them still looking sleepy.

My Stepdad was worried when he learned about the blackout, but we told him everything was fine.

Mom called out to me just as I was about to leave the flat, so I told Asamura-kun to go on ahead.

“Saki, were you alright?”

Huh? I was fine. It was just a blackout, and the appliances weren't damaged.

“But Saki, you were afraid of lightning, weren't you?”

Oh, that. Right, Mom knows.

“I was fine. Yuuta-niisan was there with me.”

“Yuuta-kun?”

“The power went out while we were both in the living room. He comforted me until I calmed down.”

I chose not to mention that we were hugging.

“That's good. Yuuta-kun is so kind,” my mother said with a pleased smile.

After another warm send-off from her, I left the flat and hurried after Asamura-kun.

Walking side by side still feels new. I haven't asked why Asamura-kun started walking to school instead of riding his bike, but I sense he's trying to change the distance between us when we're outside. I need to get used to it too.

We walked while talking about random stuff, like the smell of the city after the rain, and practicing for the upcoming sports festival.

When we stopped at a red light, Asamura-kun gazed across the intersection with a distant look in his eyes.

*I wonder what's on his mind... Ah, I remember.* This was where, about a year ago, I was almost hit by a car, and Asamura-kun pulled me to safety.

In hindsight, it felt like both a rational and frantic act. Life had changed with my mother's remarriage and getting a new stepbrother, and my mindset needed to change along with it. Though nothing bad had happened, I realized I shouldn't worry others unnecessarily. Especially not Asamura-kun.

After that, we continued to walk together. We passed through the school gate and headed towards the school building. We walked side by side the whole time—up the hill leading to the building, through the corridors, and up the stairs. Even though he was just next to me, I still felt the need to keep this distance.

When we entered the classroom, Asamura-kun and I exchanged silent “see you later” glances and headed to our seats. As I put my bag down and was preparing for the first class, I sensed someone coming over to me. I looked up to see Class Rep standing there. I thought her under-rim glasses really suited her today.

“Good morning, Ayase-san!”

Her greeting was unusually cheerful. Though she's always jovial, today she looked like she was practically bursting at the seams with excitement.

Satou Ryouko-san, aka Ryo-chin, peeked out from behind her. She scrunched up her eyebrows as if she wanted to say something. Class Rep sits next to me, so her being there wasn't out of the ordinary, but why was Satou-san with her?

“Good morning, Class Rep, Satou-san.”

Both of them seemed a bit off. *What can it be?* Before I could puzzle it out, Class Rep patted my shoulder.

“Seriously, Ayase-san, you can't be underestimated, can you?”

“Huh?”

Class Rep looked at me curiously, while Satou-san seemed a bit worried.

“Don’t play dumb. I saw you two. Are you and Asamura-kun... you know, like *that*? ”

My heart skipped a beat.

She’s asking if we’re in a romantic relationship, right? Even *I* can tell that much.

But wait. If just entering the classroom together makes people suspect we’re dating, wouldn’t that mean everyone walking side by side is in a romantic relationship? Well, in our case, it’s not a coincidence and completely true, but still.

“What do you mean by ‘like that’? How did it look to you?”

I responded to her question with another question. Class Rep put a hand on her chin and let out a, “*Hmm.*”

*Huh, what’s with that reaction?*

“Ryou-chan, apparently she hasn’t noticed.”

Satou-san nodded along.

“What?”

“I mean, not only did you just respond to my question with another question, but you usually hate being asked this kind of question, right, Ayase-san? But you didn’t seem annoyed just now.”

When she put it like that, I was surprised at myself.

Class Rep whispered, “The thing is, the fact you’re even entertaining this kinda conversation means...”

Her eyes narrowed into a pleased arch and Satou-san nodded along again.

“But... is it really okay, Ayase-san?”

“Huh?”

“Um... weren’t you trying not to talk to Asamura-san?”

What? Oh, right. Satou-san, Maaya, and I shared a room for the entire school trip. During the rendezvous with Asamura-kun at the Palawan beach, Maaya made sure we could be alone. I think maybe Satou-san was there.

“It’s not like that... we’re just close.”

“Whoa! What’s that mean? How far have you two gone?”

How far!? Um, she’s asking about our relationship in a romantic sense, isn’t she? There’s no way I can talk about that. Nothing like *that* has happened anyway... Well, I mean, we did hug in the dark a couple of times. And we kissed during Halloween, on a suspension bridge, and, oh, I did barge into his room when I was feeling Asamura Yuuta-deprived a few times... And lately, we’ve been going out together.

*Huh? That’s quite a lot, isn’t it?*

“I’ll... leave it to your imagination.”

I tried to keep my voice carefree, as if to say it’s ‘no big deal,’ and play it off as a joke.

“Hoho. You’re leaving it to my imagination, huh,” Class Rep hummed thoughtfully, raising her pointer finger.

“My wild imagination is running free! You two have been dating for about half a year, if I had to guess! You’ve already met each other’s parents, maybe even had sleepover dates, and you two have promised to get married after uni—”

“Whoa, whoa! Stop that imagination right there, Class Rep!”

Satou-san put a finger to her lips, making a shushing sound, and thankfully derailed Class Rep’s imagination train. Some of what she said hit a bit too close to home, making me anxious.

We met each other’s parents literally when we first met, and when we visited Asamura-kun’s family home, we did sleepover and took a walk together.

But promising to marry? Come on, would high schoolers who’ve been dating for only half a year do that? We’re just high school students.

“Well, anyways,” Class Rep said, narrowing her eyes behind her under-rimmed glasses and flashing me a smirk. “I’m happy I can have this kinda conversation with you, Ayase-san.”

*That’s not fair. How can I refuse when you put it like that?*

But being told this to my face is much better than hearing whispers behind my back, I guess.

“C’mon, Class Rep. You really should wait for Ayase-san to bring this kinda stuff up herself.”

Satou-san came to my rescue.



Mhm, that's right.

"Whaaat, but—"

"After making us wait, *hehe*, won't it be more fun when she finally tells us?"

No! That isn't support! That's more like a hunter lying in wait to ambush me!

Class Rep puffed out her cheeks to show her dissatisfaction.

"But like, what if we never get around to talking about our love lives and then, boom, life's over? What then?"

"Then we'll reminisce about it at our pity party."

By the time I tuned back in, the conversation had drifted to something entirely different.

"I see, I see. That sounds nice. Sitting on the porch, a cat on your lap, sipping bitter tea, reminiscing about how we never thought we'd be single at this age, eh? We can chat about it and have a good laugh."

"That does sound fun, doesn't it? Right, Ayase-san?"

Hold on. Why are they assuming *I'm* attending this pity party?

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Our afternoon PE class was set aside for practicing for the sports festival.

During the break, Class Rep, who was sitting cross-legged in front of me, adjusted the bridge of her sports glasses, and turned to me and Satou-san. We were all on the same team.

"By the way, you two. I've gotta say, watching the sports festival and seeing everyone give it their all is really fun for me."

"Huh... huh?"

What's this girl on about? The topic came out of nowhere, and what does she mean by "seeing everyone give it their all?"

“What’s with that flat soda reaction?! Boys and girls going all out chasing the ball, dripping with the shiny sweat of their youth. Makes them look a hundred times cooler, dontcha think?!”

So, she thinks everyone playing sports looks cool. That’s just like our Class Rep.

But if it’s increased by a hundred times, wouldn’t that make them a completely different person?

“Don’t you think your heart would race after seeing a different side of your boyfriend or girlfriend?”

“Is it really different, though? I feel like you could tell if you watch them practice...”

Because the sports festival is an extension of the practice. Essentially, it’s the consistent effort in everyday practice that makes someone shine, not just the festival itself.

As that thought ran through my head, I glanced at the boys.

I caught a glimpse of Asamura-kun working hard out of the corner of my eye. Didn’t he say he wasn’t that good at basketball? He also mentioned not wanting to hold anyone back. But seeing him in action now, he looks like he’s holding his own, despite the short time he’s had to practice.

“Oh? So not only do you want to watch during the festival, but also practice too, Ayase-san? Quite the enthusiast, aren’t you?”

“I-I didn’t say that—”

*Wait, calm down, Saki. This is a clever trap.*

“Maybe, yeah,” I said with a soft smile.

*Keep it up.*

“Oh, such a confident smile.”

Good. Now, they won’t label me as some sort of Asamura Yuuta stalker. Just when I figured we’d moved on, Satou-san circled back to the earlier topic with a slow reply.

“But, y’know, it can be a starting point I think. It makes you realize there’s another side to someone beyond what you usually see. I mean, until we hung out together on the school trip, I thought you were way more intimidating, Ayase-san.”

It felt like I’d been hit where it hurts. Class Rep nodded along.

“Yeah, I get you. Until we became desk neighbors, I had no idea she was this fun.”

*Fun...?*

“So, by seeing a different side to someone, you might change your opinion of them. Being impressed by someone during the sports festival is also a possibility.”

I cleared my throat with a small cough and reluctantly joined in the conversation.

“Well, if it’s about picturing how hard someone works based on how they do, I get that.”

“So it’s about seeing someone in a new light ’cause of a certain trigger, huh? Well okay, so among them—” Class Rep pointed to the boys. “I’d probably say Kodama, personally. I used to think he was just annoyingly hyper, but he’s surprisingly good. He must have played basketball before. I think he’ll shine tomorrow. And then, of course, there’s Yoshida, who seems to be good at any sport.”

“He’s been making some nice shots for a while, hasn’t he?”

“You’ve been watching, huh?” Class Rep teased Satou-san, whose cheeks immediately turned red.

“I just happened to see.”

“The one who’s wasting his potential is Asamura-kun.”

My heart raced at the mention of his name.

“Wasting his potential...?”

“He seems pretty skilled, and I think he has a thoughtful personality. He always pays close attention to his teammates’ movements, so he sends the pass to the right spot. But he passes even when he could have taken the shot himself. He’s like the unsung hero. But, I feel he could step it up a bit.”

“He’s humble, isn’t he?”

“Maybe he’s just timid. But then again, maybe you, Ayase-san, don’t want him to stand out too much. But as the class representative, I do wish he’d play a bit more aggressively for the sake of our class’s victory.”

*Step up, huh.*

The teacher blew the whistle. Break time was over.

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“It looked like you were trying hard.”

At dinner, I remembered what Class Rep said and brought up the topic of basketball.

I mentioned that some classmates were praising him, but Asamura-kun just kept being modest.

Sure, he might not be as skilled as those who play in the actual basketball club, but from the sidelines, people still said he seemed capable of doing more.

*I wonder if he can’t see it himself,* I thought, tilting my head.

I wanted to continue the conversation a little longer, but Asamura-kun clearly wanted to move on.

“Besides, you were working hard too, weren’t you? It looked like you were having a serious discussion.”

I tilted my head in confusion.

Was he referring to today’s PE class? Were we discussing something?

Then it hit me—he must have seen me talking with Class Rep and Satou-san. There’s no way I could tell him I was watching the boys practice, sizing up who would shine tomorrow.

We were really just joking around and getting a bit carried away, but he must’ve thought we were taking the sports festival seriously.

“Oh... yeah. Well, a bit.”

I felt awkward and embarrassed, so I ended up giving a vague response.

After all, how could I admit that I was daydreaming about Asamura-kun's prowess on the court?

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## June 15th (Tuesday) — Asamura Yuuta

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Prestigious school or otherwise, the hype on event days is palpable.

And the most enthusiastic among us was Yoshida.

“We’re gonna win!”

He was single handedly hyping up everyone around him. The sheer energy for what he was *really* chasing today was seriously blinding. It was like it was only sunny around him, while still the rainy season for the rest of us.

In contrast, a few students who were pretty shitty at sports were in the corner of the classroom, staring dead eyed down at the schoolyard.

“C’mon, guys, chins up!” Class Rep said, adjusting her glasses as she addressed them.

She clapped her hands together, a beaming smile plastered on her face.

“Just do your best and have fun! Oh, and make sure everyone drops by the classroom during lunchtime today.”

Everyone looked a bit confused.

“We, the temporary Home Economics Club of our class, have made some treats. We got permission to use the Home Ec room. So, we’ll be waiting for you with loads of rice balls!”

A collective, “Oooh” swept through the classroom.

I ignored the excited chatter around me, remaining seated, and tilted my head in confusion.

“Temporary Home Economics Club?”

“Class Rep’s idea. Five of us, including me, decided to make lunch for everyone,” A familiar voice answered.

When I turned towards it, I saw the small face of Kodama, known as the best dribbler on our class’s basketball team.

“...Hm? Kodama, is that... the filling for the rice balls?”

“Bingo. Huh, Asamura, you cook?”

“Um, ah, no...”

I mean, it was obvious just by looking at the container he had. There were pickled plums, salmon, kelp, and bonito flakes<sup>1</sup>... Who *wouldn't* think of rice balls seeing all those?

“Well, I guess I know that much, at least.”

Kodama put the ingredients he was checking back into his lunch bag and stood up.

“Alrighty, I’ll put these in the Home Ec room’s fridge and then join everyone. I’m counting on you!”

“You too.”

*It’s us who should be saying that.* After all, our key players in the basketball team were Yoshida, who claims he’s good at any sport, and Kodama, who’s skilled at basketball despite his small stature.

I’d heard Kodama used to play basketball in junior high, so he’s an experienced player. He said he quit because he didn’t grow any taller, but aside from the active club members, he’s probably the best in class.

Kodama joined Class Rep and three others. Three girls and two boys. *Ah, I see, so that’s the temporary Home Economics Club.*

As the group were walking out of the classroom, Kodama turned around and waved. Those left in the classroom called out, “We’re counting on you for something delicious!”

Class Rep said, “Leave it to us!” in a funny accent as she left too, making everyone crack up.

“We’ve gotta win if we want to enjoy the food! C’mon, let’s roll, Asamura!”

Egged on by the fired-up Yoshida, I also left the classroom to change my clothes.

The sports festival at Suisei High takes place between midterms and final exams.

It’s not unusual for the rainy season to have kicked in around this time, so sometimes it can be canceled due to bad weather. Fortunately for us, the rainy season this year hadn’t started yet and we were blessed with clear skies.

It’s a school-wide event, and all classes from first to third year participate in a tournament format. After the opening ceremony at the central ground, the students disperse to their respective competition venues.

Yoshida and I were in basketball, so we made our way to the gymnasium. We were crossing the schoolyard towards the kamaboko-shaped<sup>2</sup> building when someone called out to us.

“Yo, Yoshida, Asamura!”

It was Maru. It was news to me that Maru was also in basketball, but Yoshida seemed to know already. The three of us, who had coincidentally shared a room during the school trip, headed to the gym together.

Maru made an exaggerated face like he hadn’t seen me in ages. It’d been a hot minute since we last talked. We just hadn’t been able to much of late. It wasn’t because we weren’t in the same class anymore or anything like that, Maru had just been busy since becoming a third year.

“How’s it looking? Think you can win?”

He wasn’t talking about the sports festival.

Maru had been busy — so exhausted that he couldn’t even make calls at night. Reason being, the regional qualifiers for the summer Koshien<sup>3</sup> tournament were starting in July.

“Well, freaking out now isn’t gonna change anything,” Maru said in a resigned tone.

Yoshida pursed his lips.

“What? I heard our baseball team is pretty strong this year. You’re aiming for the Koshien, aren’t you?”

That’s quite the surprise. *The Koshien?* As in, the dream stage for all high school baseball players?

“Huh. I didn’t know our school was that strong.”

“Come on, Asamura, it’s your best friend’s team we’re talking about.”

“No, I mean...”

I knew they weren’t weak, but I had no clue they were Koshien-level strong. Maru had never once mentioned it.

“It’d be a miracle if we pull it off, honestly.”

See, even Maru himself says so, and he’s the baseball team’s main catcher and captain.

“It okay to be so pessimistic?”

“Look, Asamura, I don’t get overconfident. If I’m just hoping for a miracle, I can’t do my job as captain. I know our capabilities and will do everything in my power to win.”

“That’s so like you, Maru.”

“But think about it, man—if you can somehow make it to Koshien, you might go pro, right?”

“Pro, huh...”

Yoshida’s eyes shined as if it were *his* dream.

That reminds me. I think around the time of the parent-teacher interviews last year, Maru said something like, “Just because you’re in the baseball club doesn’t mean you can make baseball your job.”

“Well, if we can make it into Koshien, there’s a higher chance of catching a scout’s eye. Only if we *can* get in, that is. Obviously we’ll do our best to win.”

“Is it that hard?”

“Objectively speaking, yes. We’re not like those famous schools where a bunch of promising players from all over Japan gather. We don’t have the luxury of endless funding and fancy facilities.”

“...I see.”

“As I said before, I don’t think it’s easy to go pro. But in this last tournament, I’ll give it everything I’ve got to see how far I can go. If, by the end of it, I catch a scout’s eye—”

Hearing Maru speak so matter-of-factly, Yoshida sighed, clearly thinking the road ahead was tough.

“—It ain’t easy. And, Yoshida, I’ve been thinking.”

“Yeah?”

“What do you think is most needed for a professional athlete?”

“Dunno.”

“What about you, Asamura?”

“Um... skills, I guess?”

I figured you probably need a certain level of skill to become a pro.

“That’s important too, sure. But, in my opinion, a pro needs to have a ‘performance worth paying to see.’ And, it has to be unique to that player.”

“A performance unique to the player...?”

“Professional baseball is entertainment, after all. They’re essentially paid for ‘showing their play.’ You could even say they ‘captivate’ their audience. Just making your team win isn’t enough, in my opinion. In the end, pros are basically like self-employed business owners.”

“Ah... I get it.”

“Isn’t that also a kind of skill?” Yoshida remarked.

“Could be. I don’t know. Anyway, to put it simply, it’s about being able to make a play that moves the audience... but I haven’t really thought about it too much.”

For a moment, Maru’s gaze shifted from the gymnasium we were walking towards and drifted off into the distance.

“I really have no idea how my play looks to others.”

“Well, yeah... You can’t really see yourself from an outsider’s perspective, can you?”

Maru smiled faintly.

“True enough. I wish I could experience it just once, though. But, there’s no point in hoping for a miracle, like getting scouted by the pros. And thinking about how to play impressively, something I have even less idea about? That’s pointless too.”

*Maru... is really hard on himself.*

“I’m not saying it’s a realistic option, but there’s always a chance. I believe that giving it your all while believing in that chance will enrich your life when you look back on it later.”

Yoshida smiled wryly.

“Man, that definitely doesn’t sound like something a baseball club member would say. Sounds more like a line from a wise traveler in an RPG or something!”

“You got me,” Maru said with a sly smile.

“It’s about whether you can seize the opportunity when it comes. Those who aren’t prepared won’t be able to grab it. It might be a chance with very low odds, something that might not seem realistic, but I practice everyday in hopes of that moment.”

“I reckon you’re already pretty awesome, Maru, having secured both a regular position and the captaincy already.”

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere, and I won’t go easy on you either.”

“Go easy?”

Yoshida and I tilted our heads in confusion, and Maru shook his in disbelief.

“What, you guys haven’t seen the match schedule? If we both win one game in this tournament, our teams will face each other.”

“ “Ugh.” ”

Yoshida and I groaned in unison.

“So we’re going up against Suisei High’s mastermind, huh...?”

“*Hahaha*, Yoshida, did I not just say flattery won’t get you anywhere? Relax, I’m a beginner at basketball too.”

With that, Maru walked through the gymnasium doors, waved, and went over to his own class.

“Hey, Asamura...”

“Hm?”

“During PE, I heard from a guy in the class next door that Maru’s been researching who’s in all the basketball teams of all the third year classes.”

“You serious...?”

I wish he’d take it easy just for this sports festival. But that’s just not his character, is it...

When I entered the gymnasium, I was immediately surrounded by the sound of shoes squeaking on the polished floor and the thumping of balls.

On one side, a volleyball match was underway, and on the other, a basketball game. Both had already started.

This was my third sports festival in high school, but it was my first time participating in an indoor sport.

“Quite a lot of people come to watch, huh?”

There were clearly more spectators than people waiting for their games. A bunch of students had even climbed up to the catwalk to watch from above.

“It’s like this every year,” Yoshida said.

“Really? I’ve always been in tennis.”

I struggled to remember if there were this many spectators around the multiple tennis courts. Maybe I just wasn’t paying attention in the previous years.

“Well, there’s air con.”

“Ah, makes sense.”

By this time of the year, the heat outside was already pretty intense. The gym was big, so it’s not exactly comfortable, but it was definitely better than being under direct sunlight. On my way to the basketball court assembly point, I crossed paths with Ayase-san, with the volleyball team. We exchanged glances and small nods. As our eyes met, I noticed Yoshida quickly glance our way, but I pretended not to notice.

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Our first game began roughly 10 minutes later than scheduled. Our opponents were a team of second years who seemed to have a taller average height than us. They looked formidable.

The jump ball went up, and the opposing team successfully tapped it, meaning we were on defense from the get go. They passed the ball around, then sunk a shot off a dribble.

“Don’t sweat it! Let’s get one in now!” Yoshida yelled loudly. Ever the mood maker of our team.

“Asamura!”

The ball was launched in my direction along with that shout. I passed it off to Yoshida, who had backed up to the three-point line. He boldly chanced the shot from there. It miraculously made it in, putting us ahead.

Cheers erupted from the crowd as Yoshida struck a triumphant pose.

“Nice pass, Asamura-kun,” Kodama called out to me as we passed each other on our way back to defend. His praise wasn’t just for the goal, but for the play leading up to it. That’s the kind of praise you’d expect from a seasoned player.

I was happy to take the praise, but I also felt it was Yoshida’s skills that truly stood out.

When we reset for a throw-in due to a foul, I backed up to the sideline and noticed Makihara-san among the students watching from the stands. It looked like she’d come to watch with a friend, sitting next to her. She was probably told when the match was scheduled. *I wonder if she saw Yoshida’s three-point shot earlier.*

The game continued, with both teams equally matched.

I tried to pass the ball to Yoshida as much as possible. Not just so he could show off to Makihara-san, but to win as well. We had a better chance of winning if I let the guy with the highest shooting success rate take the shots.

There were seven of us in our class’s basketball team, including substitutes. Aside from Kodama and Yoshida, the rest of us, including myself, had fairly similar skill levels.

We rotated out when we got tired, but by the end of the first half, all of us were out of breath. We were trailing by one point.

“Let’s all be more aggressive in taking shots in the second half.”

I was surprised to hear that from Yoshida.

“You too, Asamura. Don’t hold back and take your shots.”

“Uh... alright.”

That being said, Yoshida had the highest shooting success rate. All I could do was to pass the ball to a teammate in a good position when it came around, and in the end, we had to rely on Yoshida to make the final shot.

Yoshida made the shot just in the nick of time, and we scraped through to win our first match.

The whistle signaling the end of the game blew. Yoshida excitedly ran up to Makihara-san.

I spotted a familiar broad back moving away in the distance. Maru.

*Had he come to watch our game...?*

Apparently our next opponent would be a formidable one too. One who wouldn't compromise and would keep a keen eye on their opponent until the very end.

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I thought her movements were a bit stiff.

We had an hour until our next match, so our basketball team was pulled to the opposite side of the gymnasium to cheer for the girls' volleyball team. It was Ayase-san, Class Rep, and Satou-san's team. This was the first time I'd seen Ayase-san play volleyball up close.

Her movements were stiff, and she'd been making a bunch of mistakes. It was her first time, sure, but I don't remember her saying she was this bad at receiving and tossing the ball.

Plus, maybe because she was panicking, she only made more and more mistakes, and the opposition started targeting her.

Except for the finals, volleyball games are single-set matches. One stumble can lead to a quick defeat. I was watching in silence, but when she failed to receive and tumbled to the floor, I couldn't help shouting, "Ayase-san!"

Our eyes met for an instant.

She quickly looked away and then, *bam*, slapped both of her cheeks. Satou-san, her teammate, looked surprised by the sudden gesture.

The opposing team missed their serve, narrowing the point gap from three to two.

When our side's volleyball team got the serve, Ayase-san, who was at the front, stepped back to serve.

The white ball, served with a perfect floater form, fell deep into the opponent's court.

It landed between the players, adding another point and reducing the gap to just one.

The ball was returned.

As Ayase-san smacked the ball on the floor, she backed up to the end line. Even the cheering squad, who had been shouting encouragement, fell silent, probably not wanting to mess up her focus as she prepared to serve.



Taking a deep breath, she lifted her gaze to glare at the opposing team.

*You can do it, Ayase-san!*

The next serve she released got picked up by the opponent this time. But, they failed to transition it into an attack within their three touches, turning it into a chance ball for us. Satou-san, who was playing as the libero, deftly picked up the ball, passing it to the setter, a short-haired girl. *Umm... What was her name again?* Regardless, she set a brilliant toss which Class Rep then beautifully spiked.

Impressive. She used the springing force from her legs to make a high jump and spike the ball, which landed just inside the end line. It's a tie! A roar of cheers erupted.

Once it gets to this point, the momentum usually swings to the side that caught up. Ayase-san also started to perform as if her earlier slump was a figment of my imagination.

And in the end—they won! Seeing Ayase-san and the others so happy, I felt a warm sense of satisfaction.

Ayase-san turned around. Our eyes met. She sent me her gratitude wordlessly, mouthing... *Thank—You*, maybe.

I hadn't really done anything special. But, if something got through and Ayase-san calmed down, then that was good.

The time for the third round (second round for us) match was fast approaching.

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I was thinking back to last year's basketball class.

Maru was a player we could never quite get the better of during those basketball lessons.

Though, given Yoshida's athletic ability, he wouldn't be outmatched by Maru. That meant even if I personally couldn't beat Maru, our team still had a chance to win. Same went for Kodama. We had two fairly skilled basketball players on our side.

And, on the flip side, it looked like there were no experienced basketball players on Maru's team. Maru appeared to be the most skilled among them.

I figured out that much during the first few exchanges of offense and defense.

On paper, we *should* have had the upper hand, but we were trailing behind Maru's team.

Maru was focused on completely shutting down our main players, Yoshida and Kodama.

They assigned their tallest player to the short Kodama, not to play man-to-man defense, but to wait under the basket for Kodama to drive in. Kodama was nibble, and could dodge a player bigger than him with a feint, but sadly, he was hardly ever successful with long-range shots.

As for Yoshida, he was double-teamed. So, predictably, he couldn't freely take shots with two players guarding him.

You'd think a team of amateurs adopting a formation like that would leave a gap somewhere, but that was exactly Maru's aim. The remaining three players, me included, weren't good enough handling the ball to reliably score.

I received a pass. Holding the ball, I started dribbling towards the goal.

Maru, moving his hefty frame agilely, stayed on me. He maneuvered around me, blocking my path.

The small eyes behind those glasses formed a sly grin. I scanned the court as I continued dribbling. As usual, Yoshida had two markers, and Kodama, wary of the goalkeeper under the basket, had retreated to a relatively distant position. That left—Yamazaki and Nakano. Maru reached out for the ball I was dribbling—

*I'm going to lose it!*

“—Yamazaki!”

Calling out the name, I twisted my body desperately, trying to pass the ball towards Yamazaki, who was near the 3-point line's end. But Maru's outstretched hand was a feint. His arm didn't actually extend, and he lunged at the ball just as I was about to pass it to Yamazaki. Maru's big hand grazed the ball practically the second it left my hand. The ball, caught between my hand and Maru's, popped straight up. *Damn it.*

I jumped to try and grab the bouncing ball. It grazed the tips of my fingers, changing its trajectory, and bounced towards a lanky guy from the opposing team. Swiftly catching the ball, he passed it immediately.

Straight to—Maru.

At some point, he had started running. Charging towards our goal, Maru unleashed a beautiful layup shot off his dribble. The ball floated up gracefully and swished through the net without even touching the rim.

Cheers and screams erupted all at once.

We got steamrolled for the rest of the first half and found ourselves down by five as the whistle blew.

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“We need a game plan! We’ve gotta strategize!” Yoshida declared. “Think of something, Asamura.”

“That’s a tall order for me”

“Kodama, then! Don’t you have any ideas? You’ve got experience, don’t ya?”

“Honestly, my junior high basketball team wasn’t that strong… Hmm. Lemme think.”

We sat in a circle on the side of the court, resting. Just about two minutes remained before the start of the second half.

Kodama glanced at everyone’s faces before speaking.

“We might be able to do something if we can shake off the other team’s marks.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Kodama guessed the strategy that Maru had probably come up with.

“In this team, I think Asamura is the one who receives the most passes. He’s good at observing the surroundings and being in the right place at the right time.”

Everyone nodded in agreement with Kodama's observation. Well yeah, I'm aware of that too. My strength is in team play.

"But I believe Maru-kun is aiming for that."

"Meaning?"

"Because, Asamura-kun, you mostly pass and rarely shoot yourself, right? So, from the opponent's perspective, it's safe as long as you have the ball. They probably want to leave you unmarked, making it easier for you to receive passes. If they mark Yoshida-kun and me, three out of our five team members are essentially neutralized. We can't win this way."

"What should we do?" Yoshida asked.

"I think the basic strategy is to do the unexpected. Asamura-kun, I want you to be near the goal as much as possible. Preferably near the guy wearing number four, who's marking me."

"The tall one? Just by staying near him?"

"If possible, I'd like you to shoot once in a while. Otherwise, they won't be drawn to mark you."

"I'm not as skilled as Yoshida, though."

"Asamura-kun."

Kodama looked at me seriously.

"Y-yeah?"

"It's not about whether it goes in or not. A guy who's decided not to shoot isn't a threat. No one will pay attention to you because of that. They'll think it's fine to leave you be. It's just what Maru would be counting on."

*No one will watch me, huh.*

For some reason, I remembered what Maru had said.

*"I really have no idea how my play looks to others,"* or something like that.

I thought it would be fine not to be noticed since I was trying to be like a shadow player... But if you think about it, being able to play without standing out and still helping your teammates win would be a play of a higher-level player, wouldn't it?

Wasn't there a manga with a plot like that?<sup>4</sup>

So a basketball newbie trying to be a silent powerhouse would just end up getting overlooked, huh?

The whistle blew, and the referee signaled for the players to gather on the court.

The second half began.

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I did as told and tried to position myself as close to the opponent's goal as possible when we were on the offensive.

I hovered around the lanky number four player. Predictably, he looked annoyed, and kept glancing my way.

Kodama passed to me. I pretended to turn and shoot, but instead returned the ball right away. Lanky number four glanced my way for just a moment, making him late in defending against Kodama. Seizing his chance, Kodama cut in and scored, narrowing the score gap from five points to three.

Cheers erupted from the classmates who'd come to support us. Everyone was on cloud nine, with shouts of "Nice one!" and "Keep it up!" flying around.

The game reset with the opposing team in possession of the ball.

There was no choice but to play defense here, so I quickly fell back and fortified our defense. I would return to our goal when defending and try to get as close to the opponent's goal as possible when attacking.

Little by little, we narrowed the score gap until we were just one point behind.

Then, we transitioned into a fast break from an intercepted pass. It was tough, but I sprinted up to the goal. As my breathing grew ragged, another pass came from Kodama.

However, Yoshida already had two defenders marking him. As I looked around for another teammate, I saw Maru coming at me out of the corner of my eye. Lanky number four quickly switched to mark Kodama, blocking the passing lane.

Maru tried to intercept the ball again.

Pretty much the same thing happened in the first half. Back then, I tried to pass back and got blocked, losing the ball. And now, Yoshida, my go-to scorer, was marked too. Which means, there's gotta be an open teammate somewhere.

Maru was barreling towards me like a heavy tank.

*I need to pass*—No. No time. I didn't have time to look.

I turned my back to the charging Maru and spun around to face the hoop. I took a single step then kicked off the floor, letting the ball fly from my hand.

A collective gasp came from the crowd.

The ball bounced off the backboard, looking like it'd be sucked into the net. *Please go in!* I willed it, but to no avail. It did a half circle around the ring and bounced out again.

The opposing team grabbed the rebound, connected their passes, and scored, widening the point gap again.

*If only it had gone in!*

I raced after it but was too late. I bit my lip, feeling both frustrated and guilty.

A gentle pat landed on my back.

“That was a good try, man.”

Looking up, I caught Yoshida giving me the thumbs up as he passed by.

“You got this.”

“Just keep taking those shots!”

Words of encouragement came from Kodama and Sasamoto too.

The game's tempo went back and forth.

I went back to doing the same routine as before, receiving passes and connecting the ball to my teammates.

*Huh?*

But now it felt easier to connect passes compared to before. Whenever I got the ball, the opposing team would suddenly tighten their defense around the goal. More importantly, Maru stopped recklessly charging at me. He was probably wary of me pulling another spin and shoot.

Soon enough, I was winded and substituted out. When I made my way to the side of the court, my classmates told me how close my previous shot was. Was it really that close?

After a little break, I returned to the court.

By then, the point gap had closed, and we were only trailing by one.

“Come on, Asamura~! You can do it~!” A voice shouted from behind me.

I turned around to see who it was. Class Rep. Satou-san and Ayase-san were with her too.

I turned my attention back to the court.

The clock was ticking, less than a minute remained.

Our side started with a throw-in. I caught the pass and immediately scattered it to my teammates. The strategy remained the same; In the meantime, I ran and positioned myself under the basket. Kodama made a dribble and passed a bounce pass to me from outside the three-point line. I turned around and pretended to shoot, but instead, twisted my body towards Yoshida, who was in my peripheral vision.

They probably thought I was going to shoot, as the defenders rushed toward the goal, leaving Yoshida unmarked. I passed the ball through that open space.

Yoshida released his shot from just inside the three-point line.

The ball drew a beautiful arc through the air and fell towards the hoop. I thought it was in... But with a dull *thud*, the ball didn't go in and bounced away.

*It missed?!*

Everyone's hands reached up for the ball as it fell, mine included. And, by some stroke of luck, the ball came my way. It landed in my hands. *Where's Yoshida?*

My eyes searched this way and that... and met Maru's. *No, not him.* Yoshida was to the left. I noticed him running from the three-point line toward the goal. Now's my chance to pass. But just as I was about to, I saw Maru charging at Yoshida. He glanced at me. I also saw the referee teacher staring at the clock, whistle in his mouth. Time was running out.

The whistle could blow at any moment. If I passed to Yoshida, he might make the shot. But I figured Maru would anticipate that, which was why he was charging at him.

Which option had a better chance of succeeding?

If someone asked me why I made my decision, I'd probably say Kodama's words were still in the corner of my mind: "*I think the basic strategy is to do the unexpected.*" So I raised the ball and pushed my arm diagonally forward, towards the goal. With a push of my palm, I let the ball go.

To be honest, I could barely see the basket. So I was just grateful the desperate shot I made even hit the backboard. I'm pretty sure it was sheer luck. And the fact that after bouncing off the backboard, the ball was sucked into the hoop was nothing short of a miracle.

The final whistle sounded almost exactly as the ball fell through.

“WOOOOO!”

“WE WON!”

While my classmates celebrated, I, exhausted, collapsed onto the gym floor.

A large shadow loomed over me. Maru.

“I figured you'd pass. You really got me there,” he said, expressing his surprise with a voice tinged with both amusement and shock.

“I always thought I was the type of person to just pass too.”

“...What're you on about?”

“I don't know. I don't even understand it myself. But man, am I shattered!”

A teacher chewed me out for lying sprawled out on the floor, saying the next match was about to start. I reluctantly picked myself up and lined up for the customary post-game bow. The sports festival was part of the curriculum, and our school, Suisei High, took formalities like those seriously.

As I walked toward my cheering classmates, I was greeted with applause.

Yoshida came up to me and repeated, “Nice job, dude!” over and over again while vigorously patting my back.

“Sorry I couldn't pass more often,” I apologized, but Yoshida looked surprised.

“It’s all good. Winning is what matters!”

Class Rep, Satou-san, and Ayase-san were all smiles.

Despite our hard-fought victory, our team ended up losing in the next match. Ayase-san’s volleyball team also lost in the semifinals. The best performance for our class turned out to be Hoshino-san from the girls’ tennis team, who made it all the way to second place.



And like that, Suisei High's third year sports festival came to a close.

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Since I didn't have a shift at work that day, I just went home, ate dinner, took a bath, studied, and went to bed.

My old man was working overtime, as usual, and Akiko-san had already left for work.

Ayase-san and I were chilling out and sipping tea after dinner. Instead of green tea, we had chilled roasted tea from the fridge. The coldness of it felt refreshing as it went down my throat.

"Today was so tiring, wasn't it?" Ayase-san said with a sigh, and I nodded in agreement.

"After all the crazy practice this past week, it's no surprise, I guess. I mean, I've never really thrown myself into a sports festival like this before."

"Me neither."

"Maru has been doing this all along, after all. It makes me think that people who are really committed to sports are amazing."

It's not like I can say much, since I only took part in the sports festival for a week because it's part of the school's curriculum, but still, I reckon I caught a little glimpse of what it's like for people who've been doing this day in, day out, year after year.

"It's kinda like your cooking, Ayase-san."

Ayase-san shot me a wry smile.

"But it's just something I do every day."

"That's what's amazing about it. And it's delicious too."

"Thanks. But I only cook for myself and our family... Um, you mentioned Taichi-san works in food product planning, right?"

"He told me he did, yeah."

I'd only recently learned the details of my old man's job. He wasn't the type to talk about work at home, so there was a lot I didn't know.

"Well like... If you sprinkle salt and pepper on your food, it might turn out dry and hard to eat, but that's your personal preference."

True enough. Ayase-san doesn't have any trouble eating it like that herself.

"I can remember that and make adjustments for those preferences, but it's not like I'd go out of my way to adjust them to taste for random people."

*What does that mean?*

"Um, what I'm saying is, I don't know what impression the general public might have of my everyday cooking. I basically just make it according to my own tastes."

"Ah, I get you."

"But Taichi-san has to consider all that when he's planning."

"That sounds... difficult."

Different strokes for different folks, as they say.

"And it being 'just' delicious won't cut it either."

This time it was Ayase-san's turn to tilt her head in confusion.

"What do you mean? What's wrong with it being 'just' delicious?"

"Think about it this way: You like salt and pepper on your fried eggs, I prefer soy sauce. So, imagine a seasoning that mixes half the salt and pepper and half the soy sauce."

"Huh?"

"Would that create a taste that would satisfy both of us?"

"No way," Ayase-san replied instantly.

"See?"

"I like that amount of seasoning because it suits my taste, and it's the same for you... Yuuta-niisan. Besides, salt and pepper and soy sauce are two distinct seasonings. Just mixing a little of each won't make a universally perfect flavor—Oh, I get it. That's what you mean."

Ayase-san seemed to catch on quickly when I put it in cooking terms, her area of expertise.

“So you’re saying that if you go for an ‘average taste,’ you’d end up with a flavor that satisfies a bit of everyone’s taste. Sure, it might turn into something everyone can eat, but also, everyone might be a bit unsatisfied.”

“Probably, yeah.”

“But that’s not necessarily a bad thing, is it?”

“Well there’s a problem with that approach.”

“A problem?”

Yet again, I found myself remembering what Maru had said.

*“I really have no idea how my play looks to others.”*

I think that resonates with Ayase-san’s statement about her cooking. That she only adjusts her cooking to her own taste, and doesn’t have confidence that others will find it delicious.

Maru added more to that too. He said professional athletes are basically self-employed, so it’s not enough for them just to perform well. They need to perform in a way that is unique to them.

“I can imagine conducting surveys with customers, or compiling data on individual taste preferences, and creating a recipe that averages those out. Kind of like a golden ratio.”

“Well... hypothetically speaking.”

“If you mechanically average a huge amount of data, there should be only one recipe that comes out. I suppose that’s what’s deemed ‘average’ or ‘normal’.”

“Yeah.”

Since she nodded, I went on with my argument.

“If we just wanted a recipe like that, we wouldn’t even need to have planning meetings, right? Because it would just be decided in one single way.”

Ayase-san’s eyes went wide and she let out an, “Ah.”

“I feel like a lot of new food products are marketed with catchphrases like ‘super spicy’ or ‘ultra fluffy’. But, if you think about it, they aren’t really aiming for the ‘average’. They’re selling a unique product experience.”

*A player’s performance needs to be unique...*

“That’s true. Yeah. I don’t particularly like super spicy or super sweet things. Ah, Maaya might go for the super sweet stuff though.”

So Narasaka-san has a sweet tooth does she?

“So, even if you don’t tailor your cooking to others’ tastes, it doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be shared with the world. Obviously it still needs to be edible though.”

“But, I don’t think my home cooking would be good enough to sell.”

“Well, as long as it’s delicious to me, I’m happy.”

“T-thanks,” Ayase-san murmured, looking away shyly for some reason.

It hadn’t really been a compliment, I just voiced my honest opinion.

“Plus, if it sells, that means you could become a professional.”

“I already had my hands full just making something edible. But since I came to this house, my cooking gets nothing but praise, so it’s actually kinda confusing...”

“I’m grateful.”

I put my hands together and bowed playfully, and she turned away with a, “Hmph.”

Honestly, while I do find Ayase-san’s cooking delicious, I can’t confidently say it’s at a professional chef level. Besides, I doubt my taste buds are that refined. So, I didn’t want to say it if I didn’t mean it, and the truth is, my only option was to deflect with a joke.

But today, more than ever, I was reminded of how little we sometimes know about ourselves.

*“You too, Asamura. Don’t hold back and take your shots.”*

*“A guy who’s decided not to shoot isn’t a threat. No one will pay attention to you because of that. They’ll think it’s fine to leave you be.”*

What Yoshida and Kodama had said echoed deep in my ears.

While thinking about the taste of Ayase-san's miso soup, it hit me that, actually, I'd never seen Maru playing baseball. *I wonder how he plays.*

"Oh, by the way," Ayase-san started saying, gently putting her glass of roasted green tea down on a coaster. "Thanks to your plays, your basketball team made it to the top four. You're surprisingly good at sports, Yuuta-niisan."

"No, no, that was all Yoshida and Kodama. I just focused on team play."

"But the last point was from your shot, Yuuta-niisan."

"I just took a desperate shot, and luckily it went in, really."

I'm not particularly athletic; I'm well aware of that. I'd rather spend my time reading books.

"It's alright! You were the MVP in my eyes," she said with a shy smile.

I couldn't help feeling a little embarrassed too.

"T-thanks," I muttered, and turned away just like she did earlier.

She suddenly burst out laughing.

"You're blushing!"

"I'm just not used to compliments."

Ayase-san kept laughing until we started cleaning up.

\*\*\*

That night, just as I finished studying and was about to climb into bed, my smartphone beeped. It was a LINE message.

**Yoshida:**【Cheers for today! Really appreciate it!】

Apparently, going off his next message, he had successfully confessed his feelings to Makihara-san afterward.

I thought about how to reply.

I wanted to say that I just passed the ball so our team could win. I genuinely believe his confession was successful because of the good impression he'd made on Makihara-san through their regular interactions. Yoshida is a good guy, after all.

But people often talk about compatibility too. Just because you're a good person doesn't guarantee they'll say yes. What one person finds "desirable" might be "unpleasant" to someone else. Still, from what I observed in the cafeteria when they were sitting across from me, Makihara-san and Yoshida seemed to get along well enough.

That said, there's no point in going on and on about it. The words Yoshida wants right now are—

**Yuuta:**【You're welcome.】

After shooting that off, I sent the simple message Yoshida was hoping for.

**Yuuta:**【Congrats.】

I got a sticker of a triumphant pose in reply. Classic Yoshida.

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<sup>1</sup> Bonito flakes, also known as katsuobushi in Japanese, are thin, dried, and smoked flakes made from bonito fish.

<sup>2</sup> Kamaboko is a traditional Japanese food made from fish paste that is typically shaped into a semi-circular or oval shape.

<sup>3</sup> Koshien is a famous baseball stadium in Japan known for hosting the National High School Baseball Championship, a prestigious high school baseball tournament held twice a year.

<sup>4</sup> Not sure what manga he is talking about. It's not specified.

## June 15th (Tuesday) — Ayase Saki

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“Did you watch yesterday’s drama?”

I tilted my head in response to Class Rep’s question.

I was in the middle of changing in the locker room. While I was pulling on my gym shirt, my head almost got stuck with it angled like that, and I nearly turned into quite the funny sight.

“Phew... Huh? A drama?”

“You talking about ‘Aokoi<sup>1</sup>’?”

Ryo-chin, or Satou-san I should say, quickly chimed in from where she was standing next to me.

Aokoi? Blue... Carp? Some kind of sudden mutation?

“Course I am! Going off that face you’re making, Ayase-san, you don’t know it?”

“Oh, you haven’t watched it?”

“...I don’t really watch dramas—”

*Ah, crap. I’m going to derail the conversation.*

“—I mean, I don’t, but what kind of drama is it?” I hastily added.

Chances are it’s not a story about breeding improved varieties of carp... probably.

“It’s called ‘Fell in Love with that Blue Sky.’ Everyone talks about it whenever it’s airing on Monday at 9!” Class Rep said passionately.

Satou-san explained it was a romance drama with a hot guy and a gorgeous girl in the leads. And she went on and on about just how hot and gorgeous they were.

*You should finish changing first. It’s all hanging out. I won’t say what though.*

Class Rep was apparently really into the story part of the drama, enthusiastically explaining how it was a modern narrative mixing in reincarnation and time-leaping.

“Y-yeah. I get it.”

“Just try watching it once!”

“If I have time.”

I’ve gotten better at giving standard lines to dodge the topic. Personally, I think I’ve become more sociable. If it were the old me, I would’ve cut the conversation short with a blunt, “Not interested.”

I *still* have zero interest, but the reason I’m going along with it without trying to end the conversation lies in the fact that they know things I don’t.

Convos about celebrities, overseas dramas, K-pop idols, YouTubers…

Class Rep and Satou-san bounce from one topic to another with no clear connection, so it’s hard to keep up. Though, I think I’m more interested in them talking about it than the actual content of the conversation itself.

Plus, there’s so much I don’t know, and it makes me realize how vast the world is.

As I finished changing and tying up my hair for volleyball, Class Rep asked me something when there was a lull in the conversation.

“Hey, Ayase-san, what kinda stuff do you usually watch?”

“What kind…?”

“Seems like you don’t watch TV, but what about videos?”

“Um, recently?”

What videos I’d watch—

“Maybe sports videos explaining the basics of volleyball?”

“So diligent!”

“That’s amazing. I should’ve watched them too. Maybe I would’ve gotten a little better.”

“No, no. If just watching made you good, there’d be no need to practice, right? You should watch them as a reference though. Anyway, you’ve been practicing your butt off, Ryo-chin! That’s more than enough!”

“Yeah, true. I didn’t even know the rules.”

I wasn't being modest. I'm just not very knowledgeable about sports. If it were a competition on fashion trends, maybe I'd stand more of a chance.

"Anyway, if anyone can pull it off, it's you, Ayase-san! We're counting on you, ace!"

"Don't be ridiculous..."

That's way too much pressure, Class Rep.

As I was leaving the locker room, I passed a girl coming in.

"Oh?"

"Oh, it's Saki. Long time no see!"

It was Maaya.

We'd be in the way chatting at the door, so I let Class Rep go ahead and went back into the locker room to chat with Maaya for a bit. It ended up just being to make sure each other was doing well, though.

I said, "See you," and quickly went to leave the locker room.

Maaya threw a challenge at my back as I was nearly out the door.

"Our class won't lose!"

I didn't look back, just waving and then closing the door behind me.

She can say she won't lose all she wants, but looking at the tournament chart, if we were to face Maaya, it'd be in the finals... *Can we even make it that far?*

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With the opening ceremony in the schoolyard done and dusted, students dispersed to their respective competitions.

From above, it'd look like a swarm of ants skittering this way and that.

We were all wearing matching white gym uniforms. Ah, there were also students in tracksuits, I should add. Given the heat, there were more people taking theirs off though.

Within the stream of people, some were being sucked into a kamaboko-shaped building, namely the students participating in indoor sports. Me, Class Rep, and Satou-san were among them.

When we passed through the door, I saw that the first matches had already started. Volleyball on one half of the gymnasium, and basketball on the other.

“We still have a bit of time, let’s watch from up top!” Class Rep suggested.

“Up top?” I wondered, and Satou-san said, “Sounds good.”

It turned out she meant to watch from the catwalk on the second floor—a place I hadn’t been in three years at Suisei High. Looking up, I could already see a heap of students watching from up there. Interesting.

On the way, we passed by the basketball team. My eyes met with Asamura-kun’s, and after exchanging quick nods, I moved on. We climbed up the stairs next to the stage to the second floor. We could stay here and watch until it was our turn.

You could hear bursts of loud cheering every now and then, both from the catwalk and the court below. Looking more closely, it wasn’t just the girls with their high-pitched squeals, but boys shouting just as enthusiastically. Though, their shouts sort of felt more like a brownish noise compared to the yellowish screams of the girls.

“What’s that?”

“Hm? The basketball side. Oh, look at the boy with the red head over there. It’s an even more flashy color than Ayase-san’s.”

“Who is he?”

I genuinely just didn’t know, but even Satou-san was giving me a “Seriously?” look.

“It’s Otosaka from class two-four, one grade below us,” Class Rep enlightened me.

“What? Is he famous or something?”

“Well, he’s pretty much as famous as you, Ayase-san. Actually, he might be even more famous lately. It’s not just his flashy looks; he’s also in MA.”

“MA?”

*What the heck’s that?*

“Music Association. Like a light music club at other schools.”

I flipped through my mental dictionary to find “association.” I think it means a group voluntarily formed by people with a common goal. Ah okay, so it’s like a music appreciation group.

“Why’s it called that?”

“Who knows? Apparently it’s been called that for ages.”

“*Hmm.*”

I remembered going to a visual kei<sup>2</sup> band’s performance at last year’s cultural festival with my classmates. That was a rare moment when I indulged in someone else’s hobby. If he’s a second-year now, he must’ve been a first-year back then. Was he on stage back then? I can’t remember for the life of me.

*Oh, he fell.*

Looks like he lost his balance while twisting his body to receive a pass. High-pitched screams erupted.

“Why?”

“Cause he’s tall, maybe?”

“Ah, yeah, height’s an advantage in basketball, isn’t it?”

“No... I don’t think those screams were about that, though,” Class Rep said, and I tilted my head.

As I watched, there was a “Kyaa” when a shot was made, and a “Kyaa” even when it missed. What’s up with that?

“Well, it’s like people think he’s cool, or he’s a feast for the eyes. Don’t you think?”

“Um, I’m not really sure.”

I suppose that occasionally, some students would make a shot from far away; and those moments did make me think, “Wow, that’s impressive.”

“I think their plays ‘impressive,’ which is also cool in their own way, right?”

“I mean, isn’t that just part of a basketball game?”

“Well, then visual kei bands wouldn’t really work out, would they?”

“...True.”

That does make sense. Back then, I just sort of nodded along without much thought when the bands mentioned the pursuit of a “world view.” I mean, if you’re into “impressive” performances, wouldn’t you just go and listen to the professionals? In that sense, expecting “impressive” performances from a high school sports festival, where not even club members participate, is probably misguided. What does “cool” really mean anyway?

“Ah. It’s our class up next. Should we get closer?” Satou-san said.

The match was over, and it was now Asamura-kun and his team’s turn. They were playing against a team of second years, who snagged the initial jump ball and quickly scored on us.

“It’s okay! It’s just one point! Let’s get it back!” Class Rep yelled.

Wow, that was loud. So this is Class Rep at full power.

“Think we’ll be okay...?” Satou-san said, sounding worried.

Class Rep’s answer came with an unusually serious face.

“I think our team can put up a good fight. Yoshida is good at shooting, and Kodama apparently played basketball in junior high.”

“Oh really?”

“Yep. I heard it when we were having a meeting for the temporary Home Economics Club.”

*That so?*

I watched the progress of the game. It was just as Class Rep said—Yoshida-kun and Kodama-kun were definitely a cut above the rest in terms of skill. The opposing team also had a skilled player, but we had two... no, wasn’t Asamura-kun also pretty good?

“Asamura-kun is doing surprisingly well, isn’t he?”

“H-he is?”

“He’s positioning well. See, he got another pass.”

Watching the game, yeah, the ball definitely did find its way to Asamura-kun a lot. He connected those passes well with his teammates; If he passed to Kodama-kun, he dashed deep into the enemy’s side, and if the ball went to Yoshida-kun, it mostly turned into a shot on goal.

“That was a close one, huh?”

Yoshida-kun’s shot hit the backboard but sadly bounced out of the ring. The kid who picked up the rebound passed it back to Asamura-kun. It went to Yoshida-kun again and this time—it went in.

“Amazing, amazing! It’s a turnaround!”

Satou-san, who’s already like a small animal, was actually hopping around all lively, like a real tiny creature. So, there really are people who literally hop around in real life.

“Hmm, I wonder why.”

Our class had taken the lead, but Class Rep was groaning.

“Asamura, you could’ve taken that shot...”

*Eh. Using his name without honorifics?*

“Ah, sorry. Asamura-kun. I tend to get a bit rough with my words when I’m excited.”

*Huh? Why is she apologizing to me?*

“You know, Asamura-kun, you could’ve shot it yourself without passing it to Yoshida, right?”

“Didn’t he want to make sure it went in? It was a chance for a turnaround, after all,” Satou-san said.

Class Rep put a hand on her cheek and thought for a moment.

“Maybe. But from what I’ve seen, Asamura-kun hasn’t taken a single shot.”

Thinking about it, she wasn’t wrong.

Well, if he’s setting up shots by passing to his teammates, isn’t that good enough?

I remember last summer, when we all went to the pool, he willingly took on that supportive role.

“Anyway, we’re against second years, so I think we can win. It’s not that scary.”

*I wonder what she means.* It was a curious choice of words, but while I was mulling over it, the game ended.

In the end, it felt like a proper victory. I think Asamura-kun was moving around while keeping a good eye on his surroundings the entire time. *That's a wonderful aspect of him*, I found myself thinking again.

He might not stand out, but...

While I was absentmindedly enjoying the view from above, the time for our match to start rolled around.

I climbed down to the first floor and joined the others gathered beside the volleyball court.

Our team captain, of course, was Class Rep. The whistle blew, marking the start of my first team competition at a sports festival.

Not to toot my own horn, but I thought I did decently at the start. Since everyone in volleyball was inexperienced, there were no fast and strong serves or attacks from the opponent, making it manageable for us. That meant I could receive and, while weak, even launch attacks of my own. Well, to be fair, I did make some empty swings too.

“Let’s keep up the pace!” Class Rep spurred us on.

I nodded, receiving the ball. It was my turn to serve.

As I lightly bounced the ball, walking to the end line, I looked up without thinking. A heap of students were packed shoulder-to-shoulder on the second-floor catwalk. Huh, when did so many people—

The second I realized I was being watched, I felt my heart tighten. *This is bad*, I thought. I mean, I was just up there watching too. Nothing’s really changed, I just hadn’t noticed it until now.

I swallowed. My throat felt parched. My nerves were getting the best of me, tying my limbs into knots. The awareness of being watched felt like needles pricking my skin.

My serving technique is a so-called “floater serve,” where I would face the opponent’s court and hit the ball without jumping. It needed a little practice compared to an underhand serve, but it wasn’t as difficult as a jump serve.

I would toss the ball with my left hand and hit it with my right as it fell. I had practiced it many, many times and rarely failed to get the ball into the opponent’s court. Yet, this time, I failed.

I gave the other team one point and lost the serve.

Something inside me snapped. The thought of making a mistake turned into fear. Steps that I should have been able to take, I couldn't. Hands that should have reached out, didn't. The thought that I have to make a good play ironically summoned the anxiety of "What if I can't?"

I was acutely aware of how my limbs were refusing to cooperate. And, predictably, the opponents started targeting me with the ball. It was thrown in a gentle arc, flying towards my face. I hurriedly took a step back, but being in the front, I was worried about what was behind me, and my legs got tangled up, causing me to fall over. I fell back, landing on my butt with a *thump*. It hurt. The ball barely grazed my face as it whizzed by. Obviously there was no way I could pick it up.

"Ayase-san!"

I snapped to attention. Even in the midst of all the cheering, I could recognize that voice anywhere. It was Asamura-kun.

The thought of him watching, or rather, having *been* watched by him, made me feel awkward and my movements sluggish. I tried to stand up, my eyes watering from the pain, but my knees felt like jelly. I couldn't help looking back, and our eyes met for a moment. This is bad. I'm making him look so worried. I looked away. I didn't want him to see my eyes, so full of fear and uncertainty.

"Here," a voice said, and a hand came with it.

I grabbed hold and used the momentum to pull myself to my feet. Class Rep stood there looking apologetic.

"Why don't you take it easy? Everyone's got your back."

Glancing around, there was no blame on the faces of my five teammates on the court or the subs on the sideline.

"It's okay. I'll cover you too!" Satou-san said as she ran over with both hands clenched into fists.

"Ah, okay."

That's right. This is a team sport. That's why I didn't want to be a burden, but by thinking that, I'm actually being more of one.

"Got it. Thank you."

I stood up straight and slapped my cheeks hard with both hands. The dry sound echoed louder than I expected, and I thought I might have overdone it a bit, but I needed to pull myself together.

Satou-san looked shocked and took a step back. Never thought I'd see a *teammate* get scared of me.

I looked back one more time to make sure Asamura-kun was still there. Yes.

It's okay. He's not the type to laugh at someone's failure. I remembered his warm eyes and the worry in his voice when he called out to me earlier.

The opposing team's serve came. The ball was served underhand, which was weak, but it seemed controllable, and they targeted me again. It looked like it would fall just a little in front of me.

What Class Rep said earlier grazed the corner of my mind.

*"You could've shot it yourself."*

*"It's not that scary."*

Being terrified and freezing up from thunderstorms and blackouts was more than enough.

Everyone will back me up. So, I shouldn't be frightened of failure. The step I couldn't take before—I have to take it now!

Leaning forward, I managed to get my arms under the ball in time. The ball barely lifted and was carefully set by Satou-san. Class Rep followed up by skillfully avoiding the opposing team's block and slamming it down into their court. It landed cleanly between two of their players.

*"We did it!"*

Everyone cheered as if we'd already won.

The serve was returned to us, and as a front player, I stepped back to serve again.

This is where I choked last time. *This time, I won't lose.*

There's no need to hit it hard. If we play it nice and slow, the other team isn't as good as us.

I breathed in and out, in and out, relaxing my whole body.

The tension bled out of me before I knew it. Don't think about the gallery. They're not really cheering for you.

I thought back to the worry in Asamura-kun's eyes. He's not expecting me to do something amazing. If he did, he would've looked at me with disappointment earlier. He's "supporting" me so I can give it my all.

I looked up at the gym ceiling and breathed out.

I served, the ball tracing a beautiful arc and landing just on the edge of the opponent's end line.

After the successful serve, I looked back and caught Asamura-kun's eyes.

I mouthed a silent, "Thank—you" to him.

Asamura-kun would probably say he didn't do anything, but when I felt he was watching over me, I could relax. Just like during the blackout.

He is there for me. I can tell he's supporting me.

Compared to the unbearable anxiety I felt in April, when I had to barge into his room and be held by him to find peace, I can keep it together a bit more now.

I don't need to barge into his room anymore; he wants to walk to school together in the morning, and he talks to me more in class. I know he's trying to close the distance between us.

I thought he was a trustworthy person, but... now I feel that even more.

Our team kept the momentum going and won the match.

We were tired, but when we heard that Asamura-kun's game was coming up, we moved to the side of the basketball court. We couldn't spare a moment to climb up to the catwalk, so we started cheering right away.

Yeah, this is "support."

I'm not expecting him to look cool. I'm just scared he's holding back, not showing what he's really capable of.

The result is just the result. Even if he doesn't score, I won't be disappointed.

The opposing team was Maru-kun's class, Asamura-kun's best friend. Maru's the captain and the main catcher of the Suisei High's baseball team (I don't know whether that's a big deal or not). From what everyone had said, he's a formidable opponent.

"Alright, everyone, let's cheer our hearts out!" Class Rep shouted to our classmates gathered around the court. She's incredibly energetic despite only *just* having gone all out in volleyball.

But, how do you even go about cheering?

I mean, I've only ever taken part in tennis for our sports festivals, which is a solo competition, so I don't know what to shout since I've never been cheered on before. Well, strictly speaking, I do remember practicing cheering in class during junior high, but by then, I was already pretty cynical and blatantly ignored it, so I don't remember it at all.

We haven't really practiced it in class or anything—right?

As I mumbled something to that effect, Satou-san, who was beside me, said, "Just calling out the name of your favorite person<sup>3</sup> is enough."

Oh, favorite?

"If you shout the name of the person you want to support, they'll be like, 'Ah, someone is watching and supporting me'!"

*Is that how it is?*

But if I do that, won't everyone know who my favorite is? Plus, I want to support him, but I also don't want to put any pressure on him.

"Isn't cheering them on in your heart enough?"

"Ayase-san... you're so stubborn."

*Why am I being stared at with such reproachful eyes?*

"It's not embarrassing to support someone who's giving it their all, y'know?"

"No, it's not because it's embarrassing..."

"Ahhh!"

Huh?

I hurriedly looked back at the court.

In a flash, a pass was made, and a large-framed boy was barrelling towards his team's goal.

The sound of the ball rhythmically dribbling on the floor echoed in the gymnasium. Asamura-kun and his teammates frantically gave chase, but with a speed that didn't match his large size, he rushed beneath the goal and scored with beautiful form.

The moment he scored, he turned around, the eyes behind his round glasses curving into a smile. Maru-kun.

"Oh dear. That big guy is pretty good, isn't he?" Class Rep said in a raspy voice.

The first half ended with us down five points.

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Tension hung thick in the air.

The looks on the faces of the boys' basketball team, taking a break on the sideline, seemed a bit gloomy.

"This is bad... We might lose at this rate."

Class Rep's dire analysis of the situation brought down the mood, Satou-san and the cheer squad included.

"But there's still the second half!" I blurted out without thinking.

Class Rep lifted her head and stared at me as if she was seeing something strange.

"Ah... Yeah, true. No, no, we can't give up. Just like Sakki<sup>4</sup> said."

S-Sakki? Who's that? Well, whatever, that doesn't matter right now.

"Everyone, listen up! We haven't lost yet!" Class Rep said while slowly looking into the faces of each of our classmates.

Y-yeah. That's pretty much what I said.

"Let's keep cheering them on until the end!"

“Yeah!” The male cheer squad fired back with their booming voices, and the girls nodded along. Satou-san was clenching her fist and saying, “We’ll do our best!”

The referee blew the whistle to resume the game, and the second half began.

“Hmm. They changed their strategy a bit,” Class Rep said as she stared intently at the court.

I couldn’t tell how she came to that conclusion, but definitely, compared to the first half, our class had regained some momentum.

Little by little, the five point lead shrank until it was almost gone.

Asamura-kun was still playing support, but he seemed to be in a position closer to the goal compared to the first half.

Cheers of, “Good job!” and “Keep it up!” echoed in the gymnasium.

Some students called out specific names. Many of those cheers were apparently directed at the skilled Yoshida-kun and the small Kodama-kun.

We finally closed the gap to just one point, and a pass went to Asamura-kun. With a fluid motion, Asamura-kun readied to pass the ball to Yoshida-kun—no, he changed his mind and he turned, forcefully taking the shot himself.

A wave of cheers started to rise, but sadly, the ball refused to go through the hoop, and the rebound was snatched by the opposing team, who immediately scored.

The cheers turn into screams.

“Yep. That’s good, Asamura.”

Huh? I was learning forward, but couldn’t help turning around. Class Rep’s eyes were narrowed behind her under-rim glasses and a smile was planted on her face.

“That was his first shot just now, wasn’t it?”

“Y-yeah, it was, but...”

I knew that. I mean, I’ve been watching the whole time. Sure, Yoshida-kun was being marked by the opposing team, but I never thought he’d go and take the shot himself like that.

“You got this.”

“Just keep taking those shots!”

Those voices were from Asamura-kun’s teammates, directed at him.

It sounded like a good thing to say he was being more aggressive, but I thought it might just come off as him hogging the ball or playing solo.

But, as Class Rep said, the tide had turned now.

“Is it just me... or are we pushing them back?”

“Asamura, ah, sorry, I mean Asamura-kun—”

*There you go apologizing again.*

“Now that they know he can shoot, they can’t ignore him anymore. Till now, it was okay to leave him be.”

I didn’t really get it, but that did seem to be the case. The opposing team was clearly more bewildered than before whenever Asamura-kun had the ball. Obviously because he might turn around and take a shot.

The game went back and forth, and Asamura-kun was subbed out. As he walked across the sideline, classmates’ voices saying, “That was close” flew his way.

“Come on, Asamura~! You can do it~!” Class Rep loudly called out to him, egging him on.

Asamura-kun turned towards the voice. He could probably see me standing next to her.

When Asamura-kun returned to the court after a rest, the point difference had narrowed to one, and there was about one minute left on the clock.

Straight away, the ball was passed to Asamura-kun. He passed it off instantly and ran towards the goal. The pass connected, and Kodama-kun cut in with a dribble. Then a pass to Asamura-kun in front of the goal! Maybe a shot!? But it looked like that was just a feint, and he passed it off to Yoshida-kun. It was a bit far, but, without hesitation, Yoshida-kun launched the ball at the goal. Probably because there wasn’t much time left. Maybe about 30 seconds, I think.

I thought the ball, drawing an arc through the air, would definitely go into the basket. But cruelly, it missed, bouncing out again. Honestly, I thought it was over at that point.

Everyone swarmed towards the ball. Asamura-kun was the one who managed to snag it as it bounced up. He looked around, eyes darting this way and that, looking for somewhere to pass. As he did so the referee looked at the clock and put the whistle in his mouth.

My throat tightened. It was almost time-up. I watched as Asamura-kun's darting eyes zeroed in on the goal.

I gasped.

He took a step forward.

Taking that step is scary. I know that because I'd just experienced that feeling a moment ago. But his foot was facing the goal.

*"If you shout the name of the person you want to support, they'll be like, 'Ah, someone is watching and supporting me'!"*

Reversing that, if you don't say it, they won't understand, and it won't get across to them...

Even when I'm scared, someone will always be there for me. In the darkness a certain someone hugged me and taught me that.

So, I also—

“A—”

*Do your best! Keep going!*

“Asamura-kuuun!” I squeezed out from the depths of my throat.

Asamura Yuuta let the ball fly from his hand even as he was losing his balance.

The round object drew a high arc as it rotated through the air. It was as if its trajectory painted a rainbow spanning the blue sky outside the window. It bounced off the backboard. Time seemed to slow, as if everything was in slow motion. The ball slipped inside the net.

My ears had shut out all the sounds of the world, and in the silence, all I could see was the ball. It looked as if it was squeezed out of the net, and fell down.

The sound of the whistle sharpened in my ears, and the flow of time returned to normal with it.

The ball bounced, and rolled on the floor. We were all cheering our lungs out. Asamura-kun had sat down on the floor.

“WOOOOO!”

“WE WON!”

Everyone around us was also making a big fuss about the dramatic ending.

Satou-san was even in tears, but hold on, this wasn't even the final match or anything, was it?



Anyway—I do think they did their best.

“*Hmm~*. That was good cheering, Ayase-san,” Class Rep said.

“Huh? Oh.”

All I did was call out Asamura-kun’s name....

“Well, it’s normal. He’s a classmate.”

“Hoho. He sure is...”

Eh. Did she notice how cool Asamura-kun is?

“He was indeed a sight worth cheering for.”

I considered those words for a moment and then nodded slightly.

“He was.”

For whatever reason, a wry smile flashed across Class Rep’s face, but I purposely pretended not to see.

It was almost noon, and we were about to go into lunch break. Class Rep loudly suggested everyone have lunch.

That reminds me, the temporary Home Economics Club, led by her, is making rice balls.

If I’d known, I would’ve at least made miso soup. Well, you know, for the sake of my classmates.

When the sports festival resumed in the afternoon, neither Asamura-kun’s basketball team nor our volleyball team made it to the finals, but our class managed decent results overall.

I was pretty exhausted, but truthfully, I realized that team sports aren’t so bad.

And so, my third year sports festival at Suisei High came to a close.

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That night, both Asamura-kun and I were tired, so we decided to have dinner early.

When you're wiped out, the later it gets, the more of a pain it is to prepare food and clean up afterward. And if you feel like that, chances are you'll take a bath and go straight to bed without doing much else.

We decided on a simple menu. Specifically, we just grilled the mackerel that Mom had bought. The salad was pre-made. We did grate some radish for the mackerel though.

We did also make miso soup. The only ingredient of which was fried tofu.

After dinner, we both had a cold glass of roasted green tea and finally took a breather.

"Today was so tiring, wasn't it?" I said, letting out a half-sigh.

Asamura-kun nodded.

As Asamura-kun and I reflected on the sports festival, somehow, the conversation drifted to how incredible athletes are. We talked about the difficulty of practicing every day, and somehow, it led to him saying how incredible it was that I cook every day as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

I thought it was too much praise.

Besides, I feel like I'm not conscious enough of trying to make my own cooking delicious. I basically only care whether I find it delicious or not. And also, it's not like I'm aiming to be a chef or anything. So, I guess you could say I only care about my own taste.

"Since I came to this house, my cooking gets nothing but praise, so it's actually kinda confusing..."

He thanked me so sincerely that I ended up feeling embarrassed and looked away.

*Asamura-kun really is good at giving compliments.*

"Oh, by the way..."

I suddenly remembered today's sports festival and found a point to praise Yuuta Asamura on.

I praised him for his play in the basketball game, which landed us in the top four.

But, Asamura-kun is always modest when it comes to himself. He insisted that it was a do-or-die moment and that making the shot was just a fluke.

I wasn't talking about the outcome. It was his choice to take a shot in that desperate moment that was dazzling to me. I was so tense from the pressure that my limbs wouldn't move properly until Asamura-kun spoke to me.

"It's alright! You were the MVP in my eyes," I said firmly, and Asamura-kun's cheeks turned red in embarrassment.

"T-thanks."

His curt thanks sent a wave of amusement washing over me.

"You're blushing!"

"I'm just not used to compliments."

*Ah, this is what I find charming about him,* I thought as I watched Asamura-kun blush and scratch the back of his head.

Even after getting into bed, I kept picturing his face, and it warmed my heart each time.

That night, I had a dream.

For some reason, I was a child again, crying in the pitch-black darkness with my knees hugged to my chest.

Someone crouched beside me, took my hand, and pulled me away.

The darkness cleared, and instead of the ground, the floor of a gymnasium stretched out all the way to the horizon.

There was no ceiling, and I could see the blue sky above.

I gripped the hand of the person who'd led me there, and we walked side by side, endlessly.

The owner of the slightly embarrassed face that smiled back at me was a boy named Asamura Yuuta.

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- <sup>1</sup> Not a real drama as far as I can see.
- <sup>2</sup> Visual kei is a Japanese subculture that combines elaborate fashion, dramatic makeup, extravagant hairstyles, and diverse music genres.
- <sup>3</sup> She uses 推し(oshi) here, a Japanese slang term for your favorite person or character, often used in pop culture fandoms, like for idols or manga/anime characters.
- <sup>4</sup> Class Rep said her name as “さつきー” which phonetically sounds like Sa-Kiii.

## July 20th (Tuesday) — Asamura Yuuta

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All the students of Suisei High gathered in the blissfully air-conditioned gymnasium for our first semester's closing ceremony.

Once it was over, I joined the throngs of students heading back to their respective classrooms. The sweltering heat instantly clung to my skin, and a grand chorus of cicadas pounded my eardrums.

A month had already slipped by since the intense sports festival.

Glancing sideways, I could see the school grounds. Beneath a deep sky, sharp black shadows fell from thick poles holding up the net which enclosed the brown field. The scorching sun drew a clear boundary between light and darkness, its blinding light, almost physically oppressive in its intensity, appeared to allow no room for ambiguity or deception.

I let out a sigh, feeling overwhelmed. No surprise, given the outcome of our entrance exams would be determined by how much I could prepare during this last summer vacation.

“So yeah, Maru is pretty awesome, don’t you reckon?”

“Huh?”

Turning towards the voice, I realized Yoshida was beside me.

“He made it through the third round.”

“Apparently so.”

Maru, the captain of the Suisei High baseball team, had already advanced through the third round of the East Tokyo regional qualifiers. And if they won the fourth round, held the day after tomorrow, they’d be in the top sixteen.

“This area is one of the toughest in the whole country. Making it to the top sixteen is pretty incredible. Maybe I should get Maru’s autograph or something.”

“You’re into baseball, Yoshida?”

“Nah, not really.”

*Is that really true?*

“Simply put, if I think it’s awesome, I just wanna say it’s awesome.”

“Gotcha.”

So Maru, through his hard work, even earned the admiration of those who normally couldn’t give a rat’s ass about baseball.

“Oh? You seem happy, Asamura.”

“Well, yeah.”

*Yep, that's so like him, impressive as always.*

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After the closing ceremony, we had a short homeroom and were let go right after.

I had a shift at work in the evening, but there was still a bit of time before that. Should I go home for a while? Or maybe rest somewhere?

With summer vacation starting, I won’t be coming to the classroom for a while, so I meticulously checked inside my desk to make sure I didn’t leave anything behind. I felt the touch of bare steel. Empty. Good.

“Asamura-kun, can I talk to you for a sec?”

Turning towards the voice, I found Ayase-san standing there.

*At home, we’re distant, but outside, we’re close.* We’d gotten used to talking naturally in the classroom over the past month. At first, our classmates would say stuff like, “You two seem close lately,” but when we kept replying, “We’re just classmates,” comments like that eventually stopped.

Well, it’s normal for classmates to talk; nothing to see here.

“What’s up?”

“Maaya said she has something to talk to us about.”

Narasaka-san does? Not just to Ayase-san, but to me as well?

*What could it be, I wonder.*

“Saki~! Asamura-kun~! Sorry to keep you waiting! Here I am!”

That cheerful voice accompanied the female student who literally jumped into the nearly empty classroom.

Yep, it's Narasaka-san alright.

She came over to us with a broad smile lighting up her face. I remember Ayase-san once calling her a "sunflower." And it was true her presence alone definitely brightened up the place.

"Narasaka-san, you wanted to talk to Ayase-san and me?"

"What!? How'd you know!? Are you a psychic, Asamura-kun~!?"

Seeing Narasaka-san dramatically covering her mouth in surprise, Ayase-san let out a soft sigh next to me.

"You were the one who said you had something to talk about, Maaya. I just passed it on."

"Ahaha, oopsies~"

"Who's the mysterious foreigner you're imitating now?" I shot back.

Narasaka-san cleared her throat exaggeratedly before opening her mouth to speak.

"Umm, both of you! Have you already made plans for the day after tomorrow!?"

The day after tomorrow? That'd be July 22nd. The second day of summer vacation... and a Thursday. Do I have any plans?

"Not really."

"Something happening?"

Narasaka-san's eyes gleamed with a playful sparkle.

"You wanna come cheer for Maru-kun and the rest of the baseball club?"

Cheering? Oh, right, it's Maru's game that day.

"Anyways, it's not just the two of you, I've invited other peeps too. Y'know, nearly everyone who went to the pool last summer said they can come!"

Shinjo's refreshing face came to my mind. He's part of the group that's close to Narasaka-san.

"Everyone's coming, huh."

True to form for Narasaka-san the social butterfly. She puffed out her chest with pride.

“It’s our last summer, and it’s a match that could get us into the top sixteen! Since Maru-kun is doing his best, I wanna cheer him on. I want him to play with a sea of cheering fans all around!”

What she said reminded me of the sports festival a month back. It wasn’t about shoving “expectations” onto him, it was more about “support.”

“They’re going against a seriously tough school!”

*Oh, really?*

I don’t know squat about sports, so I don’t know how strong a powerhouse school in the district is.

I might not know, but if Narasaka-san says so, it must mean that the opposing team is nearly equally matched.

“So, will that work? You two think you can make it?”

“Yeah. I’ll go.”

I thought about it during the sports festival anyway. I want to see Maru play in an official match at least once.

“How about you, Ayase-san?”

“Well... if it’s just for one day.”

“Alrighty! Yay! Saki~!”

Both of Narasaka-san arms shot up, seeking a high five from Ayase-san.

“Y-yay?” Ayase-san responded, albeit with confusion.

Their palms met with a *clap*.

“If you guys wanna invite anyone else, feel free to do so! On the 22nd, we all GO to the stadium! I’ll go invite some other peeps as well now. So, Adyu<sup>1</sup>~!”

*Adyu?*

After saying goodbye with a peculiar mix of French and Japanese, Narasaka-san left the same way she arrived—like a whirlwind.

I lost myself in thought. If I were to invite someone, it would be Yoshida, right? He’s a mutual friend and was concerned about Maru’s match.

As for Ayase-san, she’d try inviting Class Rep and Satou-san.

But... Narasaka-san is acting like a self-appointed cheer captain or something. She must get along pretty well with Maru, huh?

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<sup>1</sup> She's mixing Japanese with the French word for "goodbye" (Adieu). It sounds like "Add-you" phonetically.

## July 20th (Tuesday) — Ayase Saki

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Just like that, summer was upon us.

They say there's a turning of the seasons, but it's not always easy to actually feel the change.

Lately, I've noticed that I don't need to take an umbrella when I leave the house, I can hang laundry outside, and I can't hear the squeaking of indoor shoes in damp hallways anymore.

Some might notice stuff like that, but more often than not, it goes over people's heads unless it's pointed out to them.

Change sneaks up slowly, and by the time everyone notices, summer has completely transformed the world around them. Though, there's still no official announcement marking the end of the rainy season.

The blazing sun bathed the classroom in light.

It's been a month since the sports festival. Between studying for entrance exams, taking regular tests, and working part-time—even with me cutting back on that—the season has completely changed while I've been run off my feet.

And it's not just the season.

My relationship with Asamura-kun has also changed a bit too. I've completely gotten used to calling him "Yuuta-niisan" at home, and we've been walking side by side outside more often.

Along with all of that, I've started feeling more at peace, and slowly but surely, my grades have started picking up again. I was especially happy with being able to make up for my poor performance during the mock exams at the end of June. It's reassuring to see changes reflected in numbers precisely because they are hard to see with the naked eye. Seems to me that reevaluating the distance between Asamura-kun and I and changing how I address him are showing some results. That said, everyone else was working hard for the exams, and improving too, so my rank only went up a little bit. Given Suisei High is known for its academic advancement, there are many students who take exams seriously.

Today is different though.

I looked around the classroom. My classmates were all chatting away, the noisy atmosphere reminding me of the buzzing of cicadas. Everyone was upbeat. Starting tomorrow, it's summer vacation. Even if we entrance exam takers knew that we wouldn't really get a break with cram school and mock exams and all that, everyone was all smiles. Well, not *everyone*. There were still some students with gloomy faces. Take, for instance, the Class Rep that I was looking at. As soon as she arrived at the classroom, she sat at her desk next to mine and flopped down, pressing her face against it.

"I-I'm melting."

"Aren't you *already* melted?"

"Ugh... It's so hot..."

Satou Ryouko-san, aka Ryo-chin, was using a piece of paper to fan Class Rep, who looked kind of like ice cream melting on asphalt. Satou-san recently moved to the seat in front of me after a seating change. I should add, Class Rep's still sitting next to me after the change.

"They said the high today is gonna be like thirty-four degrees," Satou-san said.

"Ugh, that's almost the same as human body temperature... It feels like being hugged by a crowd of people, constantly... Get away... It's so hot..."

"Is it really that bad?"

I was wearing a cardigan as I didn't like the chilly feeling from the air-con. The classroom's air-con was of course running at full blast. But Class Rep, who'd just walked in from outside, kept rattling on about feeling like she was melting.

"I endured a packed train and then trudged under the scorching sun to get to school..."

"I hate going outside during summer too," Satou-san said, and Class Rep lifted her head off the desk a little.

"You're an indoor person, Ryo-chin?"

"I don't like sweating, so I prefer being at home. It's easier to choose what to wear too."

"I totally get it. When I'm home, I'm fine just wearing a bralette. I don't even need a T-shirt. It's more than enough for summer and comfortable too."

“Wh-what!?” Sato-san quickly jumped in to drown out Class Rep.

I was embarrassed too. *What the heck is she thinking, saying stuff like that right here in the classroom?*

“Hm? What? What’s the matter?”

“C-Class Rep! You shouldn’t say stuff like that with people around!”

“Huh? Isn’t it normal to wear light clothes at home? Does anyone actually wear a lot of clothes at home?”

Satou-san and I sighed in unison.

Seriously, this girl. True or not, girls our age shouldn’t go around talking so openly about underwear and lingerie in front of others. I think freshly washed underwear is the same as a towel, and I think it’s normal to talk about it with family, but still.

“Ahaha, no one’s listening anyway. Everyone’s thinking about summer vacation.”

“I do think it’s gonna be a summer completely filled with studying, though...” Satou-san muttered the harsh truth, and Class Rep went right back to melting.

“I’ll go to a summer festival every day!” She grumbled, burying her face in her desk. She was totally deflated. Satou-san looked flustered seeing this.

“A-a summer festival sounds nice! But do they really happen every day?”

Class Rep shot upright. She pulled out her smartphone and showed it to us.

“Tehehe, I’ve done my research, Ma’am.”

*Who’s she calling Ma’am?*

“Check this out. There’s a site that lists all the national festivals in a calendar! I’ve already got it bookmarked!”

“Wow, Neputa Festival, Nebuta Festival, lantern floating, Awa Odori, Yosakoi<sup>1</sup>... amazing. There are so many.”

The smartphone’s screen showed every festival from Hokkaido to Okinawa. On a side note, the festival in Hirosaki is called “Neputa” and the one in Aomori is called “Nebuta.”

But still—

“Going to one *every day* is impossible, isn’t it?”

She’s a student studying for entrance exams, after all. Even if she wasn’t, it’d still be a tall order.

Class Rep shrugged, as if to say, “Ayase-san, you don’t get it, do you?”

“This kinda thing is all about mood. Even if we say we’re exam students, if all we have planned is studying, there’s no way we can stay focused! Being tense all the time isn’t good for anything, is it?”

I thought about what she said. Yeah, she might have a point. Even when I’m sitting at my desk at home, I do lose focus at some point. If it’s just for one day, maybe I can manage. But if it goes on for a whole month...

“Well, that being said, I kinda hesitate to invite anyone else, you know, because I end up wondering whether I’d be interrupting their studying.”

*That’s thoughtful of you, but aren’t you also a student preparing for exams?*

Well yeah, when you invite someone to hang out, you do have to consider the person’s schedule, don’t you? But wait, now that I think about it... have I ever actually asked a friend to hang out first?

Huh? Wait, have I *ever* actually been considerate like that before? Did I ever invite Maaya?

As I sat there frozen, Satou-san nervously opened her mouth.

“I-I’m free anytime! Hmm well, going to a festival every day might be tricky... but if I can’t, I’ll say!”

She seemed totally ready to tag along with Class Rep.

“Oh my, oh my, oh my. Do you really wanna hang out with me that much, Ryo-chin?”

“Y-yes. ’Cause I... I’ve finally gotten to be friends with you... but once summer vacation is over, we might not be able to hang out much.”

“S-so cute...”

“C-c-cute?”

“What a sweetie. There, there, Onee-san<sup>2</sup> will have fun with you. Hmm, which festival should we go to? I’ll pick one out, just wait a sec, okay? Look, look, how about this one?”

Class Rep gleefully scrolled on her phone. Satou-san was also peeking in, and they ended up wrapped up in their chat, leaving me twiddling my thumbs. Well, it's questionable whether I was really part of the conversation from the get-go.

Just then, my smartphone beeped.

**Maaya:**【Do you have time after the closing ceremony? There's something I reaaaally wanna talk to you about!】

*I wonder what it is.* It doesn't seem like serious news though. I messaged back saying I didn't have anything urgent to do, and a reply came straight away.

**Maaya:**【Thanks~ Wait in your classroom with Asamura-kun, okay?】

Oh, Asamura-kun too? Why? What's this about?

I typed "tell me first," but...

**Maaya:**【This passion! You gotta feel it in person! It's hotter than the sun!】

*....The heck is that?*

Right. Looks like it's not something she's willing to tell me beforehand.

Can't be helped, I guess. I'll just have to wait patiently until after school. It's impossible to get anything out of Maaya at times like these. Just as I put away my smartphone, the pre-bell rang. Class Rep and Satou-san also looked up from the phone's screen.

Satou-san looked at me.

"Um, Ayase-san, let's go somewhere during summer vacation too."

Satou-san was clenching her small fists. Apparently, she was completely in the outing mood.

"Ah, sure."

Class Rep smiled contentedly and clapped her hands toward our classmates.

"Alright, everyone! The closing ceremony is about to begin, so let's head to the gym!"

The deflated figure from earlier was nowhere to be seen, and Class Rep was back to owning her role.

While wondering what Maaya wanted with me, I headed to the gym with everyone.

\*\*\*

It was after school, with the closing ceremony done and dusted.

Maaya appeared in our classroom just as I told Asamura-kun that she had something to talk to us about. Correction, she *jumped* into the classroom. And what she wanted to talk about turned out to be:

“You wanna come cheer for Maru-kun and the rest of the baseball club?”

So that’s what it was.

“Anyways, it’s not just the two of you, I’ve invited other peeps too. Y’know, nearly everyone who went to the pool last summer said they can come!”

Pool?

Digging through my memory, I recalled going to the pool last summer after being invited by Maaya. It was that summer day when I’d been reluctant to go, and Asamura-kun persuaded me.

My heart gave a big thump.

It’s not that I had forgotten. I was just pretending to forget. On that summer day, I recognized my feelings and, to seal them away, called Asamura-kun, “Niisan” for the first time.

After that, for a while, I went through painful days that made my heart feel frozen.

I don’t want to address Asamura-kun with those feelings ever again. Calling him “Yuuta-niisan” as I do now feels so much better. Actually, this way of addressing him was a good idea. To be honest, it was Mom who first suggested calling him that.

“*Is it still embarrassing to use his name? Calling him ‘Yuuta-niisan’ is fine too, you know?*” She’d said out of the blue.

At the time, I thought it was a really embarrassing way to address him.

Now, though, I'm completely used to it. And I mean, as long as I add "niisan," I can use his first name! What a great idea.

"Oiii, Saki-chi."

"Ah, yes."

"It's not a 'yes' answer."

Maaya was puffing out her cheeks.

*Uhm, what were we talking about?*

"How about you, Ayase-san?"

Oh, right. Cheering for the baseball team.

I've hardly ever cheered for anyone. I'm not that close to Maru-kun either. Still, Maaya invited me.

She said she wanted to have lots of people there supporting Maru-kun.

It was like she was inviting me in a joking way... but when I stole a glance at Maaya, our eyes met. There was more heat in them than usual.

"Well... if it's just for one day."

I found myself responding like that. I was curious about why she suddenly wanted me to cheer for him, but if it made Maaya happy, I figured it was fine. We somehow ended up high-fiving. Seriously, I can never guess what this girl's going to do next.

"If you guys wanna invite anyone else, feel free to do so! On the 22nd, we all GO to the stadium! I'll go invite some other peeps as well now. So, Adyu~!"

No sooner had she spoken than Maaya left.

...What was that weird goodbye? It sounded like a mix of Japanese and French...

Well, whatever. If I overthink what Maaya says and does, I'll just drive myself crazy.

Now I've got this awkward gap before my shift today. I shot Asamura-kun a "what now?" look. We were the only ones left in the classroom.

"It's not worth going to a cafe, so how about going to the library?"

"You don't mean to read books... right?"

“I was thinking it might be cooler there. The air-con in the classroom will shut off soon, but the library should be cool until it closes.”

That was news to me.

Just as I was about to head there with Asamura-kun, my smartphone beeped. I stopped in my tracks when I saw the name on the notification.

“Sorry, go ahead without me.”

Asamura-kun tilted his head in confusion but headed off to the library anyway.

After watching him leave, I looked down at the screen.

**Maaya:**【Can you talk now?】

Hmm. What’s going on? She was all cheerful when she left earlier. When I messaged her back saying I was free now, she called me straight away. I asked her what was wrong.

『Umm, well, you know, you were unsure about going, weren’t you Saki?』

*Ah... so that’s it.*

“I was just wondering if it was okay for me to go. I understand asking Asamura-kun, but...”

『I told youuu. I wanna bring as many people as possible to cheer for him.』

“And that’s exactly my point. If you’re inviting other people besides me, isn’t that enough? You have lots of friends and acquaintances, Maaya. If you want a big crowd cheering for him, wouldn’t they be better? I feel like... I’d be more of an outsider.”

Maaya went silent for a moment.

『You know... um... actually, I want you to watch more than anyone else, Saki.』

Her tone had changed. It was different from her usual cheerful voice, a bit lower, and a little hesitant.

“Me?”

『Uh-huh. You see, I’ve seen how hard Maru-kun has been working. I wanted you to see that too.』

“Me to see that?”

I ended up repeating it. I didn't get what Maaya was saying.

『That's right. I want you to see Maru-kun shine.』

I almost asked "Why?" but swallowed my tongue.

That was close. I need to be careful. Asking "Why?" like this can easily come off as, "Why do I have to watch Maru-kun's match when it has nothing to do with me?"

And Maaya isn't the kind of person to just invite someone for no reason. It was the same for the pool last summer. It wasn't just Asamura-kun, but her too, that saw how overwhelmed I was back then and invited me to take a break. Maaya is a thoughtful person, even if it looks like she's joking around a lot of the time.

So I worded my question carefully.

"There's a reason it has to be me, isn't there?"

Another hesitant pause.

『Saki, how much do you know about Maru-kun?』

How much...? Probably just that he's Asamura-kun's friend.

『You probably just know he's Asamura-kun's friend, right?』

*Humph. It's like she's reading my mind.*

『That's exactly why I want you to know about it. About his last summer.』

His last? Oh, right. If she hadn't mentioned it, I wouldn't have even thought about it. Since I'm not really the type of student to be into club stuff...

Life marches on, but you only get three summers in high school. This is their last shot for the third years to challenge themselves at Koshien.

『This next game is crucial, deciding the best sixteen! And the opponent is a powerful contender for the championship! They narrowly lost by one point in a spring practice match, creating a rivalry!』

"They only lost by one point against a powerful team? That's impressive."

『Yep! It is. And after losing, he pushed himself even harder. As the team captain, he came up with strategies and training routines and stuff. Despite having entrance exams to study for, he's been swinging that bat every day...』

Maaya's voice was becoming more and more passionate.

Honestly, I can't even begin to imagine the effort Maru-kun puts in. Heck, I probably shouldn't say I understand at all since I didn't continue with club activities. But the passion Maaya had for cheering him on was coming through loud and clear.

『I want you to see him giving it his all, too. Because, y'know—』Maaya took a breath.『—After all, Saki, you're my precious friend.』

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The old building at the end of the corridor, commonly known as the “Library Wing”, has a music room on the first floor and a library on the second.

I climbed the stairs and opened the hefty door.

I stepped into the library, a realm governed by silence. The only sounds were the soft hum of the air-con and voices lowered to the faintest of whispers. The windows were shut tight, with thin curtains hung to block out UV rays. However, even with soundproofing, the sound of the wind instruments from the music room below floated up.

I wandered through the forest of bookshelves until I found Asamura-kun and sat down next to him. This corner was secluded, with no one else around. A spot where we could have a whispered conversation without bothering anyone.

“Who are you inviting, Asamura-kun?” I asked in a low voice as soon as I sat down. It was about what Maaya had said, that we could invite our friends too.



He lightly tapped his breast pocket.

“I LINE’d Yoshida just now. I feel like he’d say it’d be awkward if I don’t invite him.”

Asamura-kun, Maru-kun, and Yoshida-kun were in the same group on last year’s school trip. He’d been chatting with Yoshida-kun a lot since they’re in the same class this year, and they did well together at the sports festival.

“He replied right away that he’ll come. Said he’ll try inviting Makihara-san too.”

“Makihara-san?”

I’ve heard that name somewhere before. After talking to Asamura-kun for a while, I realized we were in the same class in our second year. They’ve apparently been pretty close since Yoshida-kun helped her during the school trip.

“Oh, I see.”

“Are you going to invite someone too, Ayase-san?”

“Well...”

It’s not like I don’t have anyone in mind. Just like Asamura-kun had made more close friends besides Maru-Kun, I had too.

“Class Rep and Satou-san, I s’pose.”

“Ah, you’ve been talking to them a lot lately, haven’t you?”

*I have, yeah. But...*

“Both of them might not know Maru-kun, so I wonder if it’s okay to invite them.”

Both of them apparently didn’t like the heat either, so I wondered if it was wrong to invite them to watch baseball under the scorching sun.

Then there was what Class Rep had said: *“I kinda hesitate to invite anyone else, you know, because I end up wondering whether I’d be interrupting their studying.”*

In hindsight, it was always Maaya who invited me places. I don’t remember ever inviting a friend myself. So, why did I have the audacity to put on a grumpy face and say “I don’t wanna,” about the pool, even though I actually wanted to go?

What a pain of a human I am.

So, anyway... I figured I'd try inviting someone myself for a change. But then, like Class Rep said, I find myself worrying about stuff.

"Gotcha. But they're *your* friends, right Ayase-san? If they are, then I think it should be fine."

"Huh? I'm not that well-liked or popular."

"Sorry, I might've phrased that badly. I didn't mean they'd for sure come, I just thought they'd be the kind to give you a heads up if they aren't interested or had other plans."

I was completely blindsided.

"It was the same with you, Ayase-san."

*Hmph. Is he talking about the pool incident last year? Maybe.*

When I asked as much, he replied with a wry smile, "I'm not talking about a specific time." Well, that's fine then... Sorry.

"But yeah. Satou-san did say she would tell me if she couldn't come."

"See?"

Seeing his warm smile, I felt encouraged.

Before losing my nerve, I pulled out my smartphone and fired off a message. My heart raced as I tightly gripped my phone—and a reply came back.

I checked the notification.

"How'd it go?"

"T-they said they'll come."

"Oh, that's great!"

Asamura-kun said it so nonchalantly! Meanwhile, I felt like if there was a bed nearby, I'd be collapsing onto it right now.

I never knew inviting someone could be this nerve-wracking... Props to everyone who does it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Neputa Festival*: A summer festival in Aomori, Japan, featuring large, illuminated floats with intricate paper lanterns. *Nebuta Festival*: A summer festival in Aomori, similar to Neputa, with enormous paper lantern floats depicting historical and mythological figures. *Awa Odori*: A lively traditional dance festival held in Tokushima, featuring dance performances by participants and spectators. *Yosakoi*: A modern dance festival originating in Kochi, known for its energetic and colorful dance routines with naruko clappers.

<sup>2</sup> She's calling herself Onee-san (older sister) playfully here.

## July 22nd (Thursday) — Asamura Yuuta

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Climbing up the dimly lit stairs, we were hit with the intense sunlight of a bright, clear day.

The baseball field, which spread out fan-shaped from home plate, was covered in grass both in the infield and outfield, and shimmered green under the blazing sun. Only the four bases and the pitcher's mound showed hints of brown dirt peeking through.

The sound of a brass band rang out loudly, as if piercing the sky.

The Suisei High baseball team, led by Maru, were gearing up for their match here. It was the fourth round of the East Tokyo regional qualifiers for the National High School Baseball Championship. Meaning, this match would decide whether they played in the summer Koshien tournament. A victory here would land them in the top sixteen, the best achievement our school had seen in years... or so I heard from the excited Yoshida standing next to me.

“Check it out, Asamura! Isn’t it awesome that the entire field is grass!? I wonder if it’s hard to maintain?”

“Seems like artificial turf. I heard they recently renovated most of the facilities.”

I was sure of it, actually, since I’d looked it up earlier. And low and behold, the infield seats spreading out before us looked brand new and very clean.

“Oh, cool. Hey, I’ll go grab us some good seats!” Yoshida said, leaving the shaded entrance and dashing off towards the stands.

There were six of us who had come to support Maru. Me and Ayase-san, of course, then Class Rep and Satou-san, whom Ayase-san had invited, Yoshida, whom I’d invited, and Makihara-san, whom he’d invited.

We’d all met up at the station nearest to the stadium and walked here together.

I glanced behind me.

Makihara-san looked lost, clearly out of her element. She didn’t really know anyone here besides Yoshida. It felt as though she was a fish out of water—or so I thought anyway.

Class Rep gently placed her hands on Makihara-san's shoulders.

"Yuka-chan, aren't you gonna follow Yoshida?"

"Sh-should I?"

"Oh, he's obviously trying to find a good seat for you. I can tell. Trust me, you should go after him now."

Class Rep sounded like a matchmaking aunt.

"You're right. I'll go after him."

Makihara-san, gently pushed by Class Rep, trotted off into the sunlight in the direction Yoshida had gone.

But man, it was amazing Class Rep was already on a first-name basis with Makihara-san, considering they'd only just met. All in the short time from our rendezvous at the station to our arrival at the stadium. That's the mysterious power of Class Rep, I suppose. No wonder people referred to her by that title more often than by her actual name.

"They both left, huh?"

It was Ayase-san. Satou-san was beside her. Both looked pretty worn out from the heat. *I wonder if they're okay.*

"Well, there's still time. And since Yoshida went to secure seats, we can probably just wait and cool off here. What do you wanna do?"

"Hmm."

"I wonder if Narasaka-san's group has already arrived?" Satou-san asked.

"I think they're around. Can't spot them, though," I answered vaguely.

I tried to spot Narasaka-san—who'd organized this cheer squad—in the stands, but from this tight entrance between the concourse and the seating, I couldn't pinpoint her.

"Maaya's over by the concourse," Ayase-san said while holding up her smartphone. She probably got a message on LINE.

"I'm gonna go say hi to Maaya. What about you, Asamura-kun?"

"Alright then... I'll go grab seats with Yoshida."

Given that Narasaka-san had invited me, I probably should go with her. But for now, it's best to split up. I mean, Ayase-san is closer to Narasaka-san anyway.

Ayase-san glanced at Class Rep and Satou-san, silently asking, "What will you guys do?" with her eyes.

"Oh, I'll go too! Asamura-kun, I'm counting on you to find us good seats!"

"I'll come too."

With that, they headed off, the girls happily following behind Ayase-san.

I headed off into the stands to find Yoshida and Makihara-san.

In hindsight, I felt a bit relieved that Ayase-san and the other two went over to Narasaka-san's group. I wasn't sure I could keep up a conversation with that many girls by myself. If that had happened, I might've ended up only talking to Ayase-san, which could've made things awkward for the other two.

Now then, should I go find some good seats as requested?

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Our seats were on the first base side (to the right when looking from behind home plate). Narasaka-san told us that Suisei High's cheer squad would gather here.

The spectator seats were set up on both the first base side and the third base side, from near the home base to the front of the outfield, with a total of about three thousand seats. All seats were unreserved.

There were no stands in the outfield. There was no roof, so all the sound seemed to escape into the blue sky above. If it rained, all the spectators would get wet.

Near the outfield, the brass band was warming up. Based on what Narasaka-san told us, the actual cheer squad and cheerleading team would gather on that side. We'd been told to gather on the opposite side, closer to the home base.

The seats were filling up decently. It felt pretty crowded, considering it was just a qualifier. I'd definitely be incredibly nervous with so many people watching me if I were playing. But, problem is, I don't know which seats are good. It's my first time watching a baseball game. I probably should've followed Yoshida. Where is he?

"Oi, Asamura!"

I heard my name being called as I was scanning the seats. I saw Yoshida waving. When I went over to him, I didn't see Makihara-san next to him.

"Huh, where's Makihara-san?"

"She went to reapply her sunscreen. I mean, look at this sun. Can't really blame her for not wanting to hang out in it for too long."

"Oh, I see."

"And look, since you're here, someone wanted to say hi."

"Ah."

There was a guy who'd been sitting there for a while, waiting for our conversation to wrap up.

"Yuuta-kun, long time no see."

A guy who looked refreshed despite the heat. Shinjo. Does that mean Narasaka-san's group has taken seats around here?

"A-ah, um, long time no see."

I gave him a slight wave in greeting, and he returned a slightly awkward, sheepish smile before glancing over to his side. I had noticed that there was a girl sitting next to him. She bowed her head. I reflexively nodded back, but I didn't recognize her face. I hadn't seen her at the pool last summer either. Apparently, she was an acquaintance of Shinjo's... *Should I properly introduce myself?*

Reading my confused look, Shinjo straightened up and gestured towards the girl.

"This is Kobayashi-san. We're in the same class."

Kobayashi-san bowed her head again as she was introduced.

She had bright, mid-length brown hair. She wore earrings that looked like seashells. While she didn't exactly look like a gyaru, she had a sophisticated look about her.

"Um, we started dating recently."

*Wow... Dating, huh? So she's his girlfriend?*

Kobayashi-san burst out laughing as if she couldn't hold it in any longer.

"Keisuke, seriously. I always think this, but even though I'm happy you're introducing me, can you stop using my last name with '-san' added? It sounds like you're introducing me to your parents or something."

"Don't laugh. I'm still not used to introducing you to people."

"Yeah, yeah. I've gotten used to it though."

Kobayashi-san playfully patted Shinjo's back, making him laugh shyly.

Apparently, they address each other by their first names, so they must have a very good relationship. Wait, wasn't Shinjo trying to confess to Ayase-san or something...?

I briefly met his gaze. His eyes narrowed, and he rose to his feet, leaning in to whisper to me.

"It's been over half a year since then, man," he said with a hint of annoyance.

Looks like he cottoned on to what I was thinking. By "since then," he probably meant the time when Shinjo had confessed his feelings for Ayase-san. *Am I that easy to read?*

"Ah, no, my bad. I didn't mean it like that."

My reply came out as a quiet, awkward mumble. I regretted thinking about something so rude, especially since he was now dating someone else.

"Hey, are you two having secret guy talk? Very suspicious."

Kobayashi-san playfully nudged Shinjo, pretending to pout.

"It's nothing, really."

"Very suspicious."

The pair of them started to playfully tease each other. Yoshida and I exchanged glances and decided to make a quick exit.

Going off what Yoshida suggested, since he'd watched games like this before, we settled into seats near the middle of the first base side. I shot Ayase-san a quick message to let her know where we were. Yoshida headed down to the concourse to check on Makihara-san.

*Wow, has it really been half a year? Time flies.*

That much time had passed since Shinjo confessed his feelings for Ayase-san to me. But should I say it's "only" half a year or "already" half a year?

I believe he was genuine about his feelings back then. But within those six months, he found someone new and was laughing with her like that. To be fair, there's no rule saying you have to continue harboring feelings for someone who rejected you.

It did get me thinking, though. People's hearts are fickle. Like a wound healing over time or like an apple eventually falling from a tree, feelings change organically. It's neither good nor bad.

Shinjo's feelings probably didn't change overnight. At first, there might've been a time when he couldn't forget her. But as the days went by, new encounters might have come along.

People's hearts change with the passage of time and changes in the world around them.

If that's the case...

I took a slow, deep breath.

...Could she, my biological mother, have felt the same way?

I have no intention of sympathizing with her. Shinjo's story revolves around being rejected, whereas what that person did was cheating. They're totally different. I won't defend deceitful actions, period.

But maybe, in a lengthy marriage, small cracks that were invisible at first slowly grow larger and eventually become huge fissures that tear people's hearts apart.

And if that's the case—

"Asamura, heat getting to you?"

My body jolted in surprise as I heard the voice. Yoshida and Makihara-san were looking at me with concern.

Seems like they managed to find each other without any issues.

I felt a sticky droplet on my cheek, and only then realized I'd been clenching my fist tightly and sweating profusely.

"...No, I'm fine."

"Don't push yourself, man. Here."

He handed me a sports drink as he sat down behind me. It was cold.

"Narasaka-san got those for everyone," Makihara-san, who was sitting next to Yoshida, said.

That means Ayase-san... isn't here yet.

"If you're looking for Ayase-san, she's still with Narasaka-san."

"Ah, I see."

It'd been a while, so they must've had a lot to catch up on.

"But Narasaka-san... I mean, she's really something, isn't she?" I commented as I twisted the bottle cap off.

"Absolutely," agreed Yoshida, "I'd heard the rumors, but the way she handles things is seriously master-level. It's kinda scary. Don't ya think, Yuka?"

*Hold on just a minute, Yoshida. I never said she was scary.*

Makihara-san gave him a wry smile, saying, "Maybe."

Not long after, Class Rep and Satou-san showed up, followed by Ayase-san a little later. Since Class Rep and the others had left a seat open beside me, Ayase-san sat down in it. It looked like Narasaka-san and her group were seated a little ways away, around where Shinjo was sitting.

Narasaka-san and a few other students carried what looked like cooler bags. Those must be the sports drinks they'd brought. And there were so many of them.

Ayase-san leaned over and peered into my face.

"...Is something wrong?"

I was surprised. Yoshida hadn't noticed, but she had.

"I'm fine," I lied.

I didn't mention the unsettling thought I had earlier. The hypothesis that no matter how close a couple is, they will eventually break up.

Yoshida and Makihara-san are dating. So are Shinjo and Kobayashi-san. And Ayase-san and I, too.

Nobody becomes a couple intending to break up. Yet if people's feelings change, is there no way to resist it?

The game started as a pitcher's duel, with both teams holding the score at zero for the first two innings.

"They're off to a good start," Yoshida commented from behind me.

I turned my head and glanced back.

"Oh really?"

"Jyouryoku Academy is a regular in the district's top four and has a rich history of being in the Koshien, so they're a strong team."

Yoshida, a regular sports enthusiast, seemed to know a lot about high school baseball too.

"So they have experience in Koshien, huh...?"

Just hearing that made them sound like a tough opponent. I guess that's the power of reputation?

"Kinda like how you brace yourself when you hear a best-selling author's got a new book out?"

"Not sure about your analogy there, Asamura."

"R-really?"

"And get this, they've got players now who are expected to go pro. What were their names again...? Can't remember. But the general consensus is Jyouryoku's pretty much expected to win."

"Reallyyy? Must be frustrating to hear that even before the match even starts," Makihara-san said with genuine frustration.

"Well, Suisei High rarely advances past the top sixteen."

Still, they were putting up a good fight so far.

"It's probably because of our pitcher, right? Jyouryoku's one is good, but so is ours."

Yoshida added that it might be thanks to our catcher. *So, you mean because of Maru?*

Not knowing much about baseball, I didn't know if I should take Yoshida's word for it. But even from where I sat, it was clear Maru was going all out.

From our infield seats near home base, although distant, I could make out the players' expressions—well, not in much detail, to be fair. Catchers wear masks, but I could see Maru actively giving instructions to his teammates.

Every move he made was precise, and you could feel the determination as he chased the ball. He took off his mask to chase a high foul ball, running full tilt towards first base—right in front of where we were sitting. He slid on the ground and stretched out his mitt, trying to make the catch... But sadly couldn't grab it and bit his lip in frustration.

Watching Maru play his heart out and directing his teammates, I was honestly a bit surprised. When we were in the same class until last year, he always seemed pretty laid-back, like the kind of guy who wouldn't bother with unnecessary stuff. Yet on the field, his face was intense, giving no hint of resignation, even against a stronger team. Even his attempts to catch fouls spoke volumes about his dedication.

From what Yoshida said, Suisei High didn't usually make it to the top ranks. So, in regional qualifiers, we're kind of treated like underdogs.

Going just by the odds, they're opponents we couldn't beat. Regardless of hope or cheering, it felt like a game where we were pretty much set up to lose. Yet, here we were, with the game locked at zero all.

The atmosphere was electric, as cheers from both sides rose. Members of Suisei High's school brass band were set up on the side closest to our outfield. Around them were members of the cheering squad dressed in school uniforms and cheerleaders. Close by, there were also players who didn't quite make it onto the bench.

There was, of course, the same thing on the opposite side of the field, with a cheer squad for Jyouryoku Academy there. Their setup was pretty much the same as ours, but the most notable difference was the sheer number of players who didn't make it onto the bench. As you'd expect from a team that's regularly in the top four, there were almost a hundred of them in uniforms.

"But in terms of the number of supporters, it looks like we're about even, aren't we?" I said, scanning the spectators.

Yoshida chimed in, offering an explanation. He said winning a fourth round match was a given for them, so their supporters weren't out in full force. For us, though, a win would mean a rare spot in the top sixteen, so our side was already very excited. That difference in motivation balanced out the number of attendees.

"Makes sense."

"You know, it's like, when you beat someone who everyone thinks is gonna win, it feels so darn good~" Class Rep said.

"Pretty much, yeah. We really need Maru to step up," Yoshida said.

Makihara-san nodded in agreement, saying, "He really needs to give it his all."

After getting through the top of the third inning, Suisei High finally got a hit in the bottom half. They bunted it, making it one out and a runner on second base.

Then it was Maru's turn at the plate. He swung the bat with his big body a couple of times before stepping into the batter's box. Being right-handed, his expression was clearly visible from the first base side.

"MARUUU! YOU DO CAN ITTT! KNOCK THEM DOWNNN!"

Just then, a particularly loud cheer rang out.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Who was *that*?

"M-Maaya!?"

*Huh?* I followed Ayase-san's gaze and saw a girl shouting fervently near where I'd met up with Shinjo. Oh, she sat down. She must've stood up in her enthusiasm and just realized it. She quickly bowed apologetically to those behind her.

"Narasaka-san really can get heated, can't she?" Class Rep said, sounding surprised.

"That true?" I whispered to Ayase-san next to me.

"I-I don't know. It's my first time seeing her like this too," she whispered back.

Actually, I do remember seeing her get pretty excited when she came over to play video games with Ayase-san...

“Three balls, one strike. It’s a hitter’s count,” Yoshida mumbled.

Say what? I was about to ask when the distinct metallic ping of a high school baseball bat hitting a ball rang out. The crowd erupted in excitement as Maru’s hit shot between first and second base, rolling out into the outfield.

By the time the right fielder caught up to the ball, the runner on second base had rounded third and was sprinting for home. The outfielder, rather than attempting a risky throw to home, calmly tossed the ball to the second baseman.

Our runner dashed past home plate. One point!

The brass band played, and the cheering squad hugged each other in joy.

“They didn’t want to make the situation worse with a bad throw... They’re quite level-headed.”

“You know, Yoshida... you could be a commentator.”

“Leave it to me. I’ve never missed reading a baseball manga.”

So, manga was his source? Still, having Yoshida beside someone like me, who didn’t know jack shit was invaluable. I was glad to have invited him.

“We just scored a point, right?” Ayase-san asked.

“Yep. Look, the scoreboard displays it.”

I pointed towards the scoreboard in the outfield, where a [1] shone brightly.

“Oh, yeah.”

“Nice, nice! Keep it up!”

Class Rep was getting fired up.

But, the following Suisei High batters couldn’t maintain the pace. The bottom of the third inning concluded with just that single point, signaling a changeover.

Yoshida commented that the difference between us and Jyouryoku lay in the depth of their players.

Jyouryoku Academy boasted over a hundred members in their club, so they could pick the best talent from a vast pool of players. And the quality of those players was undeniably superior to Suisei High, which had less than half that number to pick from.

As the innings progressed, this difference became more apparent.

All the same, the score remained close until the fourth inning. The single point earned by Maru was soon tied in the next inning, it was a seesaw game where one side would score a point and the other would take it back straight after.

The balance shifted in the top of the fifth inning. Suisei High's starting pitcher lost control of his pitches. He threw ball after ball, and Maru rushed to the mound to pat his shoulder, offering some words of encouragement. The pitcher nodded several times, but even from a distance, his face looked visibly pale.

"They might need to swap him out," Yoshida murmured.

He said it was probably fatigue affecting the pitcher's accuracy. But swapping out a pitcher might make a lot of sense for a team with a deep roster. For us, though, Yoshida said it doubtful whether Suisei High's second-string pitcher could hold back Jyouryoku.

Without making a change, Suisei High found themselves with bases loaded due to walks.

"Ah, they're making a change after all."

As Yoshida said, a player came off the bench and ran to the umpire to tell him something. In high school baseball, it seemed coaches weren't allowed to leave the bench, so players relayed instructions.

As the pitcher left the mound with his shoulders slumped, Maru whispered something into his ear. I noticed him wiping his eyes with his sleeve several times, and it made my chest hurt to see the tear-streaked face of the young player as he was pulled back to the bench. If they were to lose, his high school baseball memories would be of him walking off the mound.

Of course, the same could be said for the opposing team—such is the nature of sports, where one team's glorious victory spells another's bitter defeat. And so, we were left to chew on Yoshida's words that the depth of the players would decide the game.

The new pitcher who replaced the starter struggled even more with control.

After three balls in a row, it made it a batter's count, which means the batter is at an advantage (as explained by Yoshida).

The pitcher tried to nab a strike with a softer pitch, which the left-handed batter slammed towards right field. Groans rose up from Suisei High's stands. The ball sped along the first-base line and rolled deep into right field. By the time the fielder reached it, all the runners had scored, resulting in a three-run double.

“Ahhh.”

Both Class Rep and Satou-san let out cries of disappointment.

I glanced at the scoreboard—[7-3].

“A four-point difference, huh...”

It was frustrating, but they were undeniably strong. They seized momentum the moment we showed any sign of weakness.

It took a while, but they finally got the third out. As our players trudged back to the bench with downcast faces, Maru yelled something at them, but with the brass band playing and the crowd's cheers, it was impossible to catch what he said. Still, the players shook their heads, as if to shake off their doubts.

Before sitting down on the bench, Maru paused and looked back, glaring at the scoreboard.

“Maru...”

The bottom half of the inning began with Maru leading off. With no runners on base, Maru approached the plate. Shouts of encouragement flew at his back.

“MAAAARU! DO YOUR BEST!”

It was Narasaka-san's voice. Her loud, clear shouting pierced through a brief lull in the brass band's playing. It was impressively loud.

“Man, our cheer captain's got some serious pipes on her...” Yoshida said in amazement.

It went to show she was very clearly the leader of the Narasaka cheering squad.

“On three!” I heard Class Rep say behind me—

“ “ “MARU-SAAAAN! DO YOUR BESTTT!” ” ”

Class Rep, Satou-san, and Makihara-san all cheered in unison.

He must have heard it, because Maru looked back, his eyes scanning the stands for the source of the voices. Our eyes met—or at least, I thought they did. Was that... a grin on his face? Maru gave a confident thumbs-up before stepping into the batter's box.

Taking his stance, Maru locked eyes with the opposing school's ace pitcher. In that moment, his usually gentle gaze blazed with determination. That look was captivating. I was so wrapped up in watching Maru that I even forgot to breathe.

The pitcher, from atop the mound, began his wind-up, a sequence known as the wind-up motion, swinging his arm up high. With a dramatic leg lift and a backward lean, he channeled all his energy into his fingertips and unleashed the pitch. To my untrained eye, it looked incredibly fast. If I were faced with a pitch like that at a batting center, I doubt I could even graze it with a swing.

I followed the ball with my eyes all the way to Maru. It must've been just a split second, but with how zeroed in I was, it felt like everything was in slow motion. Maru drew his bat back and swung it with all his might at the ball hurtling towards his chest. A satisfying sound echoed out.

The ball arced through the air, landing just past the center fielder with a *thud*.

With powerful strides, Maru took off running. He dashed past first base and made it second before the ball was thrown back in. A double!

Suisei High's cheer squad went ballistic.

“Amazing, amazing!”

“He did it!”

I felt a light tap on my hip. Turning, I was met with Ayase-san's smiling face.

“That was great, wasn't it?”

“Yeah...”

I dropped back into my seat. I didn't even realize I had jumped up.

On second base, Maru struck a victory pose. That only fired up the crowd and cheering squad even more.

While they managed to score a point that inning, Suisei High gave up another in the top of the seventh. The pitcher they had brought in couldn't keep the lead, and by then Suisei High simply didn't have the energy to come back.

In the end, they lost eight-four to Jyouryoku Academy.

The umpire signaled the end of the game, and the last batter, who struck out, dropped to his knees in despair.

The opposing side's stands were buzzing like a poked beehive.

The players lined up, exchanged bows, and started to leave the field. I saw Maru shedding tears of frustration along with his teammates, showing just how much the loss hurt.

The players formed a single line and came over to their supporters. They offered a deep bow of gratitude to the cheering squad, the brass band, the cheerleading team, the benched players, and their families who'd come out to support them. Applause rose up in response.

"Maaya..."

Following where Ayase-san was looking, I saw Narasaka-san. She'd rushed down to the front row and was just standing still, taking in the scene of the departing players. Though she'd cheered so loudly earlier, now she just silently stared without uttering a word. She seemed frustrated too, biting her lip. But that look vanished in an instant.

Turning towards the Narasaka cheering squad, she shouted, "Everyone! Let's applaud their hard-fought effort! Ready? One, two, three!"

In response, shouts of "You did great!" and "Well done!" filled the air. With everyone cheering behind her, Narasaka-san joined in, shouting "Great job!" and giving the players a round of applause.

"It was an awesome game."

Yoshida stood up and started clapping. Inspired, Makihara-san and others joined in. *I guess this is what they call a standing ovation.*

"It was."

I stood up too and clapped along with them.

We didn't stop clapping until every single player had left the field.

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We parted ways with everyone at the station.

Ayase-san and I walked side by side on our way back to our flat.

The sun sets around 7 pm this time of year. Even though it was starting to dip behind the buildings, the sky was still fairly blue and it was still warm out. Still, the thick, almost suffocating air felt a bit lighter. Walking like this wasn't too uncomfortable.

But it seemed like I'd moved around more than I realized. I felt like that kind of sluggishness you get after getting out of a swimming pool.

“Are you tired?”

Ayase-san peered into my face as she walked beside me.

“Ah, no, not really... Well, maybe a bit.”

Ayase-san chuckled.

“Did I say something weird?”

“No, you didn’t. I just thought you weren’t aware of it.”

*Huh?... What does that mean?*

Ayase-san interlocked her fingers and stretched her arms above her head. Her slender, beautiful arms stretched towards the sky, her eyes half-closing as they were hidden by them. A little, “Nhh!” leaked out.

When she let her arms fall, her head drooped forward.

“Haah.”

“You seem pretty tired yourself.”

“Yeah. I guess I’m a bit tired.”

The nearest station to the stadium is just four stops from Shibuya, about a ten minute train ride. It’s not that far, but spending almost the entire day there would understandably wear *anyone* out.

We turned off the main street into a side alley. After rounding a corner into a residential area, the crowd of people thinned out. When we passed a lush green park, a refreshing breeze blew, and I couldn't help taking a deep breath. How nice. Ayase-san's long, flowing hair danced in the twilight breeze.

"Oh, by the way..."

Ayase-san looked at me curiously with a, "Hm?"

"Before we left the stadium, you went somewhere with Narasaka-san, didn't you?"

Narasaka-san's group was pretty big, and they said they were going to have an after-party. So after helping them clean up, our group left the stadium first. But, just before we left, it looked like Ayase-san and Narasaka-san went off somewhere together.

"Ah, yeah, for a little bit. It's not really my business and it's private, so can we not talk about it?"

"Ah... Got it."

If it wasn't Ayase-san's business, it must've involved Narasaka-san or someone in Narasaka-san's group. If she's saying it's private, I probably shouldn't poke my nose in any further. Courtesy is important even among close friends.<sup>1</sup>

Being in a relationship doesn't mean you have to share every single thing. But, I can't help being curious.

At the edge of the park, a father and son were playing catch. The father looked completely spent, suggesting they wrap up, but the boy—who looked about elementary school age—energetically continued throwing the ball, refusing to stop. The boy was on summer break, but the father, presumably coming home from work given it was a weekday, must be exhausted.

*Kudos to him.*

"Did you ever do that with Taichi-san?" Ayase-san asked.

Apparently, she'd been watching them too.

"Playing catch?"

She nodded.

"Nah, I've always been more of a stay-at-home-and-read kind of kid."

And I can't remember a time when my old man made it home this early in the evening. He was always tied up with work. In a way, maybe his long hours led to my biological mother cheating on him.

Since marrying Akiko-san, sometimes he comes home really early. There were moments when, after taking a little detour on my way home, I'd find him already there, happily eating dinner with Akiko-san just before she headed off to work. Maybe that's him trying to learn from past mistakes or something.

"My old man occasionally watches sports on TV. As for me, I've never really been into any."

"Fair enough. But you seemed to know more about baseball than I did."

"Maybe. My knowledge of baseball mainly comes from manga and novels, to be honest. There are fewer baseball mangas these days, or so I've heard. I might know a little more about soccer."

"Oh really?"

"Having Yoshida around was a lifesaver. Whenever I didn't understand something, I could ask him straight away."

Oh right, Ayase-san mentioned it was her first time watching a baseball game, didn't she?

"How was it for you, Ayase-san? Did you enjoy it?"

She paused for a second to consider my question.

"Yeah. It was fun. It's nice to see people trying their hardest. Plus, some moments had me on the edge of my seat."

"Well, it did kind of get a bit one-sided after a while."

"How about you, Asamura-kun?"

"I guess I enjoyed it. And also..." I thought back to the game. "Seeing Maru like that was surprising. Almost like he was a completely different person."

Ayase-san nodded in agreement.

"I see. So you've never seen Maru like that before either. I've met him a few times when I was with you, but I didn't know he had that side to him."

“Yeah, I get that. He always seems so composed. I s’pose it just goes to show how strong the other team was. It was rare seeing Maru so desperate. I got so caught up watching him that I got carried away too. Thinking about it now, I probably looked pretty stupid.”

It was something I said without much thought behind it, but—

“Does that mean you thought Maru looked stupid too?”

I was thrown for a loop by her question.

Images of Maru and his team, fighting desperately against odds stacked against them, flashed through my mind. Did I ever think they looked stupid or uncool?

“No, not at all. Not one bit.”

“So, if you were so into cheering him on, Asamura-kun, you probably didn’t look stupid either, wouldn’t you say?”

The sound of Ayase-san’s gentle encouragement resonated with the evening breeze sweeping through the park. The trees swayed, sending the soft rustling of leaves to my ears. It soothed my restless mind and brought back some peace.

“It’s just... I don’t know. I never saw myself getting so carried away like that.”

“Maybe it’s not that you think you looked uncool, but more like you’re just feeling a bit embarrassed?”

She clenched and unclenched her hand.

“I want to hold hands. That okay?”

It caught me off guard, and I couldn’t help looking down at my own hand. I suddenly became conscious of my sweaty palms. They felt clammier than usual. I hesitated, wondering what to do...

“Mm.”

Ayase-san firmly reached out her hand to me. At this point, there was no way I could back out.

I gently took hold of her hand.

We let our hands drop between us.

We'd stopped walking without realizing it, so we started moving forward again. Ayase-san chatted to me sporadically as we walked.

"You know, seeing you cheering your heart out like that, Asamura-kun—" Our intertwined hands swayed in rhythm. "I thought—you looked really cool."

We walked slowly, matching our steps as we made our way home.

The warmth from my hand melded with hers, becoming a singular heat that pulsed between us.

"It's a shame they lost, don't you think?"

"Yeah."

"I wonder what Maru-kun will do now. Does losing mean he can't go pro?"

"I'm not sure... But I think even if they win, only a select few ever become professional players."

"I don't really know much about baseball, but I kinda got the sense Maru-kun was leading that team. The other players always seemed to be looking to him."

"They were?"

"Maru-kun was always the last one to come out onto the field and the last one to go back in, right?"

Thinking about what she said, I realized she was right. Honestly, I wasn't really paying attention, so I don't remember everything. My most vivid memory is when Jyouryoku hit a double, sweeping the bases and suddenly gaining three points.

After giving the pitcher a pep talk and shouting some rallying words to the rest of his team, I definitely saw Maru walking behind everyone as he slowly made his way back to the bench.

I remember Maru once saying, "The catcher is the command tower of the team." The catcher is the only position that can see the faces of all their team members during a game. Whether coming out onto the field or going back in, Maru must always be looking out for the entire team.

Before he sat back down on the bench, Maru glanced up at the scoreboard for a second. I distinctly remember the look on his face.

“Also, while the others were waiting for Maru-kun, they were always watching him. Both when he came out and when he went back in.”

“You’re really observant.”

Ayase-san might be much better at watching sports than I am. Since I wasn’t really paying much attention, I’m not sure if what she said was true. But it probably was.

“So, it’s like Maru was looking out for all the players, and the others were keeping an eye on Maru too, is that right?”

“I think they were relying on him. I mean, um... I think the other players could see Maru-kun’s seriousness and thought he looked cool.”

What she said made me remember something I thought during the sports festival. Expecting something “impressive” at a high school sports festival just isn’t right. And what does “cool” even mean in that context?<sup>2</sup>

Being impressive means being cool. It’s probably just that simple.

So, by that logic, are players who lose a game *uncool*?

I opened my free hand, closed it, then clenched it tight.

While watching the game, I found myself unconsciously clenching my fists. I even stood up without realizing it. The intensity and passion Maru brought to the game were so contagious that I was definitely swept up in it.

*“I think the other players could see Maru-kun’s seriousness and thought he looked cool.”* That’s what Ayase-san said.

“I mean, I think everyone was taking it seriously, even the opposing players, but he had a way of getting that across and making it look cool, you know? Maybe when people saw that, they felt they could rely on him. Whether that’s normal or not, I don’t know, but he definitely led the entire team by showing that side of him.”

It was like Maru’s passion for baseball, in the way he played, even rubbed off on Ayase-san—someone who wasn’t interested in the sport.

“So, I’m sure there are plenty of other people who found him cool too. I mean, seeing someone so passionately engrossed in something like that, it’s hard not to find them cool. And I’m sure many others felt the same. In fact, I know some did.”

She added, “That’s a secret, though.”

She squeezed our intertwined hands and looked deep into my eyes.

“I don’t think it was all for nothing. I think it probably reached someone.”

“I hope so.”

Compared to someone like me—who’s resigned to staying in my comfort zone—Maru-kun had definitely taken a step towards something.

Before I knew it, the sky had turned a shade of crimson.

Looking at Ayase-san’s side profile bathed in the evening glow, I found myself uncharacteristically thinking, “I wish I could look cool in her eyes.”

Because I’m always hesitating, afraid to take a step forward.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a Japanese proverb that emphasizes the importance of maintaining politeness and good manners even in close or familiar relationships. Politeness is a central pillar of Japanese society, so if you ever visit here, keep that in mind.

<sup>2</sup> I’m not sure why the author is attributing these to Yuuta here, as it was Saki who thought it in her PoV. He might’ve thought the same, but it just wasn’t mentioned in the story.

## July 22nd (Thursday) — Ayase Saki

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I was sitting beside Asamura-kun, when I noticed him suddenly stand up out of the corner of my eye.

He loudly shouted his best friend's name.

Just then, I heard a metallic *clang*. I quickly looked back at the green field.

*Where's the ball? There!*

The ball, which had blended in with the blue sky and white clouds, finally came into view as it bounced onto the grass.

It was rolling through the middle of the fan-shaped outer field while an opposing player frantically chased after it.

Maru-kun, who'd already started running, was sprinting on the white line drawn in the shape of a diamond, and reached the second corner.

*A hit? That's called a hit, right?*

I turned my head towards Asamura-kun, who was probably happy. To my surprise, he was still standing, shouting loudly.

“He did it!”

It was an expression and gesture I'd never seen him make before. He swung his fist in sheer joy.

Watching him, a smile crept up on my face. It felt contagious. Good for him.

I lightly tapped his hip. He turned around in surprise.



“That was great, wasn’t it?” I said with a smile.

Asamura-kun looked surprised for a second before quickly sitting back down. Apparently, he hadn’t even realized he’d stood up.

The game was nearing its end, and although Maru-kun had made a hit (apparently called a double), the subsequent players couldn’t score. They only managed to get one point back.

By now, they were already three points behind.

And, in the next inning, they let the opposing team score another point, making the gap even wider.

The game ended like that.

Eight to four. Suisei High lost.

The players lined up and then walked from the bench to the stands, bowing their heads in gratitude.

Maaya took the lead, and we all stood up to applaud their efforts.

My smartphone buzzed.

**Maaya:**【After cleaning up, can you step out for a bit?】

When I looked up, I saw Maaya waving to me from the front of the stands.

I put away the drink I’d opened, told Asamura-kun and the others that I’d be back shortly and headed to the concourse.

I met up with Maaya. It seemed that her group had also finished cleaning up.

“Good work today everyone~! Thank you!”

Maaya waited for a response, then said, “We’re having a little get-together near the station. Those who want to join, head to the restaurant~. If you have other plans, feel free to leave!”

“Got it,” everyone replied.

“You guys are having a ‘thank you’ party?”

“Well, we came out during summer break, so it’d be nice to chat a little, dontcha think?”

“Makes sense.”

“So, like, I was thinking of surprising Maru-kun and the others in the hallway by the players’ locker room. Wanna come with, Saki?”

I was thrown off by Maaya’s request. She was holding a bouquet of flowers.

Isn’t that what they call ambushing someone? Isn’t that annoying? Don’t they have post-march meetings and their own get-togethers after club activities?

“It’s okay, I’ve already talked to the club. I just wanna hand them a gift on behalf of all of us,” she said, lifting up the bouquet to show me.

Ah okay, so she’s the representative of the Maaya cheering squad.

“Then shouldn’t you have invited Asamura-kun and the others too?”

I felt that way, but Maaya vaguely responded with, “Well, y’know,” implying that she preferred it to be just me.

“Please! I just wanna hand this over and say a few words!”

I decided to go along with it, thinking it wouldn’t take too long anyway. If it drags on, I’ll just send a message. With that in mind, I followed behind Maaya. I’m not super close with Maru-kun, though. I wonder if it’ll be okay. I hope it won’t be awkward.

There were stairs leading down to the first floor not far from the concourse, and at the bottom was a hallway leading to the players’ changing rooms. We decided to wait near the exit, thinking that we might get in the way if we got too close.

Soon after, the players began to emerge. Maaya being Maaya, she apparently knew a lot of guys in the baseball club. As she passed by, she exchanged greetings and “Well done’s” with them. Some nicely offered, “Want me to grab Maru for you?” but Maaya politely declined, saying that we were already waiting for him.

Maru-kun was the last to come out. He kept looking back into the locker room, as if checking on something, then bowed to those inside and stepped out. He walked with his head slightly down.

When he noticed us, a subtle smile played at the corners of his mouth.

“Great job today,” Maaya said, handing him the bouquet.

Maru-kun’s eyes went wide in surprise as he accepted the flowers.

“Sorry.”

“It’s from everyone who came to support you. For the entire baseball team. We figured you should receive it since you’re captain.”

“Ah.”

Maru-kun admired the bouquet while standing to the side of the hallway so as not to be in the way.

Taking a deep breath, he paused for a moment before finally speaking.

“Well... they were strong,” he said, then paused again for a second. “They were just too good. Sorry to disappoint even though you all came to support us.”

He gave us a wry smile, but I could tell from his swollen, reddened eyes that he’d been crying a lot before coming out. Yet, Maru-kun always made it a point to be the last to leave, looking out for everyone else first.

Maaya stepped forward, trying to peer into Maru’s downcast face.

“Hey, we came to support you on our own, you hear? You don’t have to worry about that. Yep, it was fun to watch. I’m totally satisfied!”

She tried to make it sound cheerful, but I could tell her voice was higher than usual.

“I... also had fun. It was my first time watching a baseball match.”

“See, see. If Saki says so, then it *must* be true. If it’s just coming from me, you might think I’m just blowing smoke!”

“Not wrong.”

“Heeey! That’s mean! You’re really gonna say that? Well, whatever, if *you’d* hit eight balls in four tries, we would’ve won, right? Boo!”

“Hey now, how the heck am I supposed to get more hits than at-bats?”

“Use two balls! And if you have two pairs of hands and feet, it’s physically possible!”

“You mad scientist. Narasaka, we seriously need to discuss what the word ‘physical’ actually means one day.”

“Bring it on!”

*They're really close, huh?* I thought to myself as I watched their playful banter. *When did these two become such good friends?*

Maru-kun cracked a smile watching Maaya puff out her chest and act all high and mighty. But a second later, that grin contorted into a grimace.

“*Haha... you’re really something...*”

After glancing up at the ceiling as if he was trying to hold something back, Maru-kun suddenly looked my way.

“Hey, Ayase.”

“What?”

“How did Asamura look?”

“Huh, Asamura-kun?”

“You were watching with him, weren’t you?”

“Um...”

Well, that’s... we were together, but...

“Maru-kun, you’ve been saying for a while that you wanted Asamura-kun to watch you play at least once, haven’t you?”

He has? But if that’s the case, then he should’ve just invited him directly.

“If I only invited Asamura, he’s the type who’d just come and watch on his own.”

“And that’s a problem?”

“Well, yeah... I wanted him to watch, but I also wanted someone to watch him watching me.”

*So someone watching Asamura-kun, who was watching Maru-kun?*

I tilted my head, not really getting it.

“Hmm, it’s hard to explain,” Maru-kun said, his gaze wandering to an open window on the side of the concourse.

Summer spread out under the sunlight, accompanied by the sound of cicadas.

“Do you know what the WBC is, Ayase?”

“I don’t,” I answered honestly and was met with a wry smile.

I mean, I’ve never really been interested in sports. I haven’t even watched the Olympics.

“It’s short for World Baseball Classic. It’s basically a competition to determine who the best baseball team in the world is.”

“The world... Umm, so it’s a big baseball game, is that right?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

Maru-kun told me a story from his childhood.

It was a little after the end of analog TV broadcasting, around the time LCD TVs became widespread. That made HD broadcasts on big flatscreens become accessible to everyone. That summer, a big flatscreen came to Maru-kun’s house, and since he was already an anime fan, he became glued to the TV.

Then, that autumn, the WBC was held.

His entire family would watch the games together, and while Maru-kun was initially frustrated because he couldn’t watch his anime, he quickly became captivated by baseball.

The sight of pro players competing on the world stage left a lasting impression on young Maru. Running around the field, pitching, and hitting. Not to mention the breathtaking pitching duels and exciting slugfests. Sadly, Japan couldn’t clinch the title that year, but the sight of players chasing that small white ball profoundly influenced him.

It was thrilling to watch. It made his hands sweaty and his heart race. The excitement he felt through the screen was incomparable to any other form of entertainment, and young Maru began to dream of making others feel the same exhilaration through baseball.

“So you were thinking about that while playing baseball...”

“Not really.”

I couldn’t help letting out a, “Huh?” So he wasn’t thinking about that?

“I continued playing baseball because I loved it, but it wasn’t like I was always thinking about that while playing. As a kid, maybe, but the better I became, the more I felt the gap between pro players and me. I began to think it might be impossible for me. So, over time, I stopped thinking about it.”

“I... see.”

All three of us fell into silence for a moment.

“So, yeah. After a lot of things happened, I recently remembered why I started in the first place. Well, I guess it was probably because of the parent-teacher interviews.”

I wondered why he was bringing up the past, but it turned out Maru-kun had started thinking about his own future aspirations.

Being a third-year high school student, everyone starts thinking about their future.

“I asked Asamura something a while ago. About what someone needs to be a pro athlete.”

“Umm... talent?”

Maru-kun chuckled.

“You two... you really are two peas in a pod.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ah, well, that’s another story. Anyway, Ayase, what do *you* think talent is?”

“The ability necessary to perform a certain profession,” I answered immediately.

Maru-kun nodded deeply.

It’s a common misconception, but the term “talent” doesn’t inherently mean an ability derived from genes or birth. I once heard from Mom that when talking about talents you’re born with, we often use the term “innate” or “natural” before it. That means if we have to use qualifiers like that, the word “talent” itself isn’t necessarily about being born with it.

That’s a perspective you’d expect from my Mom, who’d learned the skills of bartending out of necessity. The ability necessary to perform a certain profession.

Mom also said some professions might heavily rely on genetic abilities. Though, I’m not sure how genes would influence bartending skills, to be honest.

“Solid answer. But it’s also not the complete answer. I used to think the same way. That’s why I was always conscious of the skill gap between me and pro players.”

“Yeah, I get you.”

Even though I love cooking, I’ve never been inclined to pursue a career as a chef. I just don’t think I’ve got the chops for it. Well, I also don’t really have the drive to get better either. If it tastes good to me, that’s all that matters.

So, just like my cooking, Maru-kun continued with baseball simply because he loved it?

“But I started thinking there’s more to it than just that. Like I told Asamura, I reckon for pros, it’s all about if they can bring in the big bucks with their performance.”

Maaya chose that moment to jump in.

“So it’s like, whether people think it’s worth paying to watch?”

“Exactly. That’s it. That’s why scouts notice you, and how you gain fans. It’s that ‘star quality.’ Being good is essential, but it’s not the only thing.”

“Oh, Maru, always with the complicated stuff.”

“It’s a complex topic. And, as I’ve also told Asamura, I’m not confident that, beyond my technique, my play has any appeal to the audience.”

As Maru finished speaking, it finally clicked for me what he was expecting from me.

“In essence, you wanted someone to watch you play and give feedback?”

Maru-kun nodded.

“Not feedback from every single spectator, obviously. If I could do that, my play would have already caught someone’s eye.”

Though, he probably held some hope for that too.

“But, you know, I just wanted to play in a way that would move my friend’s heart. This is my last year in high school, after all. I didn’t want to have any regrets about the time and effort I poured into baseball,” Maru-kun said quietly, before turning to me.

“So how did he look?”

“Yeah... umm...”

There wasn’t any point in lying, and I didn’t want to either, so I just told him what I saw Asamura-kun do. About how Asamura-kun, who’d been watching quietly, had spontaneously stood up and cheered when Maru-kun made a hit. About the frustration on his face when the last out was made. That it was my first time seeing him make expressions like that.

Maru-kun listened in silence until the end, then replied, “Gotcha.”

“I really wanted to win and show it off to him, y’know? Man, I feel so pathetic.”

“It’s okay! You did your best!” Maaya said with a pout.

“Look, in a competition, just ‘doing your best’ doesn’t really mean much. It’s not a contest of who tried harder.”

“Hmph.”

Maru-kun shrugged at the frustrated face Maaya was making. I got what he was saying. It’s not about who tried the hardest. But then—

“But, you said that when you were a kid, you watched the... WBC was it? Japan didn’t win, right?”

“Right, they came third... I think.”

“So why did you start playing baseball after watching that?”

Maru-kun looked stumped by that.

“Well... I was moved by how hard they tried to win, I guess...”

“Then, if Asamura-kun was moved by your performance, isn’t that worth something? Maybe you shouldn’t be so hard on yourself. Unless... you weren’t really trying your hardest?”

“I was!”

Maru-kun’s voice unintentionally rose in his defense, and he snapped his mouth shut quickly.

Maaya gave his broad back a playful pat.

From down the hallway, I heard his teammates calling out, “Oiii, Maru.” Looks like we’d chatted for a bit too long.

“We should probably head back now.”

“O-oh... Thanks for the bouquet, Narasaka.”

“Not good enough!”

“Huh?”

“Such a common, formal ‘thank you’ is boringgg! Do it again! C’mom, think of something! Like calling me ‘Princess Maaya’ or ‘Lady Maaya’!”

“Wha-! You idiot.”

With a look of disbelief, Maru-kun abruptly turned away and started walking towards his teammates.

“How mean! Isn’t that mean?”

“I said I was grateful... Maaya.”

With that, he strode away.

“Alright, let’s head back too. Let’s go... Maaya?”

“D-don’t look at me!”

For some reason, Maaya’s face was beet red, and she was looking off into the distance. She seemed frozen in place.

...But we’re keeping Asamura-kun and the others waiting.



Once Maru-kun's figure disappeared out of sight, only Maaya and I were left in the narrow first-floor hallway.

A lukewarm breeze blew in through the hallway window, which was just a square hole.

“Should we go now?”

“Ah, yeah. Sorry for keeping you waiting,” Maaya said, and we started heading for the stairs leading up to the second-floor hallway.

But Maaya stopped after a few steps. I hurried back to her.

“What’s wrong?”

A tear dropped from her downcast face, making a small, ink-like stain on the gray concrete floor.

“Maaya...?”

I tried to peek at her face, but Maaya buried it in my chest. A muffled sob escaped.

“It’s not fair. It’s really not fair.”

“Maaya.”

I think this is the first time I’ve seen her cry. It wasn’t loud, just a suppressed cry as she continued burying her face in my chest. All I could do was gently stroke her back.

In between her sobs, Maaya told me about how hard Maru-kun had been working for this summer’s tournament. I didn’t know how she knew so much about it, but Maaya told me everything. About how he’d even started running in the early morning on cold winter days. And when they’d met up on a rare day off, and he was so tired that he fell asleep face down in a cafe (So they were meeting up in places like that.) He even sacrificed watching his favorite late-night anime to make sure he got enough sleep, and he stopped going to events.

“Events?”

“He even skipped Comiket! *Maru-kun* did!”

I wasn’t really sure what that was, but it seemed important. Maaya had been so immersed in Maru-kun’s efforts that his loss felt like it was her own.

“But... But, y’know, the one who really wants to cry is him. So, y’know—”

She couldn't cry in front of him, so she'd been holding back. The loud cries of cicadas outside the window seemed to drown out Maaya's quiet sobs.

Clouds hid the sun, dimming the hallway. The light pouring in faded, and the tear stains on the floor faded from view along with it.

"Sakiii..."

"Yes, yes. What is it?"

"Thanks for coming with mee." "

"I get it, I get it."

I continued patting her back, but Maaya's sobs just wouldn't stop.

*Well, this is all I can do anyway.*

To call her my "best friend" might be stretching it, given I hadn't been there for her enough. I hadn't even realized how close Maaya and Maru-kun had become.

"Uh... sob. Sakiii..."

"Mm?"

"He really did try his best, didn't he?"

"...Dummy."

"Uh?"

"What if I said he didn't?"

"Mm... I'd be mad."

"Then it's the same no matter what I say, isn't it? Maru-kun said it himself."

"What did he say?"

This girl... Playing dumb when she's usually way more perceptive than me...

"He said he wanted to play in a way that would impress his friends, right? So, what really matters to Maru-kun is how he looked to his friends, not me. Just like how he wanted to show off to Asamura-kun."

Maaya lifted her head.

*Oh dear, her tears have made all her foundation and makeup run.*

“Here. Wipe your face, wipe your face,” I said, as I pressed a handkerchief to her face.

“Mm...”

“Aren’t you his friend, Maaya?”

“Sniff... Maybe.”

“Then there’s no point in *me* saying, ‘I think he did his best.’ You should tell him as many times as you want. Because that’s genuinely how you saw it, isn’t it?”

I spoke slowly, letting the words sink in, and Maaya nodded again and again with her face buried in the handkerchief.

Yeah, my opinion doesn’t matter.

In any story, side characters have a big impact on the main character, not some random bystanders. I don’t really know Maru-kun that well. In his story, I was nothing more than Background Extra A. I wasn’t someone deeply connected to him.

But—What about Maaya? Did she just get to know him as a classmate and then, by some twist of fate, found out about his situation and began cheering him on?

Or maybe she wanted to be more deeply involved—like, wishing to become a named character in Maru-kun’s story.

—How do you see him?

—It’s something you should tell Maru-kun yourself.

Saying as much to Maaya, I started to wonder who I was *really* talking about here.

The clouds broke, and sunlight returned.

The light streaming in from the window cast a square shape on the floor.

There were no traces of tears left behind.

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After parting ways with everyone at Shibuya station, I was left alone with Asamura-kun.

The sun finally began to tilt towards the western sky, and the blue sky gradually darkened from the east.

I snuck a peek at Asamura-kun's face as we walked down the evening street.

When I asked if he was tired, he thought for a moment and gave me a vague answer, as if unsure if he was or not.

I couldn't suppress a laugh. I mean, there's no way he wouldn't be tired after cheering so passionately.

As we turned into a narrow street, the hustle and bustle of the city faded away. It was replaced by the loud chirping of cicadas.

As we walked through the park, Asamura-kun asked about what happened when I met up with Maaya. But I apologized, telling him it was Maaya's private stuff and I couldn't talk about it.

Asamura-kun didn't press it any further.

It's a quality I really admire about him; he respects other people's privacy. But that doesn't mean he intentionally tries to distance himself from others.

*...Or maybe he does?*

Maybe the Asamura-kun I first met *did* try to keep his distance. I felt the same way back then. Honestly, I think I was the one more inclined to keep people at arm's length though.

Like a solitary island in the sea. Like an impenetrable stone.

I wanted to be strong and have the skills to survive on my own. Asamura-kun seemed to feel the same way.

He didn't give off the same obvious "stay-away" vibe like I did. He had Maru-kun, a close friend, after all.

In my case, I even tried to keep Maaya at a distance. And still, she patiently waited for me. Until I met Asamura-kun and slowly dismantled the thorny cage I'd built around myself.

Little by little, step by step. Maaya was incredibly patient.

That said, she became super close with Maru-kun without me even realizing it. When she goes for something, she throws patience to the wind and *really* goes for it.

“Social butterfly” is a term Asamura-kun often uses to describe Maaya. But if you ask me, I’d say Maaya is just really good at maintaining the right distance with people. She approaches those she’s comfortable with easily, and with someone tricky like me, she gradually bridges the gap.

I’m the total opposite. I’ve always struggled with how close or distant I should be with others. Probably because I’ve been pushing people away ever since I was a kid. So, most people get fed up with my coldness and distance themselves early on. The face of a certain new junior at work flashed up in my mind. At first, they seemed to warm up to me really quickly, but maybe because I felt uncomfortable, it feels like they’ve been keeping their distance lately. Relationships are complicated.

At the edge of the park, I saw a parent and child playing catch.

“Did you ever do that with Taichi-san?”

I was probably inspired to ask him that because we were literally on our way back from watching a baseball game. I hadn’t really intended the question to be that deep.

Asamaru-kun’s response was that he used to spend more time reading than playing sports. I could have guessed that, even if he didn’t tell me. That definitely fits my image of him.

Still, he knows way more about sports than I do. He brushed it off, saying it was just because he read sports novels and manga. It was obvious he knew more about baseball than I did during the baseball match.

When I pointed that out, Asamura-kun called it a novice’s perspective, while also saying he was embarrassed that he’d shouted and gotten really animated when he was cheering.

“I got so caught up watching him that I got carried away too. Thinking about it now, I probably looked pretty stupid.”

*How can you say that? Especially when your friend was so happy about your reaction.*

I was uncharacteristically adamant in my denial. I knew Asamura-kun said those words because he was embarrassed, but I felt the need to correct him.

Maaya should tell Maru-kun how she felt.

But when it came to Asamura-kun—

I stole a glance at the lover walking beside me. Asamura Yuuta—I want to *keep* being his lover. I don't want to go back to being just another nameless passerby.

So, I passionately explained how I felt seeing him support his friend. If I wanted to be seen as an important character in his story, then I should be the one to tell him that.

I remember myself on the volleyball court, shrinking and cowering. I also remember the faces of everyone who was cheering me on.

The right distance. Maaya didn't hesitate when it came time to step forward.

I took a deep breath.

“I want to hold hands. That okay?”

He looked at me, a little surprised, then down at his own hand. It stayed hovering in the air, so I firmly extended mine.

“Mm.”

My heart raced as my hand hung in the air. Asamura-kun gently took it. We let our hands naturally drop between us.

We'd stopped walking at some point, so continued forward, our hands intertwined.

“You know, seeing you cheering your heart out like that, Asamura-kun—”

*I'll be the one to tell him.*

“I thought—you looked really cool.”

The noisy cicadas were a blessing. Had it been quieter, he definitely would've heard the loud pounding of my heart.

I tightened my grip on his hand, not wanting to let go.

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## Ebook Bonus: Original Short Story

### ‘Sweet Like Cotton Candy’

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Even in a city where minimal social interaction is the norm, some believe that a community’s existence hinges on the tradition of festivals, no matter how much the customs of a village society are forgotten.

Even in an apartment complex not far from Shibuya station.

It was the last Sunday of July. The festival began at precisely 5 pm.

In the modest space beside the parking lot in front of the residential building, speakers were set up, endlessly playing the Tokyo Ondo<sup>1</sup>(was it?). A digital tablet was connected to the speakers.

Stalls were lined up, albeit not many of them. Children with insatiable curiosity and sparkling eyes darted from one to the next.

It was a summer festival for the apartment’s residents.

“They did this last year? I don’t remember,” Ayase-san said.

“It’s just for a day. Easy to forget.”

“Did you forget too, Asamura-kun?”

“Well, yeah, last year I did.”

That was a lie.

While Ayase-san often stayed in her room on weekends, I usually went to cram school or work, so naturally, I had noticed the festival, clearly visible from the entrance. But at this time last year, Ayase-san and her mother had only been living with us for about a month. We were still figuring out our relationship. It didn’t feel right to invite her to the modest apartment festival.

“Do you wanna eat something? Although, there’s just yakisoba<sup>2</sup>, cotton candy, and okonomiyaki<sup>2</sup>.”

It’s probably typical of an apartment complex festival. Heck, a summer festival event at a mall might even have more stuff and variety.

“I think we still have some yakisoba in the fridge,” she replied seriously.

I tried to remember what we had in there. Not the instant cup yakisoba, but the bagged ones you cook in a pan. And enough for four people.

“Yeah, we do.”

“Plus, there’s not many vegetables in this one.”

I glanced at the yakisoba served up at the stall, noting the token amount of cabbage.

When Akiko-san and Ayase-san make it, they put in so much cabbage, carrots, and bean sprouts that you can’t even see the noodles. Indeed, our family’s yakisoba feels way healthier. I guess the same can be said about the okonomiyaki.

But for elementary school age kids, it’s a feast.

Children excitedly tugged at their parents’ clothes, saying, “I want this!” and “Buy that!” as the sky dimmed to a shade of light ink. The lanterns hanging around the perimeter lit up, their LEDs mimicking the flicker of candlelight.

“Do you want something, Asamura-kun?”

“Not particularly.”

She tilted her head.

“So you’ll eat even if you don’t want to?”

“Yeah, because it’s more memorable that way. They say that memories are harder to forget when they’re tied to emotions.”

“So if you remember it as being delicious, you’ll remember the festival?”

“That’s part of it,” I said, scratching the tip of my nose.

“But?”

“But more than that, I want to remember walking here together, with you.”

It wasn’t the festival itself I wanted to remember, but the fact that we were walking side by side, a year into our relationship.

“You’re so sweet, like cotton candy—” Ayase-san said.

“Let’s get some cotton candy then?”

Yeah, I guess you need a special machine for cotton candy, so it makes sense to buy it from a stall.

“Okay. Well... that’s not what I meant though.”

Ayase-san nodded, so I lined up at the stall and bought a big bag of cotton candy. We walked around the venue one more time, taking turns eating it.

As the sky gradually darkened, the wind began to blow, driving away the heat of the day, and making the wind chimes at the stalls tinkle gently.

*Ting, Ting. Ting.*

As we left the stalls behind and walked back towards the entrance, Ayase-san said softly, “That was really sweet.”

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<sup>1</sup> A traditional Japanese song and dance associated with Tokyo. It’s a popular song at Bon Odori, which are dances held during the Bon Festival, a Japanese Buddhist event to honor the spirits of one’s ancestors. Participants typically dance in a circle around a tower (yagura) with taiko drummers, moving to the rhythm of the song.

<sup>2</sup> *Yakisoba*: Popular dish made of stir-fried noodles with vegetables and often meat, seasoned with a savory sauce. *Okonomiyaki*: A Japanese savory pancake made with flour, eggs, shredded cabbage, and various fillings, grilled and often topped with sauces and mayonnaise.