

13



Ghost Mikawa

Illustration by Hiten

# DAYS with my STEP-SISTER

FAN TL

# DAYS with my STEPSISTER FAN TL 13



Ghost Mikawa

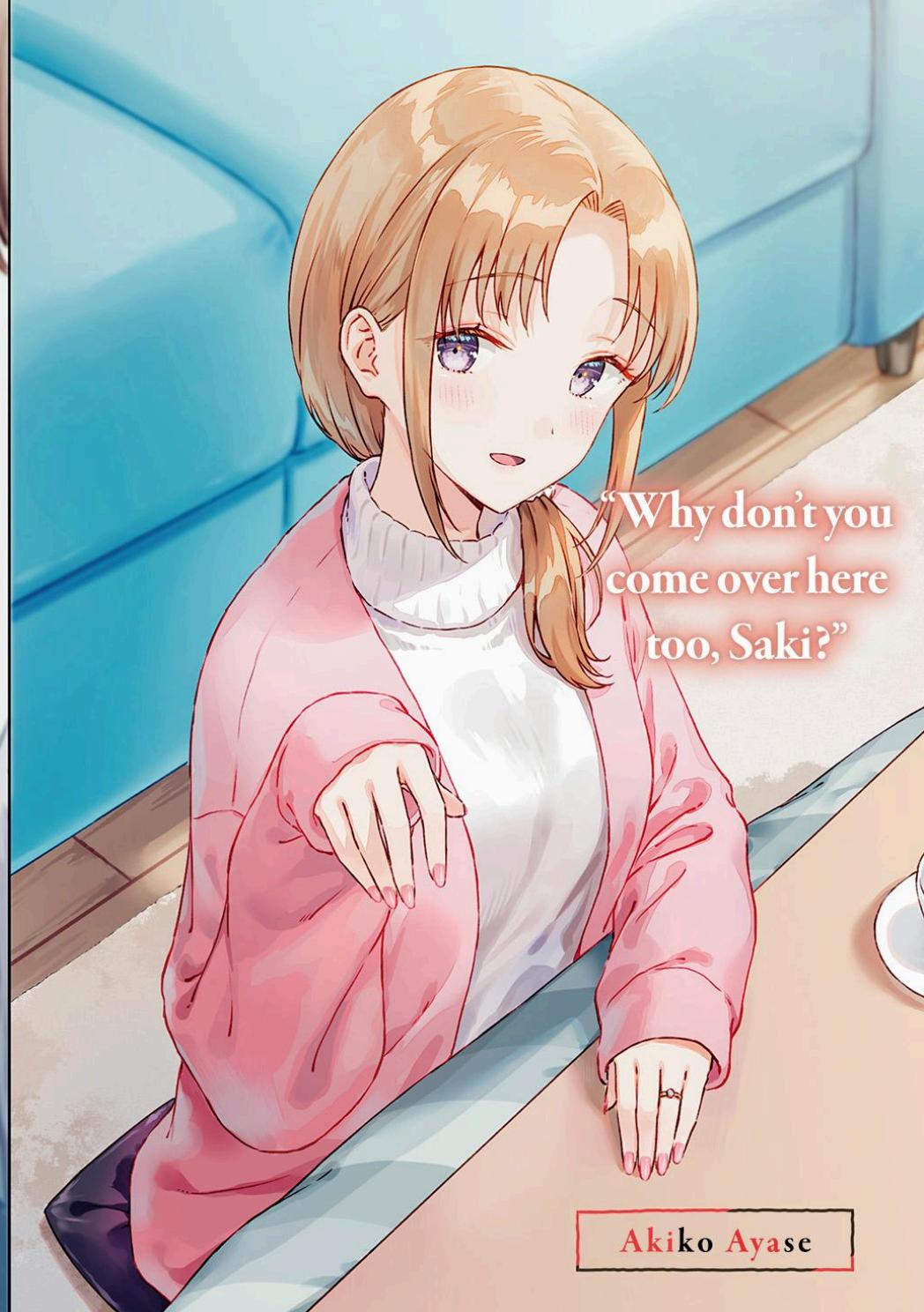
Illustration by Hiten

Saki Ayase

“So warm...  
I can't... leave...”



“Why don't you  
come over here  
too, Saki?”



Akiko Ayase

**“Go ahead,”**

she said, exuding an intense pressure.

**“O-okay, okay.”**

Timidly leaning in, I brought my face closer to the nape of her neck, where she had brushed her hair aside. My gaze inadvertently drifted downward as I did—almost catching a glimpse of her cleavage—so I quickly shut my eyes.

But with my vision completely now cut off, my other senses felt oddly sharper.

Oblivious to my inner struggle, the final theme of the movie played out on the TV at that moment.





Graduation

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Translation, PDF: NaCl

Accuracy Checking: yuituri

Proofreading: Kei, existence is pain, rsa16

Illustration typesetting: Indi

Illustration coloring: Iviera

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## About the Translators

We are a small non-profit fan translation group, consisting solely of a group of friends taking on the roles of translators, accuracy checkers, editors, and proofreaders.

Our operation mainly involves hand translating, with machine translators only solely used as *basic* pieces of reference material and structural guides (whether it be ChatGPT, DeepL, Papago; no difference when it comes to how we do things, really). We take the tedious effort to analyze and reference the original JP texts line by line, phrase by phrase, and often character by character, to basically then rewrite and build a translation from the ground up.

Paired with the use of English creative writing skills (all of our main staff members are native speakers), our approach strives to find the sweet balance between localization and foreignization, localizing phrases, references, and proverbs/idioms where we can, while opting to keep unique and culturally distinctive ones, and going for a mix of both when it works.

We proudly claim our methodology results in translations that read more naturally rather than robotically or ESL-like, with characters that actually speak distinctly and accurately rather than sounding all the same—a common issue found in most barely edited/tweaked ChatGPT fan TLs—all while considering the original author's style of writing.

For more information about the difference between a proper translation and an unedited/ESL MTL, please read [this document](#). If you care about our translations, or light novels in general, then please contribute to our cause by spreading this document and message as far as possible.

Together, we can raise awareness, inform the ignorant, and ensure that the light novel fan translating community becomes a more transparent space—one that prioritizes reader comfort and experience above all else.

Now it's true that this hasn't always been the case for us, with our older fan translations (2023 and prior) being noticeably lacking in quality to our newer ones. We highly recommend buying and reading official translations in those aforementioned cases.

We're always trying to improve the reader experience, so feel free to give us some feedback in the comments or through our Discord!

**Want to contact us?**

Feel free to contact us at [glucosetranslations@gmail.com](mailto:glucosetranslations@gmail.com) for any inquiries.

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## Prologue - Yuuta Asamura

I counted with my eyes one by one.

There were currently only eight of us, including myself. That was the total number of students currently present in the classroom.

It was completely deserted, yet it wasn't even lunch time. A quick glance at the clock hanging at the front of the room made that clear. The hands pointed to a little past 10:20.

Below the clock was a blackboard that displayed two words: "self study."

We'd normally have this period for math class. Instead, however, each student was quietly focusing on the subjects they wanted to study. I was currently working through some physics problems, while the girl sitting diagonally in front of me—

Right at that moment, as if sensing my gaze, she turned around in one blink. My heart jumped.

Our eyes met.

Her lips moved.

"Do you have a dictionary, Asamura-kun?"

*I think?*

I fished for my electronic dictionary to show her, and she gave a small nod in return. Keeping it in my hand, I stood up from my seat and walked over to the girl—Ayase-san.

"Thanks," she whispered.

"English?"

She nodded again.

I caught a glimpse of her open textbook and notebook from the corner of her vision.

*Reading comprehension exercises, I guess?*

Either she forgot her own dictionary at home or lent it to someone in another class. Something along those lines.

Given class was still technically in session, despite there only being six others besides us, I figured talking any further was a no-go. Without saying anything else, I returned to my seat.

*I mean, it's not like I've got any classmates I regularly chat with here today anyway.*

Even Yoshida, who usually sat in front of me, wasn't in today. Class Rep, who's usually close with Ayase-san, wasn't here either. Neither was Ryo-chin, a.k.a Ryouko Satou-san.

Still, something like this was perfectly normal for us third years during December at Suisei High.

Attendance was no longer mandatory, and students were allowed to prioritize their entrance exam studies.

That's why the students who actually showed up, only to sit in some classroom with the words "self study" scrawled on the board, were rare. Most students probably figured they'd be better off studying at some local library. Commuting took time too, and for some, it usually cost money in train or bus fares.

I would've stayed at home too had Ayase-san not chosen to come to school today.

Ayase-san was different.

She was the one who'd suggested coming to school to study in the first place, and it was something I couldn't help but question at the time.

I mean, Ayase-san's the kinda person who considers commuting a waste of time. Or at least, the version of her from six months ago definitely would have.

So her answer surprised me.

*"It feels like such a waste when I think about how I only have a few chances left to see my friends..."* she explained, letting out a small, self-deprecating smile. *"But, then again, the chances of seeing them even if I come to school aren't that high in the first place..."*

I found myself glancing around the classroom again.

No matter how many times I counted, there were only eight of us.

The classmates Ayase-san was close with—the ones she wanted to see—were probably Class Rep and Satou-san. Just two people, basically.

Even if we included Maaya Narasaka-san from the next class over, that still only made three.

Wouldn't it have just been easier to ask if they were coming, or coordinate for the same day, at that point?

*"Eh? No way,"* she answered immediately when I asked her this. *"I mean like, if I ask, 'What day are you going to school?' it might make them feel sorta obligated. I want them to be able to study where it's best for them. Even if that means I'll never get to see them at school, that's fine."*

She did want to see them, but she didn't want to impose that desire on them. That was just the kinda person Saki Ayase was.

*"Besides,"* she added, *"it's not just Maaya and the rest I want to see."*

I stared at Ayase-san's back as she sat diagonally ahead of me.

Now that December had arrived, with entrance exams literally looming over us at this point, more and more of our classmates had stopped coming to school. In just one week, the classroom had become this empty. And it's because of that that Ayase-san started to act like this.

Her back moved slightly as she lifted her gaze from her desk for a brief moment, casually glancing around the room. Then, as if satisfied, she let a faint smile curve onto her lips, before returning to focus on her books.

She had developed a habit of glancing around the classroom from time to time—as if she was attempting to engrave this soon-to-disappear scenery into her memory.

The large air conditioner installed in the classroom let out a soft thud before rumbling as it began to blow warm air. It probably detected a drop in temperature and started to heat the room slightly. The fact I was able to hear something so soft like that spoke volumes about just how quiet it was.

I could hear the scratch of pencils against notebooks, the soft rustling of textbook pages turning, and even faint murmurs when someone struggled with a difficult problem.

Time flowed gently as the quiet presence of my classmates enveloped the entire room.

*Everyone's working hard—I can feel it.*

*"It's quiet, but not empty. It makes studying comfy,"* Ayase-san had explained, giving me another reason why she liked coming to school during this time of year.

Apparently for her, the slight presence of others was more comforting than being completely alone.

Of course, noise being a problem was out of the question—everyone was studying, after all. But this level of quietness, where she could still sense the people around her while tuning everything out to focus on studying, was just right.

Maybe, in some way, this was just a reaction to the sudden increase in people she started to interact with lately.

The first year of high school might have probably felt close to silence for Ayase-san. No matter what sounds surrounded her in her environment, they probably never actually reached her ears. It was only in her third year did her once-quiet days suddenly become lively.

And maybe she enjoyed that. But at the same time, maybe the said environment really never gave her a chance to settle down and relax.

So this classroom, at this present moment, was perfect for her to feel at ease.

The chime rang. But no one moved right away.

Had a teacher been giving a lecture, the class would have instantly filled with chatter the moment break time began. But here, everyone was studying to their own schedule. It was natural that breaks happened at different times for everyone, then.

Still, that was only the case for us third years. The underclassmen still followed their regular schedules, so the noisiness of the lower floors started to slowly creep up into our classroom, such as the sound of someone running down the hallway echoed in the distance. Even during their short breaks, the underclassmen played around enthusiastically, and it wasn't long before their excited shouts could be heard from the schoolyard.

Back in our classroom, someone let out a deep stretch, setting off a chain reaction that spread a relaxed atmosphere over the eight students who were quietly studying.

At that moment, the front door of the classroom slid open with a clatter.

“Hope I’m not intruding—”

The one who entered was none other than Class Rep.

“Ah! Just like that, just like that. Keep studying, everyone!” she exclaimed after pushing up her under-rimmed glasses with her finger while glancing around the room.

*Way to ruin the studious atmosphere, Class Rep.*

“What’s up?” Ayase-san called out to her.

“Oh! If it ain’t Sakiccho! Today’s one of your school days, huh? Man, long time no see!”

“Did you forget something?”

It’s pretty rare to see Ayase-san being the one initiating a conversation with Class Rep.

There's a slight bounce to her voice too. It's a pretty heartwarming moment, but out of all things she could've said, she asked that? Of all possible reasons, who in their right mind would come back to school during the middle of exam season just for something like that—

“Bingo! Yep, I forgot my dictionary.”

*Seriously...?*

Isn't she aiming for Todai<sup>■</sup>, if I'm remembering things right? Is she just scatterbrained, or on another level entirely?

She made her way to her desk and rummaged noisily through it.

“Ah, there you are! Yep, right where I left it. *Ahhh*, I knew it—nothin' beats the one you're used to.”

What she pulled out was the Obunsha Classical Japanese Dictionary, 10th Edition, Expanded Version, known for its striking red-and-white cover. Despite being a compact, B6 size, it boasted around 43,500 entries.

*Oh, a classical Japanese dictionary.* Yeah, it's definitely something you're not gonna use that often compared to other ones. It's something you wouldn't wanna be without, but something you don't need every time.

“How was studying without it?” Ayase-san asked.

“I mean, I could still look things up online, but I just feel more comfortable using something I'm familiar with in the end, y'know?”

“So you came all the way here to get it.”

“Exactly.”

The sight of Class Rep holding a classical dictionary somehow fits her.

Not many people used physical dictionaries in the classroom anymore. Even I—someone so obsessed with books that my friends often get exasperated at my addiction—preferred paper books when it comes to novels and even non-fiction. But for studying? I still prioritized functionality and convenience, so I used an electronic dictionary.

Yet, a few people—like Class Rep, and now that I think about it, Ayase-san too—still held on to their paper dictionaries.

Despite being in an age where electronic dictionaries were so widespread and where information was so easily accessible online, some people still stuck with what felt right in their hands—what felt familiar to their eyes.

It's as if those choices reflect their personalities and values.

Those differences—so small yet tellingly distinctive—felt so interesting and even a little precious to me.

“Mission complete. Welp, sorry for disturbin’. Keep up the good work, everyone!”

Like a storm, Class Rep had come, and like a storm, she was just about to leave.

But just as she reached the door, she suddenly slammed on the brakes and spun around.

“Ah, right! Saki-no-suke!” she exclaimed, prompting Ayase-san, who had just been about to return to her studies to look up. “I don’t know when we’ll get to see each other next, so I’ll just say it now—happy birthday!”

Ayase-san let out a sharp, brief gasp.

“Ah... Yeah.”

“Alrighty then! Let’s both do our best! You guys too!”

And this time, she really did disappear like a passing storm.

Ayase-san, who’d been watching Class Rep’s retreating figure, murmured something under her breath before letting a small smile play on her lips.

A girl sitting three seats away—Morishita-san, I think?—then turned to Ayase-san.

“It’s your birthday, Ayase-san?”

Her words surprised Ayase-san; not just her question itself, but the fact that someone she'd barely talked with had suddenly called out to her. Still, after a brief pause, she answered back.

"It's still more than ten days away. Class Rep's just impatient."

"That's soon! Congrats!"

"Ah... Yeah. Thanks."

That was basically the whole back-and-forth; a short conversation. The two of them weren't really close in the first place, after all. Yet, even after Morishita-san directed her attention back to studying, Ayase-san continued to gaze at her for a little longer.

And then, she returned to her own work.

*"It feels like such a waste when I think about how I only have a few chances left to see my friends..."*

*So that's what she also meant, I guess.*

When lunchtime arrived, Ayase-san and I pushed our desks together and laid out our bentos.

Today's main dish was chicken. I made it last night by marinating some chicken thighs in soy sauce, honey, and some ginger before grilling it. After letting them cool down a bit, I had wrapped them up and kept them in the fridge, and reheated them lightly in the microwave this morning before packing them. There was also some salad and cherry tomatoes, and a single pickled plum that sat on white rice. It was a lunch that featured an infusion of Japanese and Western flavors.

*Wait no, it's just homemade bento; no need to get so worked up 'bout it.*

"Mmm. It's delicious. The sweetness is just right."

I let out a small sigh of relief at Ayase-san's comment. Not only was she not great with spicy stuff, she also disliked things that were too sweet, making it tricky to get the balance right.

"I really like how you season your food, Asamura-kun."

"All I did was follow a recipe, though."

Of course, I did taste the marinade while prepping it. But given I wasn't sensitive at all to both sweet and spicy flavors, I really wasn't confident in the final result.

"Don't worry, it's really good."

"Personally think I could've added some more color."

"It's Japanese food; it can't be helped."

"Ah, right. Japanese food always somehow turns out brown."

I tried my hand at frying chicken not too long ago.

Deep-frying was a pretty high hurdle for some guy in high school who really never cooked for himself, but above all, I really wanted to just eat some.

I had tossed the freshly fried karaage into our bento boxes, sprinkled some soy sauce-seasoned dried bonito flakes over the rice, and packed it with some store-bought kinpira gobo and kombu rolls<sup>[2]</sup>. I was completely convinced I had created the ultimate bento at the time.

But the moment I opened the lid at school, the first thing that popped into my head was—

*Brown.*

So, so, brown.

It was only then did I truly realize how beautifully colorful Ayase-san's bentos always were.

"Ah, yeah I remember that. It didn't really bother me, but Class Rep and Satou-san ended up sliding me some rolled omelet and kamaboko<sup>[3]</sup> on the side."

In other words, those two thought my bento was completely disappointing.

*It's a misunderstanding though, guys. Ayase-san didn't make that bento. The culprit's right here.*

"They told me I must have it tough," Ayase-san smiled a little, as if reliving the moment.

“Huh?”

Although I was still clearly confused as to why Class Rep and Satou-san said that, Ayase-san smoothly shifted the conversation back without any further explanation.

“Try using red pickled ginger for red, and leafy greens with a slice of lemon for green and yellow if you want to easily add color to your bento. Bell peppers are great and come in lots of colors too.”

“A workman is known by his tools, huh?”

“Food’s more appealing to eat when it looks nice. But I think today’s bento’s well thought out, too. You even added some cherry tomatoes for some color—it looks good.”

Even if it was just flattery, hearing those words from her made me happy. It gave me motivation to keep trying.

We then ate in silence for a while; talking too much would mean lunchtime would be over before we knew it.

The classroom retained its quietness too.

*No, it's even quieter than just now*—some of the already few students here today had gone to the cafeteria or school store to buy food, so there were even less people around. Besides me and Ayase-san, the only other students here were two who'd claimed the scenic window-side seats.

Given there were so little people around, Ayase-san and I didn't have to worry about others making comments about us eating together like this. Guess this was one of the perks of continuing to come to school together.

Pausing and resting my chopsticks to glance out the window, I spotted a leafless ginko tree in the schoolyard, swaying against the backdrop of the now mostly clear winter sky. Its bare branches bent to the forces of the wind, which was pretty strong today.

“Oh right. What should we do for our birthdays?” I turned back to face Ayase-san as I spoke.

*“Hmm... I don’t think we’ll be able to do anything like last year with exams coming up.”*

“Then I guess we better avoid going out.”

Ayase-san nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, I don’t really have time for anything like that. I’m cutting close as is.”

“I’m in the same boat too.”

Ayase-san glanced up at me slightly, her eyes seemingly saying, “You say that, yet you seem more in control than I am.”

*But no, really, I don’t. I swear.*

Taking a sip from her carton of milk tea she’d bought from the vending machine in the break room, she set down her chopsticks after a brief pause.

“It’s gotten really quiet, huh?” she remarked.

Since she was glancing around, she was probably referring to how empty the class was.

It was normal for this class to be jam-packed not too long ago—it was normal for the classrooms and hallways on this floor to be so noisy and full of life. Yet, ever since the turn of the months, it’d only taken a short time for the classroom to become what it was now. That sudden change made it feel as if everything had shifted all at once.

Even though the pace of each passing day really hadn’t changed at all.

“It’s like it’s all coming to an end. It really feels that way.”

“Yeah. It’s like... only three months ’til graduation, amirite?”

Ayase-san shook her head.

“Not that much.”

“For real?”

*If my memory serves right, Suisei High's graduation ceremony was on March 1st...*

"It's two months and three weeks."

I held back the urge to call her out for being so precise.

But maybe it was Ayase-san's way of spending each day with the awareness that her high school life was really steadily ticking away.

"Thanks for the meal," she said, pressing her hands together in gratitude before closing her bento box and slipping it into her lunch pouch. She then sipped up the last of her milk tea, letting out a sigh as she exhaled. "It's really going to end, huh...?"

Setting my own chopsticks down, I slid my hand across the desk, stopping just about three centimeters away from where her own rested neatly atop her lunch pouch.

She stiffened for a second and looked at me.

"There's still two months and three weeks left," I said.

Her eyes widened slightly in surprise at my words. Then, her expression softened, the corners of her eyes curving as she smiled and gently touched her fingertips with mine.

"That's right..." she murmured as she gazed out the window.

Reflected in her eyes was the pale blue of the winter sky.

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[1]: “東大” (Todai): short form for “東京大学” (Tokyodaigaku), the University of Tokyo.

[2]: Shredded burdock root and carrot braised in a sweet and savory sauce, and rolls made from kelp, usually containing fillings like salmon.

[3]: The iconic Japanese fish cake that's pink on the outside but white on the inside.

## December 13th (Monday) - Yuuta Asamura

Waking up in the morning has become more and more of a chore lately.

Yet, it's not just because the cold has become harsher—it's also because I've been getting even less sleep as I pushed through the final stretch of my exam prep.

*Yeah, I'm still kinda sleepy,* I thought as I stepped into the dining room warmed by the air conditioner, as the scent of grilled fish wafted past my nose.

"Good morning, Yuuta," my old man turned to look at me as he scooped some rice from the rice cooker.

"Need any help?" I asked after greeting him back.

"It's alright. Just about done," he placed a rice bowl in front of my usual seat as he spoke.

I glanced over at the food spread out on the table today. Looks like today's breakfast features some grilled sardines.

"You've grilled these pretty nicely."

"I mean, I'm bound to get the hang of it after doing this for over half a year now."

"I'll start helping out again after my exams are done."

"That depends on where you get accepted. You might end up living in a dorm, amirite? Well, just focus on your exams for now—we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. By the way, you and Saki-chan are heading to school today too, right, Yuuta?"

"Yep, that's the plan. Easier to stay on track there."

I left out my *real* reason and gave a safe response instead.

Ayase-san finally woke up sometime later as we continued talking, greeting my old man as she took her seat.

“Sorry for having you do breakfast every day.”

“It’s just helping each other out when things get busy. C’mon, eat up now. But I guess the stuff I make’s not as good as yours, Saki-chan.”

“That’s not true at all,” Ayase-san said before pressing her hands together. “Itadakimasu.”

My old man sat down too, resuming eating. He’s always leaving the house earlier than us, now that I think ’bout it.

*Wait, we don’t even have to go to school in the first place, so it wouldn’t even matter if we’re late.*

In that case...

“I’ll take care of the dishes,” I told him as he finished eating.

“It’s fine, it’s fine.”

Saying that, he gathered his dishes and carried them to the sink. I hurriedly followed after him.

Stealing a glance at Ayase-san, I saw she still hadn’t taken off her earphones, even as she ate breakfast.

*She’s probably listening to English comprehension, or something.*

She’d even gone out of her way to buy a pair of wireless ones because of how annoying the wires got while eating.

I held out my right hand and gestured, as if telling her to just keep eating.

She stared blankly at me for a brief moment before nodding slightly.

“Thanks,” she mouthed.

Ayase-san was the type of person who understood that keeping her earphones in while eating at the dining table was, simply put, bad manners. Yet, given everyone knew just how precious time was to her,

she started to adopt this new approach after giving a heads-up a few days ago. Call it an agreed-upon rudeness, I guess.

I stood next to my old man and started helping with the dishes—or rather, I practically snatched them from him and began washing them myself.

“Hey, ain’t it about time for you to head out?”

“Ah, yeah.”

“Washing your plate’s not exactly a big deal.”

“Is that so? Guess I’ll take you up on that then,” he uttered before suddenly letting out a sigh, taking off the apron he’d been wearing while cooking. “Maybe things would’ve turned out different with that person if I’d helped out around the house this much back then, too.”

My heart skipped a beat in response to his words, “that person.”

That person—my biological mother. This was probably the first time I’ve heard him bring her up so directly ever since he remarried.

I cast a quick glance over my shoulder.

He was pretty quiet, and Ayase-san looked to be way too focused on eating and listening to her English comprehension to have overheard.

“Saki-chan’s always thanking me all the time, but I can’t help but think that... The only reason I’m a father worth being grateful over now is because I don’t want to repeat my past mistakes.”

It was as if he was admitting that, deep down, he was still just a flawed person himself.

“I mean, you’ve changed for the better, and that’s all that matters,” I told him.

And it’s true—having Akiko-san take over *all* the cooking just because she was the better cook, making him stop entirely, could’ve possibly led to trouble down the line. So the fact he’s changed from a desire to avoid past failures was a positive thing.

Change isn’t always bad, after all.

“I mean look, I might end up living alone for uni, remember? In that case, this comes in handy for me too. Knowing how to cook’s never a bad thing.”

At first, I’d basically left almost everything to Ayase-san. Looking back on it now, the burden I had placed on her would’ve most likely built up to the point of causing a rift between us if I had let things continue like that.

“Our family’s changed and we share responsibilities now. Everyone’s happy, no problems—simple as that,” I explained, deliberately making sure my tone was lighthearted.

“You’ve started to say some pretty mature things, huh...? You’ve really grown up, Yuuta,” my old man spoke in a deep, sentimental tone.

*Wait a sec, isn’t he supposed to be in a rush?*

“C’mon, you really gotta get going. Why bring this up all a sudden?” I asked, and he gave a small smile immediately in response.

“Because it’s your birthday, Yuuta... I know it’s kinda late in the conversation to say it now, but happy birthday.”

I froze.

I had remembered about it just last night, but it looked like it completely slipped my mind the moment morning came around.

*December 13th. No doubt ’bout it—today’s my birthday.*

For my old man, his memories of me must stretch from all the way back from when I was born to now. Just the fact that today was my birthday probably triggered all of them to come flooding back.

“Ah... yeah, thanks,” I responded with that thought in mind.

“Alright, I’ll leave it to you then.”

Grabbing his bag in a bit of a hurry, my old man then tossed an “I’m off” our way before heading out.

Ayase-san, who had been fiddling with her phone up until now, finally took out her earphones.

“Take care,” we both called after him simultaneously.

She then turned to face me.

“Did Stepdad say something before leaving?”

“Ah, yeah. Just, y’know, wishing me a happy birthday since it’s today,” I told her, leaving out the part where he talked about my biological mother.

*I really don’t feel like bringing that up.*

“Oh, that’s right. Happy birthday. We can’t really celebrate much this year though, huh?”

“I mean it can’t be helped. The sorrows of a student prepping for exams, amirite?”

*Still, Akiko-san did mention about whipping up something special for dinner today.*

I’ll just have to put up with just that this year. The rest of the day would just be about buckling down as usual.

As Ayase-san put her earphones back in and went back to fiddling with her phone, I resumed eating breakfast while pulling out a vocabulary book from my pocket. Neither of us spoke much—we just quietly ate as we crammed our food down as if it were fuel.

Even though there weren’t any consequences for tardiness this time of year, neither of us wanted to be late, so we left the house together at our usual time in the end.



“It’s really starting to feel like winter,” Ayase-san remarked as a cold gust of wind brushed against us as we walked.

Glancing at her, I saw her cheeks were tinged a slight red, and her breath came out in short white puffs.

I wasn't using my bike anymore. Instead, we were walking together—hand in hand.

As we strolled side by side, Ayase-san suddenly spoke up.

“1773.”

“Huh...? Ah, the Boston Tea Party?”

“Correct. You’re taking history, Asamura-kun?”

“Kinda. I’m planning to take civics for the common test, but... Well, that’s about how much I know.”

The Boston Tea Party was an event considered a turning point leading to the American Revolution.

Lately, Ayase-san and I had taken to quizzing each other over things we’d memorized for our exams, from stuff like English vocabulary to random historical dates—that sorta thing. It was a very exam-student-like thing to do, but Ayase-san’s questions always came out of nowhere, catching me off guard every time.

We continued walking, exchanging quiz questions as we went.

We didn’t have many opportunities left to walk down this road together like this. Before we knew it, the ten or so minutes it took to get to school had become something precious for both of us.

“Oh, right. Happy birthday,” Ayase-san suddenly said, catching me off guard again.

“Didn’t you already wish me one this morning, though?”

“That was because of the flow of the conversation. I want to make sure I say it properly. I don’t have a present or a party to throw for you, but at least I can give you a proper birthday wish.”

“Gotcha. Yeah, thanks. It’ll be your turn next week, then.”

Ayase-san gave a small nod to my comment.

Our birthdays were exactly one week apart.

“Guess I’m your ‘nni-san’ for real this week then,” I teased her slightly, earning a reaction from Ayase-san as she puffed out her cheeks.

“There it is! So unfair.”

“I-is it really?”

“We’re in the same grade, aren’t we?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“And we’re taking our exams at the same time together. It feels like I’m somehow losing and I don’t like that.”

*I don’t think it’s unfair though... It’s just a fact.*

But seeing her reaction, I was reminded once again that Ayase-san really hated losing. While she wasn’t obsessed with winning, she definitely didn’t like to lose.

“You’re still calling me “Yuuta-niisan’ at home though...”

“That’s different. It’s like a job title.”

“So being your older brother’s a job now?”

“Official titles are used in formal settings, aren’t they?”

So home’s a “formal setting” according to Ayase-san, huh? But what even is “formal”?

*She really does weirdly categorize things sometimes.*

Welp, putting that aside—

“How’s studying going?”

“So-so, I guess.”

“So-so” for Ayase-san usually meant things were actually going well, though. If she were *really* struggling, she’d definitely be more on edge. There was a sense of calmness in her answer.

And as for me...

“What about you, Asamura-kun?”

“So-so, I guess.”

...I felt like I wasn't making enough progress—I was actually getting pretty anxious.

"You saying that must mean you're probably doing really well."

*What...? Are you sure 'bout that?*

"You're always underestimating your own ability. You're always feeling like it's still not enough whenever you're doing well. How are you doing on past papers? You're solving them fine, aren't you?"

*That's... true.*

It's true I was getting a reasonable amount of questions right whenever I was just solving past papers, but I still felt like it wasn't enough. Just memorizing answers didn't mean anything.

Unless the exact same questions appeared on the actual test, what mattered was understanding the material.

"Then I guess it's a good thing that things are going smoothly if we're both really keen on getting into our first-choices."

"It's a competition, then," Ayase-san commented with excitement.

"It's not like we're applying to the same uni, so I don't think there should be anything like that in the first place," I chuckled.

"But it's exactly why there *should*. It'll be really motivating for the both of us if we think of each other as rivals, won't it?"

"I see. Guess I'll take you up on that then."

Competition itself gets stressful for some, so it's not like it's this perfect motivational tool.

*But I guess it's fine if it helps Ayase-san stay motivated.*

Just as I was mulling over that thought, Ayase-san suddenly slumped her shoulders.

"Oh, right... You're not really the competitive type, are you, Asamura-kun?"

"That's not true. I am! Alright, let's see who gets accepted!"

“Hey. You’re seriously gonna take this seriously, right?” she asked after giving me a long, skeptical look.

“Yep, bring it on,” I nodded as seriously as I could.

“*Haaah...* Well, whatever. It’s because you’re like this that I feel we can have a harmless rivalry in the first place.”

“It’s an honor to be considered worthy enough to be your rival. I have no objections competing with you.”

“Mm. Let’s make it a good one.”

“Yeah.”

But really, being seen as a rival by Ayase-san felt weirdly comfortable.

*I think this’ll be fun.*

She’s expecting me to do my best in order to pass my entrance exams, and normally, that kinda expectation usually weighs heavily on me. I mean, I basically almost crumbled under the pressure of similarly high expectations back when I was in elementary.

Yet, despite having my own strong desire to be seen as a worthy competitor to her as well, it didn’t feel suffocating at all.

And maybe that’s because, deep down, I believed that even if, by some near-impossible chance, I utterly failed my exams, Ayase-san wouldn’t be disappointed in me.

What I was scared of wasn’t failing itself.

Rather, what I was scared of is disappointing someone else.

My biological mother never failed to have high expectations for me, and was always disappointed whenever I was unable to meet them.

And it was the same with Ayase-san’s biological father.

He—Fumiya Itou—had this fabricated image of what an ideal father, mother, and daughter should be like. And when reality naturally failed to match his vision, he was hurt. He never realized those expectations of his were the noose suffocating his family—himself included.

Expectations can sometimes be a great poison—something both Ayase-san and I had grown exhausted from after being subjected to it one-sidedly.

That was exactly why we'd promised to not expect anything from each other back then. It was how our lives as siblings had started.

Yet, we were now able to find comfort in holding a certain level of expectations for each other.

So, where did that difference come from?

Well, it pretty much comes down to this.

Think of a threshold—an invisible line—when expectations become too much; expectations that turn into nothing but demands.

Like the ones my mother had, and the ones Ayase-san's father had.

They crossed this line without realizing it, and failed to stop at the point where demanding any more would only cause harm.

My old man and my biological mom, as well as Akiko-san and Fumiya Itou, must've felt that sense of crisis at the time—that crossing that line would mean they'd only end up hurting each other.

Yet, instead of taking the steps to adjust, they took their relationships for granted.

The key is to constantly reassess, to constantly check in with each other.

Even among the closest of families, respect is important.

For us, the reason why Ayase-san and I have been able to balance our mutual expectations—without tripping across the line into something harmful—is because we've learned where the boundaries are. We've come to understand which lines can and can't be crossed.

And we've become aware enough with each other that we now don't always need words to gauge that distance.

It was simply familiarity as a result of experience.

Still, taking this familiarity for granted—forgetting to take the time to constantly adjust to each other and becoming complacent—would crumble our relationship.

At least that's how I see it.

This “competition” Ayase-san keeps talking about isn't about victory.

She'll fight to win, sure—but winning isn't her goal.

The act of competing itself is.

And that's why I'll be able to go along with it.

What she expects from me isn't success—it's something else entirely.

“Asamura-kun...”

I caught her quiet murmur and turned to look at her.

“I'm really glad we were born in the same year. It's because of it we're able to take our exams together.”

“...Yeah. Me too.”

Ayase-san was simply driven by the desire to be her very best, and all she wanted was the assurance that someone close to her side was running the same path.

Those around us walked with reddened cheeks, some burying their faces in their scarves, while others chose to pull up the collars of their coats.

The fallen leaves lined our path as we crossed the intersection, drawing closer to Suisei High.

It wasn't before long before we were met with a steady stream of students as they poured through the school gates.

It all looked just as it always did.

But the moment we reached the top floor that housed the third-year classrooms, the number of students visibly thinned.

What was left was just an empty hallway that echoed with nothing but our footsteps.

And on this wide path, it felt as if only Ayase-san and I were walking together.

## December 20th (Monday) - Yuuta Asamura

A week had gone by since my birthday.

Of course, I hadn't forgotten that today was Ayase-san's own, despite not relying on my phone's calendar. Or rather, not only had I not forgotten, it was *impossible* for me to.

*The trick to it? Well, lemme explain...*

There's a group chat that only Ayase-san, her friend Maaya Narasaka, and I are in. Last night, right at the stroke of midnight, I'd received a notification from it.

Opening it up, I saw a message from Narasaka-san.

**Maaya:** [Happy Birthday Saki!]

A short message accompanied by a sticker of a cat biting into a cake.

And the timestamp? Exactly 00:00, which meant she must have typed it up in advance so she could send it the moment the hour hand hit twelve.

The crucial detail here is that *I* also received that message at the same time. In other words, while congratulating Ayase-san, Narasaka-san was subtly reminding me, as if saying, "Don't forget, m'kay~?"

And since the chat shows read receipts, there was no room for me to claim that I'd forgotten.

Still, I couldn't help but be amazed by the sheer amount of thoughtfulness that girl had. It was as if she could see right through me, down to my habit of usually forgetting to wish people's birthdays. She basically casually took the role of being a human reminder without making a huge fuss about it.

So with all that, I was already mentally prepared by the time I woke up.

After getting dressed into my uniform, I headed to the dining room where I found Ayase-san already dressed up in hers. She was sitting in her usual seat, listening to some English comprehension. She wasn't eating yet.

To avoid startling her, I deliberately made my presence obvious. Approaching her, I gave the back of her chair a light tap.

Despite me being in a relationship with her in which you'd call us lovers, I still didn't have the guts to casually pat a girl on the shoulder. Figures this holds true even if she were my actual little sister, too.

*I've gotta ask someone with an actual younger sis to know for sure, though.*

Ayase-san lifted her head in surprise.

"Happy birthday, Saki," I said in a somewhat formal tone, taking her removing her earphones as a cue, before adding a "Good morning."

I made sure to wish her birthday first given it was more important.

"Good morning. *Mm*, thanks. Yuuta-nii—" she started, before glancing left and right quickly as she lowered her voice, "...**Yuuta**."

In all honesty, our parents probably wouldn't have heard her even if she'd said it normally.

Yet, just as I was thinking that—

Their bedroom door opened, and Akiko-san stepped out.

My heart skipped a beat.

"Good morning, Yuuta-kun," she greeted me before heading to the kitchen.

She opened the refrigerator and quickly began setting out the pre-made side dishes she had stored in some Tupperware. My old man also popped out from their bedroom slightly later, mumbling a sleepy "G'morning" in a drowsy voice.

Both Ayase-san and I responded to both of their greetings. Still half-asleep, my old man then let out a yawn before heading to the bathroom.

*Having both of them up at this hour's kinda unusual...*

"It's rare for you to make breakfast, Mom," Ayase-san remarked.

*She's right.* Considering that Akiko-san usually returns home late into the night, she should still be exhausted. Yet, not only was she setting out food on the table, she was also whipping up some miso soup from scratch.

At Ayase-san's words, Akiko-san beamed, puffing out her chest proudly.

"It's the second phase of my special shift starting today!" she explained, earning Ayase-san tilting her head in confusion.

I mirrored her gesture as I stood behind her, albeit a moment later.

*Her special shift?*

With the look of a magician revealing a well-kept trick, Akiko-san began to lay it all out. Apparently, the long-term leave she'd applied for at work had been approved according to her.

"Long-term leave? You're taking time off work, Mom?" Ayase-san asked, sounding surprised.

Akiko-san hadn't continued to bartend after remarrying out of financial concerns. Even ignoring having two working adults to support our family, my old man's salary was enough for us if we budgeted carefully.

Sure, a part of her continuing to work was to *ensure* financial stability, but more than that, she genuinely loved her job. It was why Ayase-san was so shocked.

"It's just until your exams are over for now."

Up 'til now, my old man and Akiko-san divided household duties so that Ayase-san and I wouldn't have to worry about things like cooking. When necessary, they relied on pre-made meals as well.

"But I want to give you both as many warm, freshly made meals as possible," Akiko-san explained.

It wasn't as if there was anything wrong with pre-made food, and I personally didn't mind either way. Even so, I sorta had an idea of why she insisted on this.

Akiko-san's work schedule had been so irregular back when she was struggling through that period of being freshly divorced, so much so to the point where she hadn't been able to make meals for her own daughter. It was probably a huge regret she must've been holding onto up to this point.

"You sure?"

"It's fine. I haven't quit or anything," she reassured, smiling at Ayase-san's concerned expression.

"Then... If you say so."

"Besides, I've been thinking about the future a little bit. Think of this as a trial run," Akiko-san said, glancing away for a brief moment.

Ayase-san followed her gaze with slightly narrowed eyes, before turning back to her mother.

"A trial run...?"

"Maybe I'll cut back on work and continue living like this."

"You mean like, keeping things the way they are now?"

"Ah, yes, but not right away. I'll think about it more properly after you two finish your entrance exams. There's no rush to change our lifestyle even then. But if it comes to *that*, I probably wouldn't be able to work for a while," Akiko-san spoke with a thoughtful, almost cryptic manner, resting a finger on her chin.

"Ah... So *that's* what you mean," Ayase-san replied, seemingly picking up on something.

“I haven’t decided on anything yet. It’s not *just* my decision to make. I want to properly discuss it with the both of you once things settle down after your exams too.”

Their conversion felt like some sorta coded exchange—I was completely left out of the loop. They were both understanding something I simply didn’t.

“Um, what do you—”

“Your food’s getting cold, Yuuta-niisan,” Ayase-san urged me to sit down with a glance.

Prompted by her gaze, I took my seat.

It was pretty unusual for Ayase-san to be so evasive like this—she was usually someone who preferred speaking her mind clearly, after all. I didn’t understand what was going on, but I could at least tell it wasn’t something easy to talk about. So, I quietly decided to focus on eating my breakfast.

Spread out on the table was some Japanese mixed rice, pre-made side dishes, and freshly made miso soup.

My old man returned from the bathroom and joined us, making it the first time in a while that the four of us ate breakfast together.

As always, my old man kept repeating how delicious everything was, earning a happy smile from Akiko-san.

“Nice to have something warm in winter, right? It’s really good,” I added, sipping my miso soup as I followed my old man’s lead.

“It’s getting cold out, so make sure to take care, okay?”

“Yeah,” I nodded at Akiko-san’s words, Ayase-san doing the same from beside me.

Before we knew it, the second half of December had already rolled by.

We only had around a month before the common test—this was the final stretch.



We walked around our usual route to school, the only difference being that Ayase-san and I weren't holding hands as usual.

This was because she was briskly walking ahead, and I had to take longer strides to just keep up.

“Um...” I spoke up.

Ayase-san kept walking in silence.

“Bout what Akiko-san was saying earlier—”

She kept walking, and walking, and walking... Step after step.

*Yeah...*

I was only looking for her to explain that mysterious conversation she had with Akiko-san this morning.

“Not telling you.”

“W-why?”

Was it something I wasn't even allowed to ask about indirectly?

*I mean look, you're walking wayyy too fast here, Ayase-san.*

There was no point in rushing so much to the point of being out of breath and turning red in the face...

She then suddenly stopped in her tracks, and I almost bumped into her back and had to stumble to a halt.

“I don't really know either.”

“...Huh?”

She then spun around, her expression troubled as if she were trying to find the right words.

“I have an idea of what it *might* be, but I'm still not sure... So I don't want to say anything careless.”

“G-gotcha.”

So even Ayase-san hadn’t fully grasped what Akiko-san was implying.

“Some futures can only be seen as probabilities, right?”

“*Uhhh...* I mean, yeah, I guess. Wait, actually, isn’t that how *all* futures are?”

Neither of us could say for sure whether we’d be university students three months from now.

Ayase-san shook her head.

“That’s not what I’m trying to say. I’m talking about how there are things where, no matter how hard you try, you’re only able to leave it up to fate.”

*That’s starting to sound kinda dramatic.*

“She might be trying something that relies on luck—something that takes months to see results, and maybe nearly a year to reach the final outcome. Plus, Mom might decide to not go through with it depending on how our exams go too in the first place. And even then, she probably still hasn’t figured out what comes next. I just don’t want to talk about something so uncertain based on my hunch.”

Even through all her roundabout phrasing, I could tell this was something really difficult for Ayase-san to talk about.

“Did Akiko-san... buy a lottery ticket or something?”

She slumped her shoulders in exasperation.

“How’d you even get to that?”

“I mean, it takes months to see if you’ve won or not, and she’d still need to go through the whole process of actually claiming the money even if she did. And then she’d have to figure out what to do with it after getting it... It kinda makes sense, doesn’t it?”

*Okay, I knew that wasn’t actually the answer here, but I just couldn’t think of anything else.*

“Asamura-kun... You’re normally so considerate and understanding, but you’re really so unbelievably dense sometimes...”

“Sorry.”

She shook her head.

“It’s nothing weird, so don’t worry about it. On the other hand...” she started, preparing to say something else before abruptly stopping herself. “Let’s go. We’ll be late.”

“Uh, hol’ on,” I called out to her as she took the lead again.

I took her hand—

“Ah...”

—And squeezed it slightly. She gently squeezed back

*Looks like she didn’t mind holding hands, after all.*

What a relief.

“I won’t worry about it if you say so, Ayase-san.”

“Mm. Actually, I really don’t think it’ll be a bad thing. Probably... Yeah, it’s something good.”

“Gotcha. Right, that’s good enough for me.”

Akiko-san’s words still lingered in the back of my mind, but given Ayase-san had said it wasn’t something bad, I decided to trust her and not press further.

The cold wind blew against us as we walked hand in hand like we always did. The thick clouds parted slightly beyond the buildings, as the thin morning light poured down like a ladder reaching for the earth.



Our classroom had fewer people than ever before, and I went through the entire day without having a single conversion with anyone I really knew. It was nice in a way, and gave me more time to study.

Still, at the same time, it really made me realize—this was crunch time.

The chime signaling the end of the school day rang, and Ayase-san and I left the classroom together after calling out our goodbyes to the few classmates left still packing up. People had gotten used to seeing us leave together lately, so we didn't get any teasing remarks about how close we were.

The cold wind immediately brushed against our cheeks the moment we stepped out of the school building. As usual, Ayase-san hurriedly buried her face slightly into her scarf.

"I think it's time I get some gloves," she said as we held hands. The chill of her palm only served to make the changing season feel all the more real.

We turned into a side road from the busy main street near the station, heading home, talking about small everyday things, just like we always did.

We passed through the entrance, up the elevator, and finally to our door.

"We're home," I called out as we opened it.

It was something I'd gotten into the habit of saying despite no one being there. Normally, silence would be the only response.

"Welcome home!"

Yet, the sound of slippers padding down the hallway echoed, and soon, a familiar face peeked out. It was Akiko-san.

*Right, she did mention something about working a "special shift" starting today.*

She held a ladle in her right hand. Looks like she was in the middle of cooking—

*Hol' up, is it safe for her to leave the kitchen unattended like that?*



“I’m going all out for dinner, so make sure to look forward to it! It’s still going to take a little longer, though. But wow, I was surprised to hear you two—do you two always get home this early?”

“I mean, neither of us have club activities or shifts at work right now,” Ayase-san explained as she took off her shoes, stepping up into the hallway before neatly placing them into the shoe cabinet.

I usually just leave mine on the floor and turn them to face the door, but Ayase-san always never fails to put them away properly when she’s certain she won’t be heading out again.

*“They’ll last longer that way,”* she once told me. When I replied that I’d never really thought about it like that, she laughed and told me that it was such a boy thing for me to say.

I thought it was more of a personality thing than something due to gender, so I had asked my friends about it the next day.

*“Of course, you should put them properly, y’know?”* Maru said, while Yoshida gave me a, *“I just leave them where they are after taking ‘em off.”*

And that proved my theory—it was all about personality.

*Not that it really matters in the first place.*

“I know we just came back, but do you need us to go shopping or anything...?” I spoke to Akiko-san, who was now back in the kitchen, as I followed Ayase-san down the hallway.

“It’s alright, I had plenty of time today so I managed to get everything done. But thanks for asking.”

“No, it was nothing...”

“Did you go and buy something weird again? Did you?” Ayase-san asked, prompting Akiko-san to pull an exaggerated frown.

She had the tendency to get talked into buying whatever store clerks recommended, something that often worried Ayase-san. It was why she made it a habit of asking every time, and it was clear from Akiko-san’s reaction that she wasn’t really a fan of it.

“It’s not like I’ve been wasting any money, okay?”

“I know, but...”

*Well, this is just a usual back-and-forth between them.*

On the other hand, what *wasn’t* usual was this odd feeling that has been lingering on from earlier.

Specifically, how warm Akiko-san’s “Welcome home!” felt to me—something I’ve only just become suddenly aware of. Ayase-san must’ve felt the same way, as there was this quiet sense of happiness around her, even as she questioned Akiko-san about her shopping habits.

We’ll be eating dinner together when my old man gets home, so Ayase-san and I decided to study ’til then. There really wasn’t much else for us to do as exam students.

*Though, I can’t lie, I’ve been reaching for my increasingly growing pile of unread books whenever I needed a break here and there.*

Resisting their temptation, I forced myself to keep studying.

It wasn’t long before my old man returned with a familiar “I’m home,” and we were called to the dinner table.

What waited there for us were steaming bowls of beef stew.

Despite agreeing to not do any birthday celebrations this year, Akiko-san still wanted to do something. So, she ended up making Ayase-san’s favorite dish today.

“Now, where should we eat tonight?” Akiko-san asked, and Ayase-san and I tilted our heads in confusion

*The food’s already set up on the table—where else would we?*

“You know, I think here’s fine for today,” my old man said.

I followed his gaze.

The low table in the living room? No, that wasn't it. We'd removed it a while ago and replaced it with the newest addition to our winter arsenal.

A kotatsu.

An electric one, of course.

*That much's obvious, though. It ain't possible to dig into the floor of our apartment and install some traditional irori or hibachi<sup>[1]</sup> or anything.*

There were all sorts of electric kotatsu these days anyway, including ones that could be raised to regular table height, allowing you to sit on normal chairs while using them.

*The one we have is just some standard electric one though, placed on a carpet spread over the wood floor.*

That said, there was one thing unusual about it—it was rectangular. A square one probably comes to mind when you think of a kotatsu, but that would make watching TV as a family of four difficult, given someone would always have to sit with their back to the screen. On the other hand, a rectangular kotatsu allowed two people to sit on its long sides, making it possible for all four of us to watch together.

*So that's why ones like this are sold too,* I thought, impressed by their ingenuity.

*Anyway, looks like today's its grand debut.*

It's true—sitting all snug and warm under a kotatsu while eating sounds pretty appealing.

But—

"I'm fine with here though," Ayase-san said, glancing at the dining table.

—Since Ayase-san had the final say as today's birthday girl, we ended up staying at the dining table.

With a chorus of Happy Birthday, dinner began.

Without hesitation, Ayase-san quickly scooped up a spoonful of beef stew and took a bite, her face immediately beaming with joy as she commented on how good it tasted. Seeing her so satisfied like that brought warm smiles to both Akiko-san and my old man's faces.

The four of us together, gathering together as family—something that might seem ordinary to some.

But for us, it was something to cherish.

*"You've changed for the better, and that's all that matters."*

I suddenly remembered what I'd said to my old man, and his comment right after—something about me starting to sound more mature.

*But still, I can't help but think about what'll come next.*

The flow of the river is ceaseless and its water is never the same.<sup>[2]</sup>

Even the positive change we were experiencing now wouldn't last forever; it's inevitable that things would shift again. The sight of the four of us gathered around the table, eating together like this—even this was fleeting as well. What laid beyond this moment was still shrouded in mist.

I stole a glance at Akiko-san, recalling her cryptic words from this morning.

Ayase-san had mentioned about how futures could only be sometimes seen as chances, but also about how it didn't mean they were always necessarily bad.

*I still don't fully understand what she meant, though...*

Still, I had a feeling.

A feeling not just about our exam results—something else was coming, maybe within a few months. New change that wasn't far off.

As I mulled over these thoughts, Ayase-san happily ate her beef stew, repeating over and over about how warm and delicious it was.



Once the birthday dinner came to an end, my old man and Akiko-san immediately moved to our freshly installed kotatsu, bringing some snacks and freshly brewed black tea over with them.

“So warm... I don’t ever want to leave~,” Akiko-san uttered, her face melting into an expression of pure bliss as she slipped her feet under the pre-warmed kotatsu blanket.

She’d basically fused with the kotatsu, becoming one with it, as her entire body surrendered to its warmth.

“Why don’t you come over here too, Saki?” she beckoned to Ayase-san, as if she was calling over a cat.

Yet, all Ayase-san did was simply shake her head.

“Feel more comfortable here.”

Rather than joining the both of them at the kotatsu, she stayed at the dining table as she sipped her tea while flipping through her reference book, seemingly taking a short break after eating. Following her lead, I brewed myself a cup of coffee and was about to go through my flashcards, pausing to glance toward my old man and Akiko-san.

Though the two of them were still lounging in the kotatsu, completely and utterly relaxed, something felt kinda off...

*Are they hesitating to turn on the TV ’cause we’re still here?*

The both of them weren’t really doing anything at all at this point.

“Feel free to turn the TV on if you want to watch it.”

“I don’t really have anything I want to watch right now. How about you, Akiko-san?”

“I don’t really have anything either, I think...” Akiko-san answered in a drowsy voice.

“Don’t worry about us in that case. We’ll turn it on if we feel like it.”

*Guess I don't need to be worried if they're saying that much.*

Besides, we'd be retreating back to our rooms to study once our break was over anyway.

"More importantly, Yuuta. About New Year's..."

"Hm?" I looked up from my flashcards again. "Is this about going back home for the holidays?"

"That's right. We're thinking of visiting Akiko-san's family this year."

*Akiko-san's family... Which means the Ayase family's hometown, huh?*

"Where's that again?"

"Ishikawa Prefecture."

"It's near the ocean," Akiko-san, briefly returning to human form from her kotatsu-induced stupor, added. "My mom and dad are the only ones there right now..."

"They don't usually have a huge family gathering unlike back in our hometown. But since we didn't get to visit last year, we thought we'd at least go ourselves to greet them for the New Year."

"Just you two?"

"The two of you have your exams to focus on, right?"

It was at this time when Ayase-san turned to join the conversation. It was about her family's hometown, afterall—it was only natural she'd be interested.

She put down her reference book, turning to face my old man and Akiko-san.

"Saki knows this already, but there wouldn't be enough room for everyone to stay over if we all went there. Our place isn't that big," Akiko-san then commented.

"Ah... yeah. That's true."

"I see..."

“It might’ve not felt like it to you, but your family’s house is actually pretty big, Yuuta-niisan. We had many people over there all at once.”

“That’s correct. Anyway, it’s in the countryside, so there’s plenty of land, at least,” my old man added after nodding to Ayase-san’s comment.

*So, in other words...*

“Would you two be okay watching over the house...?” Akiko-san, now submerged up to her shoulders in the kotatsu, murmured sleepily.

She looked incredibly drowsy....

Maybe the sudden flip in her sleep schedule—going from a complete night owl to a normal daytime one—was finally catching up to her.

*Or maybe it’s just the irresistible magic of a kotatsu.*

“Just the two of us...?” Ayase-san uttered, her voice trailing off, growing small.

“Mm-hmmmm~”

“It’s only for two days. We’ll leave on the 31st and be back on the 2nd in the morning. Evening at the latest.”

*In other words... we’d be alone at home—just the two of us—on December 31st and January 1st.*

It was a relief in some ways—tagging along with them meant I wouldn’t be able to study, so being able to focus at home was definitely the better option.

“It’s just two days, Mom, so don’t go overboard with stocking the fridge, okay?” Ayase-san glanced toward the fridge as she spoke.

“Mm~... Don’t worryyyy... I’ll make sure to get you guys plenty of soba, mochi, and osechi<sup>[3]</sup>... You’ll be fineee~...”

“Haah...” Ayase-san sighed at her completely unconvincing response.

“You’re okay with this, Yuuta?”

“Ah, yeah. Not like I’ve got anything to do besides studying anyway.”

*Yep. The sad cries of us exam students.*

We had nothing to do except study.

*Or at least, that should be the case...*

“You two take the time to enjoy yourselves. Don’t worry about the house,” I said, steeling myself.

This was our final stretch before our exams. I needed to stay focused. I won’t have the time to think about anything else as long as I buried myself in just studying.

“She’s definitely going to get us way too much. I’ll make sure to check the fridge properly later...”

With that, she shut her reference book with a soft thud.

“I’m going to my room.”

“Yeah. Well then, guess I’ll do the same.”

In almost perfect unison, we both stood up, cups still in hand, and headed to our rooms.

*So... New Year’s just the two of us, huh?*

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[1]: Irori (囲炉裏) are traditional Japanese sunken hearths heated with charcoal, while hibachi (火鉢) are traditional heating braziers.

[2]: The opening line of Kamo no Chōmei's Hōjōki; a reflection on the nature of change and the importance of accepting impermanence (the philosophical problem of change).

[3]: Osechi are traditional Japanese New Year foods, known for being stored in their special, stacked, bento-esque boxes called jubako.

## December 31st (Friday) ~ January 1st (Saturday) -

### Yuuta Asamura

Winter break came around just a few days after Ayase-san's birthday, and time seemed to accelerate from that point on. Before I knew it, the year was already coming to an end.

It was finally the day for our parents—my old man and Akiko-san—to visit the Ayase family home.

As morning arrived, I woke up to the faint sound of movement.

*I didn't really get much studying done last night,* I thought groggily, my mind still sluggish as I worried about the looming presence of my exams—now just less than a month away.

Rolling over, I glanced at the clock.

9:30...?

Panic jolted me awake. I'd overslept—by a lot.

I let out a deep sigh of regret. My study session last night was everything but productive. Yet, instead of cutting it short, I stubbornly insisted on completing my planned workload. It'd led to a late night, and now... this.

After quickly getting dressed, I headed to the living room, being immediately met by my old man and Akiko-san in the midst of their chaotic departure.

"Oh, morning, Yuuta," my old man greeted me as he struggled to force a tightly packed suitcase shut, pressing down on it with all his might.

*The latch looks like it's 'bout to break...*

"Good morning," I replied. "You haven't left yet?"

I assumed they would have set out early, considering how congested the roads usually get during holiday season.

Mentioning this, my old man explained that the peak travel rush had been around the 29th, and that the 31st usually wasn't as bad.

"It's not like we'll be making any stops along the way. All that matters is arriving by evening. Thinking of it as *just* a drive makes it not a big deal at all."

*A long-overdue road trip for newlyweds, huh?*

Wait, now that I think about it, they didn't even have a proper wedding ceremony. They rarely go out together too—probably because they didn't want to leave Ayase-san and me alone for too long.

A rare long-distance trip for just the two of them. In other words, time alone as a married couple.

If anything, it really made it feel like Ayase-san and I had made the right choice by staying behind.

As I talked with my old man while he finished packing, Akiko-san sat at the table, fiddling with her makeup as she applied it, having already finished getting dressed a while ago.

Watching a grown woman carefully put her face together in front of a tabletop mirror was something unfamiliar to me—a high school boy with little to no exposure to such things. It made me feel oddly fidgety, so I quickly averted my gaze.

Ayase-san never did her makeup in front of others, so it really wasn't like I was used to seeing something like that.

*Now that I think about it, Akiko-san usually does hers in her bedroom too...*

"Hm? What is it, Yuuta-kun?" Akiko-san asked, noticing my gaze.

"Ah, no. Ummm, Aya—Saki's... already had breakfast, right?"

She nodded to my question in response, her eyebrow pen coming to a momentary pause. It wasn't like she was able to nod while applying makeup, after all.

“I set aside a portion for you, Yuuta-kun. Would you like it now? I can warm it up for you,” Akiko-san added, seemingly thinking that just nodding wasn’t enough of a response.

Pausing her makeup routine, she grabbed the plastic-wrapped plate placed at my usual seat as she stood up. Heading straight for the microwave, she then also began to reheat the miso soup left on the induction stove.

*Wait, was she doing her makeup here so she'd know the moment I woke up?*

“Ah, I’ll do it myself,” I told her.

“Don’t be shy. I was just about to finish anyway.”

Eating now at this hour meant I’d be having lunch in no time, and honestly, I had even considered skipping breakfast altogether. But given she’d already started to reheat everything, I figured I might as well eat.

As I waited for my food to be rewarmed, my old man picked up his phone and started making a call.

“Hello, this is Asamura. Yes, that’s right, we’re thinking of leaving now... Um, let’s see...”

It sounded like he was calling the Ayase family to let them know when they would arrive, at least from the bits and pieces I overheard.

I scooped some rice into my bowl as Akiko-san set out my reheated breakfast, flicking the kettle on to make some tea. Taking a quick peek around the kitchen, I checked the stock of prepared food.

*Soba for New Year's and even a pot of prepped dashi broth...*

“That broth’s ready to go—you’ll just have to heat it up and add the soba,” Akiko-san spoke up, noticing my gaze.

“Ah, gotcha. Thank you.”

“I’ve also frozen some Japanese mixed rice, so just microwave it when you want some. The pot over there has some squid with simmered taro as well.”

*She went out of her way to make all this? Even though we've already got plenty of osechi, soba, and mochi...*

“Hey, Yuuta-kun, do you know if there's another way to say ‘squid with simmered taro’?”

“...Huh?”

“It's a classic my mother used to make all the time, so it's familiar to me. But now that I think about it, I actually don't know what it's called in just one word.”

*...That's true, now that she mentions it.*

I've also noticed how Akiko-san sometimes referred to simmered dishes as “rolling simmered dishes.”

“How about... squidaro, or something?<sup>[1]</sup>” she suggested with a completely serious expression.

“How about... What?”

“Don't you think it sounds cute?”

“Sure?”

Yeah, it had a cute ring to it, but it also made it easy to forget what was actually in the dish.

“Anyway, everything turns out delicious as long as you simmer it,” Akiko-san said.

*That's a pretty blunt way to put it.*

“Speaking of simmered dishes, have you heard of jibuni<sup>[2]</sup>? That counts too, right?”

“Jibuni, huh? No...”

“It's a local dish from Kanazawa. It's really good. It's usually made with chicken or duck, so it's pretty light, and it also has a nice thick sauce. And it's got a lot of vegetables, so that makes it healthy too. I'll make it for you sometime.”

“Thank you very much. Actually...”

Before I could finish my sentence, Akiko-san placed a freshly warmed-up plate in front of me with a light plop. I reflectively put my hands together. Under the plastic wrap was some bacon and a sunny-side-up egg.

“Itadakimasu.”

“Here, bon appétit.”

As I started eating, Akiko-san went back to putting the finishing touches on her makeup. It barely took her five minutes before she moved on to discussing what gifts she and my old man should bring.

By the time I’d finished and went to wash my plate, the two of them had already started carrying their luggage out to the front of the entrance.

It was at that exact moment I heard the clicking of a doorknob turning, and Ayase-san stepped out of her room.

“They’re ’bout to head out.”

“Mm, that’s why I came out.”

We both helped carry their remaining bags to the entrance. Given they were only staying two nights and three days, they didn’t have too much. Even so, both my old man and Akiko-san’s hands were full. I offered to carry at least some of it down to the parking lot, but my old man insisted he’d handle it just fine.

*I’ll probably be hurting his pride if I keep insisting; I’ll just let it go.*

Now I *was* kinda worried, but he could always call for help with his phone if things got tough.

“Still, it feels a little bit lonely that we’ll not be able to spend New Year’s together,” Akiko-san added after saying her goodbyes.

“Well, we’ll be doing it every year from now on,” I replied as Ayase-san and I watched them off together.

Akiko-san widened her eyes in surprise for a brief moment, before breaking into a smile.

“That’s true,” she nodded.

We watched their backs as they walked towards the elevator. After closing the door behind us, Ayase-san and I exchanged glances.

*It'll be fine—we're both fully aware we're just exam students from here on out.*

“Alrighty, let’s both do our best.”

“Yeah.”

Without exchanging any more words, we each headed straight back to our rooms.

*Time to focus. Focus.*

I sat at my desk and narrowed my vision to my reference book containing past paper questions and notebook.

*I've gotta make as much possible progress in the morning here—*

Or so I thought, with my focus immediately breaking the moment I did.

My phone had chimed with a notification.

“Ayase-san...?”

She’d sent a text to me.

**Saki:** **【What time do you want lunch?】**

“I just ate, though...”

*No, no, I should still reply here.*

**Yuuta:** **【I just ate breakfast, so I was thinking around maybe 2 p.m.】**

**Saki:** **【I'll do the same then.】**

I immediately set an alarm for 2 p.m. and finally focused on studying.

*Focus, Yuuta!*

By the time I next looked up, my alarm had already gone off, and my stomach dropped immediately with panic.

*No way, did I concentrate too much this time?*

I opened up my texts, seeing a single modest message from Ayase-san.

**Saki:** [Lunch's ready.]

*Just one text. Did I make her worry?*

No, I think I would've ended up feeling down whether I had gotten distracted or ended up focusing too much in the end either way.

*Balancing being a student and a boyfriend sure is harder than I thought...*

Lunch was already prepared by the time I got to the dining room, and I immediately apologized for not being able to help.

After our late lunch, we returned to our rooms once again.



A faint sound arose within our quiet house, my concentration immediately breaking apart.

*\*Thump. Taptaptap... Thud. Patpatpat. Clatter.\**

I strangely immediately recognized who was moving around, something I've gotten used to after hearing their footsteps and the everyday sounds they make with each passing day.

A firm, determined start—only to hesitate, stopping to check on something, before resuming walking. A frequent habit of theirs.

Yet, I didn't even need to think about it. The only other person in the house right now was Ayase-san, after all.

As the sounds reached my ears, shaking my focus, my eyes flicked to my phone on the desk.

19:58.

*It's already night.*

It was only then did I realize that the clattering from earlier had been the dishes clinking together.

“Ah. It’s almost dinner time.”

I stuck a bookmark in my reference book before taking a stretch and leaving my room.

As I opened the door to the dining room, I saw what I’d exactly expected—Ayase-san preparing dinner alone.

*Looks like I made it in time this time.*

“Sorry. I’ll help,” I said, stepping into the kitchen.

It looked like she was in the middle of preparing some New Year’s soba. There was a pot of water heating on the stove, and the stacked osechi boxes had already been taken out of the fridge and were now placed on the table too.

*Right, we’ll need some plates then. Wait no, I should probably wipe down the table first.*

“I’m fine on my own. You can keep studying. I’ll call you once it’s ready,” Ayase-san, wearing an apron, turned back to me.

“I already left lunch to you. I can’t just keep studying while you do all the work,” I started, knowing just saying that wouldn’t convince her.

*For someone like Ayase-san...*

“Besides, it’s not like I want any mercy in this competition of ours.”

She gave me a pout in response. *Alright, looks like that got her.*

*Now, just one more push—*

“That’s not what I—”

“It’s a competition, right?” I reminded her.

“Y-yeah. Of course.”

“Then, the conditions have to be fair, dontchu think?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Right, with that said, we’ll do this together. Which one do we warm up first?”

Despite looking reluctant, Ayase-san finally started to give me instructions.

“Okay. First, wipe down the table. The rest’s just setting things out.”

“Roger.”

Grabbing the dish cloth, I reached for the stacked osechi boxes at the center of the table to move them aside. *Woah, these are heavier than I expected.*

Maybe it was because Akiko-san had some extra time to do some housework with her “special shift,” but she really has packed these to the brim.

“You think we can finish all this?”

Sure, one advantage of osechi dishes is that they’ll last a long time, but today’s youth like us still aren’t exactly used to eating them. Having this much might be a challenge...

“Don’t worry. Just check the bottom one. It’s Mom’s kind of osechi. You’ll see what I mean.”

*Akiko-san’s kinda osechi? What does that even mean?*

Tilting my head in confusion, I lifted the osechi boxes and peeked inside the bottom one.

“...It’s all fried chicken.”

Featuring whole, uncut lettuce leaves serving as plating, the osechi box was piled high—no, packed tightly to every corner—with nothing but fried chicken. Lemon wedges, cut into crescent shapes—apparently called kushikiri—also housed each corner like flower petals.

*I mean... Yeah, okay, I can eat this—a lot, even. But still...*

“The second tier’s more of the same.”

“What do you mean...? Oh, I see.”

The second tier was basically just a giant bento. It was filled with all the usual store-bought side dishes Akiko-san often packed in our lunches; stuff like kamaboko, simmered small fish, pickled plums—*hol’up, is this really osechi at this point?*—along with some homemade rolled omelets, all neatly arranged in sections.

Everything here was stuff I regularly ate and enjoyed, so finishing it wouldn’t be a problem.

*They aren’t gonna keep as long as traditional osechi, though...*

“Rather than osechi, this is just a giant bento...”

The stacked osechi boxes were starting to look like one massive dokaben<sup>[3]</sup> in my eyes.

“Mom isn’t really particular about stuff like this.”

“I mean, I’m not complaining since it looks like there won’t be any leftovers at this point.”

“Check the top one if you want the traditional stuff.”

Lifting the lid to the top box, I found all the typical osechi classics—things like shrimp and kuri kinton<sup>[4]</sup>.

*Yeah. Just this much seems manageable enough.*

“I mean, y’know, the whole point of osechi’s to avoid having to cook during the busy New Year’s season. Since we’re just eating it while my old man and Akiko-san are away, it doesn’t really need to last long. So logically speaking, it’s fair to say this is still practically osechi, right?”

“Calling it ‘practically osechi’ is kind of funny,” Ayase-san chuckled softly. “But yeah, this practically screams ‘Mom,’ though.”

“Yeah... it does.”

Considering the fact that Akiko-san works at a bar that serves food—and that she’s great at housework in general—I’ve got no doubt she could’ve made something more traditional if she wanted to. She just deliberately didn’t.

This is the exact kinda thing a grandma from the countryside would make for her grandkids, though that’s not something I’d ever say out loud.

*“Eat up, eat up, there’s plenty more where that came from.” I can practically hear it now.*

“I actually told her that,” Ayase-san suddenly commented. “I said about how osechi shouldn’t be something like what grandmas would feed their grandchildren when they’re visiting them in the countryside. Sure, you’re a high school boy going through puberty, Asamura-kun, but that doesn’t mean you need quantity over quality, at least to this extent.”

*Huh? Did I actually say that out loud?*

“It’s fine. I can manage this much.”

“They say ‘eating until you’re 80% full keeps the doctor away,’<sup>51</sup> right? Our exams are coming up, so don’t push yourself too hard. Got it? We’ve still got soba and some mochi left, too.”

*Oh, right...*

Actually, it’s not like we had to finish everything in just two days in the first place. So why was I talking like we had to?

“The soba’s ready,” Ayase-san announced as she lifted the noodles from the pot, rinsing them in a colander under cold water.

“Roger.”

Leaving her to handle that, I took out bowls for the dipping sauce, grabbed a tube of wasabi, and started chopping at some green onions from the fridge. I then set out the chopsticks, plates, and everything else on the table.

By the time I finished, she had wrapped up as well. We then sat across from each other.

I never expected to spend the last dinner of the year like this—*just* the two of us.

We put our hands together.

““Itadakimasu.””



It wasn’t long before I noticed something was off about Ayase-san as we started to eat.

She was trying to hide it from me too. And the fact that she was hiding it meant she probably wouldn’t answer if I asked her outright.

I had no choice but to keep eating, pretending not to notice, while quietly observing her.

There had to be something up about her. I felt something was off.

She was a little quieter than usual. Her posture was perfectly and awkwardly rigid, and she reached for her food with silent precision. Yet, her gaze would occasionally drift, as if she were preoccupied with something else.

Maybe it was because I was lost in these thoughts, but I accidentally knocked my chopsticks off the chopstick rest at that moment, sending them rolling onto the floor. I hastily reached down to pick them up—

And that’s when I noticed.

Ayase-san was subtly rubbing her feet together, as if trying to warm them up, under the table.

I rinsed the chopsticks in the sink before returning to my seat.

“You cold?”

The heater was running, but I did feel a slight chill in the air.

*Maybe I should turn up the temperature.*

Or maybe—

“D’you wanna eat over there?” I asked, gesturing with my eyes toward *that* specific spot—where the low table had been ’til last week.

In other words, the kotatsu in the living room.

It’d been something Ayase-san had been avoiding for the past week for some reason. Even when she got tired of studying in her room, I’d only ever seen her spread her textbooks out on the dining table instead.

She’d always dismissed it with an “It doesn’t feel right.”

I never knew why.

And even now, she shook her head.

“I’m fine here.”

*You sure you aren’t forcing yourself here?*

“Your feet are getting cold, aren’t they? The heater’s warm air does rise pretty fast.”

Newer models these days advertise how they’re able to warm the floor properly, but the heating and aircon unit in our living room was an older model—more than ten years old, actually. Even broke last summer and had to be repaired.

“But...”

“Exams are comin’ up, Saki-chan. Don’t catch a cold, m’kay?”

“...Are you copying me?” she furrowed her brows, looking a little miffed. I quickly switched my expression back to a serious one.

“We’re competing under fair conditions, remember? I just don’t want you to get sick.”

“Ugh...”

“Or d’you want to talk about it? I won’t force you to get in if you really don’t like the kotatsu, but I’d like to at least know why.”

“It’s not that I hate it... It’s just, I can’t say why. I don’t want to,” she explained with pursed lips, looking up at me slightly, almost sulking.

*No, ain’t telling me better at this point if you’re making that kinda face?*

But then again, I can’t force her if she doesn’t want to.

Still, I couldn’t just ignore it if she was sitting here freezing.

“Anyway, if you don’t hate it then let’s just eat the rest at the kotatsu. Don’t wanna catch a cold, amirite?”

“...Fine.”

We moved our remaining soba and osechi dishes to the kotatsu in the living room. I wiped it down again just to be safe, and wrapped up the leftover osechi we wouldn’t be touching today and put them in the fridge.

*Now then, how should we sit?*

“Wanna watch a movie?”

“Yeah... I guess I’d like to relax a bit, at least for the moment the new year arrives.”

*Looks like she’s already finished with what she’d planned to study for the day.*

I felt the same way, so we decided to sit side by side by the long edge at the kotatsu, making it easy to watch the TV together.

“Any preferences?” I asked while holding the remote in hand, scrolling through some of the subscription channels our family was signed up for. I read out some of the titles—ones that caught my interest and ones I thought Ayase-san might like.

She followed along with her eyes, murmuring a few, “*Hmm*”s as she considered.

“Oh, there’s a midwinter horror special. Huh, *The Thing*’s on here. Wait, wasn’t that set in winter? Oh, right, because it takes place in Antarctica. *Gremlins*... yep, that one’s definitely set in winter. Yeah, there are some classic films here.”

“Absolutely no horror,” Ayase-san shook her head vigorously.

“Scared?”

“Not scared.”

It’s rare for Ayase-san to sound so blunt like this.

...*Which meant she was scared.*

“Got it. No horror.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Of course not. Not scared at all, right? Then how about this one? It’s ’bout animals.”

It looked to be a dog reincarnation story, at least from the synopsis.

“Cute.”

“Right then, let’s go with this,” Ayase-san spoke with a relieved expression. “But Yuuta-niisan, you don’t always have to pick based on what I want. You should watch what you like too... As long as it’s not horror.”

“I mean if it were books I’d choose what I like. But honestly, when it comes to movies, I don’t really mind either way.”

“Really?”

“I don’t really know much about movies, so I tend to go with what other people like.”

I’d probably end up stuck with a narrow selection if I insisted on only watching what I liked.

With that decision made, we sat side by side in the warmth of the kotatsu, watching the movie while finishing the leftovers of our meal.

The story unfolded just as the synopsis suggested—a heartwarming tale about a dog being reborn over and over, trying to reunite with its owner.

It was pretty good to just have on as some background noise.



“I wonder if this is adapted from a novel.”

“You’ve just watched the movie, but you’d still read the book?” Ayase-san commented with a surprised look at first, before something seemingly clicked in her mind. “...Ah, right. You’re that kind of person, Asamura-kun.”

Hearing her call me Asamura again after so long felt weirdly nostalgic. Given we’d been in the house together the whole time ever since winter break started, she’d naturally only been calling me Yuuta-niisan instead.

“What?”

“It’s just been a while since you’ve called me Asamura-kun.”

“...Yuuta-niisan.”

“I doubt our parents are gonna suddenly turn around and come back unannounced at this point here.”

“No. It’s more that if I let my guard down here... *Mhmm, fuaah,*” she started to explain, before letting out a small yawn, probably because she was feeling full.

“We need to clean up... but I can’t move... I feel like I’m going to melt. It’s too warm,” she said, her eyes darting towards the remains of dinner on the table, yet the more she spoke, the deeper her arms burrowed into the kotatsu blanket. “So warm... I can’t... leave...”

Ayase-san had fully become one with the kotatsu.

“Well, this much’s fine just for tonight.”

The both of us had been completely focused on studying over the past few weeks—only allowing ourselves to leave the house for quick grocery runs, practically dedicating nearly all of our time to just exam prep. It was as if we were sprinting through the last ten meters of a short-distance sprint, holding our breaths the entire way.

*But, at least for just this one moment—at least through the turn of the year—a li’l break won’t hurt.*

“I’ll clean up,” I said, pulling myself out of the kotatsu, picking up the empty plates and osechi boxes.

“No, I’ll help.”

Tearing herself away from her newfound fusion with the kotatsu, Ayase-san grabbed the remaining dishes and followed me into the kitchen.

We stood side by side, washing the dishes together.

I brewed us some tea after we finished, and we returned to the kotatsu once more.

“I kind of feel like I should’ve studied a bit more.”

“I guess, yeah...”

But the fact that we were even saying that meant neither of us had any intention of getting up.

“It’s so warm...”

“The kotatsu really is dangerous. You can’t leave once you’re in...”

And maybe that’s why Ayase-san had been so adamant about avoiding it—she knew just how irresistible its warmth could be.

As I absentmindedly watched the movie’s final scene play out, Ayase-san suddenly spoke up.

“Ah, you know...”

“Hm?”

“Um... so...”

Could she maybe be confessing about what she mentioned earlier—the reason she didn’t like the kotatsu?

*At least that’s my guess...*

“Yeah, I’m listening. What’s up?”

“I, uh... feel kind of... sweaty right now. Do I smell or anything?”

“Huh? ...Not really. No,” I answered, albeit almost immediately regretting my reflexive response.

Now that I thought about it, this was a quirk that did come with kotatsu. You’ll only really understand yourself once you dive under it up to your shoulders and turn the heat to high, but it actually gets pretty hot. I mean, of course you’d sweat.

*But that ain’t the real issue here.* I’d once read somewhere that women were often more conscious of scent than men. Now, I admittedly hadn’t personally sourced through the latest academic papers, or actually looked at any reliable data at that, so this was just something I’ve practically picked up by ear. Still, if that was true, then Ayase-san’s real problem wasn’t just the warmth—it was sweating because of it.

“Are you sure?”

*Yep, she’s clearly worried about it.* Yet, here I was answering so carelessly with just a simple “not really.” I wonder if that made her anxious...

“Uhhh... yeah, you’re totally fine. I don’t notice anything at all. Honestly, I’m more worried ‘bout myself now you bring it up.”

There’s no doubt that Ayase-san is definitely more attentive to scent than I am.

She looked at me with slightly widened eyes at my response, as if it had caught her off guard—as if she hadn’t expected me to say that.

*Wait no, that’s actually how I kinda reacted to her too...*

“Not really...” she said, then leaning in slightly, closing her eyes, probably unconsciously and without much thought. Her nose twitched as she sniffed the air. “...*Hmm.* Nothing in particular.”

“T-that so?”

“Do you use anything, Asamura-kun?”

“Huh? You mean like cologne?”

“Like, you know, deodorant or antiperspirants, that sorta thing.”

“Wait... deodorant and antiperspirant aren’t the same?”

“Eh?” Ayase-san let out a puzzled voice, blinking her eyes open with a puzzled expression. “Yeah, they aren’t. Deodorant’s something for masking or getting rid of the smell, while antiperspirant is for preventing sweat itself.”

“Gotcha. But no, I don’t really use either.”

“Eh?” Ayase-san said in surprise, closing her eyes again as she brought her face in even closer. “So if it’s not something you’re wearing... maybe your shampoo...?”<sup>[6]</sup>

Her long lashes came dangerously close to my neck, and I had to fight the instinct to pull away.

“M-maybe, I guess? Or uh, it could also just be the scent of my fabric softener...?”

“Ahhh... Yes, that’s possible too...” she muttered, before suddenly pulling back as if she was snapping out of some trance, opening her eyes back hastily. “Sorry, that wasn’t fair.”

“Huh?”

“I sorta... checked your scent without thinking.”

“I mean, I don’t really mind.”

*Okay, my heart is pounding so loudly right now to the point where it’s almost unbearable, but that’s just a physiological reaction—cut me some slack here.*

If anything, considering the fact we were sitting side by side in the kotatsu, practically brushing against each other—and the fact I was aware of her as my girlfriend at this very moment—I should’ve probably been way more flustered.

Yet, we’ve spent too long trying to act like family in the end. That ingrained sense of restraint—the idea that we shouldn’t be looking at each other in that kinda light—hadn’t completely dissipated yet.

It wasn't like I thought us being a couple was a problem. Instead, deep down, I think what I fear the most is that if we ever broke up—like my old man and biological mother—everything would be ruined. Specifically, about how we maybe wouldn't be able to stay a comfortable family anymore. Sure, I've heard about exes staying as friends, but I couldn't picture it happening to *us*. If there was any form of firsthand experience that Ayase-san and I had, then it was the bitter taste of a home that had fallen apart.

That fear lingered.

*So even now, sitting this close, touching each other; deep down, there's still this feeling—*

"But still, I really don't think it was fair," Ayase-san commented, interrupting my thoughts.

I was once reminded about how Ayase-san didn't like finding herself at the end of a one-sided gain or loss, whether it be with family, friends, or a lover.

She especially hated getting something the easy way. If she had to be in a give-and-take relationship, she preferred to be more on the giving side. Some might see that attitude as being overly uptight, but for me, that earnestness was something I only admired her for.

*Well, things usually spiral out of control when she goes too far with that though...*

And right now, I had a very bad feeling about where this was going.

"You really don't have to worry 'bout it. Like, even if you say that, I don't even know how we're supposed to make this 'fair.'"

Hearing my response, Ayase-san looked at me and let out a small "Hmph."

"Got it. Well then—"

She casually swept back the long strands of hair draped over the left side of her face.

"Go ahead."

*No, no, wait. Hold your horses here, Ayase-san.*

“You *really* don’t have to go that far to make it fair.”

“Even though you said you didn’t mind earlier?”

“I-I did.”

“Then it’s fine. Go ahead.”

“*Huuuh...?*”

*It really is no easy chance changing her mind once she makes it up.*

And if I refused now, there was that very real chance she’d misinterpret me as thinking that she *did* smell bad.

“Go ahead,” she said, exuding an intense pressure.

“O-okay, okay.”

Timidly leaning in, I brought my face closer to the nape of her neck, where she had brushed her hair aside. My gaze inadvertently drifted downward as I did—almost catching a glimpse of her cleavage—so I quickly shut my eyes.

But with my vision completely now cut off, my other senses felt oddly sharper.

Oblivious to my inner struggle, the final theme of the movie played out on the TV at that moment.

*Guess I missed the ending.*

And as I had expected, she didn’t smell remotely bad at all. If anything—

A faint, gentle fragrance brushed against my nose.

It was probably from her shampoo, or maybe the lingering scent of the fabric softener on her clothes. I wasn’t entirely sure, but whatever it was, it was incredibly calming.

“I don’t really smell anything that you should be bothered about...” I slowly pulled back as I spoke.

“I see.”

“Yeah.”

Before I knew it, the movie we had on the TV had begun to roll its long closing credits.

“We missed the ending.”

“Well, I got the gist that it was more of a happy one.”

“Yeah... Good enough for me, I guess.”

*I've got a feeling we'd piss the filmmakers off if we'd said that in front of them though.*

Ayase-san then turned back toward the TV before leaning slightly toward me, her left shoulder bumping gently against my right. Feeling her light weight against me, I reached for the remote.

“What now? Anything else you wanna watch?” I asked.

“I don't think I'll make it if it's something long... I might fall asleep.”

I glanced at the clock on the wall. A little past 11 p.m.

*Yeah, we'd push past midnight if we picked a two hour movie right now.*

“How 'bout a New Year's music program?”

“Won't that be kind of noisy...?”

“Then maybe one with less emcee chatter and more music?” I suggested that idea, with her nodding immediately in satisfaction.

I flipped through the channels until I found a program centered around 80s J-pop. It apparently featured some current artists performing their favorite songs from the 80s—one after another with barely any commentary in between.

By coincidence, or maybe even deliberately, most of the songs chosen had mellow, soothing vibes to them. We sat side by side, quietly taking in the flow of music from the screen.

Late night, December 31st.

Only a few sounds reached up to our third-floor apartment. Aside from the music playing on the TV, there was only the faint tick of the battery-powered clock on the wall that marked each passing minute, the occasional hum of the aircon as it released warm air to compensate for the drop in temperature, and Ayase-san's quiet, steady breathing right beside me.

The kotatsu's warmth was just right, and it gradually erased all the tension from my body. Time itself slowed to a crawl.

*Tomorrow will be back to the usual grind—another day buried in exam prep.*

But for tonight, at least just for now, I guess it was fine to do nothing and just relax.

As I felt the weight of Ayase-san's head resting against my right shoulder, my thoughts drifted toward the future.

By the time the latter half of February rolls around, the both of us would be done with our entrance exams. Our high school graduation was set for March 1st, and around ten days later, the university common test results would be announced. By then, everything would be clear.

My looming sense of anxiety began to creep back in.

*Will I actually be accepted into my first choice?*

*What do I do if I fail to even get into any of the unis I applied to?*

They were both worries I'd already experienced back when I was taking my high school entrance exams, yet somehow, they felt way more overwhelming this time around. It was as if my entire future would be painted over in black.

Logically speaking, I knew better. I knew that failing my entrance exams wouldn't mean the end of the world. It's common enough to the point where most people are still able to support themselves financially while taking a gap year to try again, after all. Others even choose to directly enter the workforce instead too.

Still, logic and emotion don't always align. And time keeps moving forward.

We can't reclaim the past, the entropy of an isolated system will only ever increase, and you can't fully convert thermal energy back into any other form. The second law of thermodynamics made sure of that. By the way, the first law's about energy conservation, and always shows up on exams—

*Wait no. Let's not think 'bout that for just a few more hours...*

"Oh, the bell," Ayase-san spoke softly as a distant chime reached our third floor apartment—likely the New Year's shrine bell.

The song on the TV concluded at that exact moment, and the screen abruptly switched to the live feed of the shrine, with the emcee announcing that the near year was just moments away.

A deep, solemn chime resonated from the broadcast, far clearer than the distant one we'd just heard. As the camera panned across a darkened bell tower, we were able to see a dense crowd that surrounded it, waiting in line to watch the ritual.

The camera then zoomed in on a bald monk dressed in red and purple Buddhist robes.

"He's got a really nicely-shaped head," Ayase-san remarked.

*Huh? That's the first thing that comes to your mind when watching a monk strike the New Year's Eve bell?*

With a powerful swing, the monk swung the massive wooden log—which was thicker than a person's face—crashing into the great bell.

The heavy, reverberating chime rang out once more from the TV as the both of us sat in silence, watching the scene unfold while listening to the sound fill the atmosphere.

*\*Booooooong.\**

*\*Booooooong.\**

The camera switched between angles and captured different parts of the shrine grounds. It looked to be an old shrine in the countryside, with paths lined with torches and lanterns. The feed had shown the shrine's name and location earlier, but we'd missed it.

*It's probably somewhere up north.*

A gentle snowfall dusted the black-tiled rooftops.

The collective breath of the gathered crowd rose into the cold night air in white puffs.

Just watching made me feel cold, making the warmth of the kotatsu even more precious than it already was.

The screen then switched back to the studio, and the emcee leading the program began a countdown, with the singer on stage raising their voice to match the rising excitement. With the countdown happening, the screen switched back to the shrine bell tower once again. The instant the next deep, resounding chime echoed, bold letters spelling out "Happy New Year" danced across the screen. The cameras then cut to a scene of people in the crowd receiving amazake<sup>[2]</sup> almost immediately after—their cheeks flushed red from the cold as they buried in their scarves, cradling the warm drink in their hands while blowing out white puffs of breath as they smiled and sipped.

The weight beside me lifted from my shoulder. When I turned to my side, I found Ayase-san doing the same, and our gazes met at the exact moment.

““Happy New Year,”” we both said in unison. “Looking forward to another year with you,” I added as she offered a soft, warm smile.

“Likewise. Please take care of me this year, too.”

We placed our hands together on the carpet—my right hand resting over Ayase-san's left. Then, just like before, she leaned her head against my right shoulder.

*It feels like the distance between us has shrunk even further.*

Snuggling up to each other, with our shoulders pressed together, we listened once more to the solemn chime of the temple bell playing from the screen. The stress of exams, which had left my nerves torn-up, seemed to melt away—just for this moment.

Gazing at the snowy landscape in the distance on the TV, wrapped in the kotatsu's warmth, and—more than anything—feeling the comforting heat of the person beside me, made all the uncertainties of the future seem less overwhelming.

My eyelids grew heavy.

Ayase-san let out a yawn from beside me, and before I knew it, I followed suit with a big yawn of my own.

*Her weight resting against me sure feels comforting.*

At the same time, I could feel that she, too, was supporting mine.

As we nestled close, leaning into each other under the kotatsu, my consciousness began to drift away.

*This is bad.*

What would someone think if they saw us like this—huddled together, half-asleep under the kotatsu? Surely no one in their right mind would believe we were *just* unusually close siblings.

*But honestly... I don't care at this point.*

A hazy thought that maybe this was all fine surfaced from somewhere in the back of my mind. Rather than worrying about how we looked to others, what mattered was treasuring our relationship. I didn't want to pretend this moment never happened.

The time I've spent with Ayase-san—with Saki—has been precious.

If change is an inevitable part of life, then I want to cherish this moment as one that can never be repeated.

And if something is truly precious, then even if it changes, I want it to change for the better.

From strangers to step-siblings.

From step-siblings to unusually close ones.

That's how our relationship has evolved.

It wasn't long before the weight against me became even heavier as I heard Saki's soft, deep and steady breathing.

*Ah... She fell asleep.*

*This has happened before, hasn't it?* I thought as a faint memory started to resurface from the depths of my mind.

It was the train ride home from our school trip, where we had been sitting side by side, just like this. She'd fallen asleep before me back then too. I had stayed awake at the time, trying my best to support her as she leaned against me.

*But this time...*

My eyelids slowly drifted shut.

Even if our parents were to come home at this very moment, and even if they saw us like this and our family dynamic were to change as a result—I didn't want to be afraid.

Change doesn't always mean things would take a turn for the worse, after all.

As my eyelids finally fully closed, I slipped into the depths of sleep.





In my first dream of the new year, I was driving.

Even though I didn't even have a license yet, here I was behind the wheel of a minivan.

Yet somehow, I didn't find it strange at all.

*Ah, I'm dreaming,* I thought with a hazy sense of awareness as I calmly steered the large vehicle forward. My viewpoint was high, and I could make out my slightly older face from the faint reflection on the windshield.

Even without turning around, I knew exactly who was in the minivan with me.

*Because, well, this is a dream.*

Seated in the passenger seat was Saki, also looking just a little older. In the back sat two children—a boy and a girl. I knew who they were without a doubt, and yet their faces were blurred, obscured with a mist-like haze.

Us as parents and our children—a son and daughter. A family of four.

The view then suddenly opened up as our minivan exited the mountain road.

“Wooooah!” the kids in the back cheered.

The sea. A vast expanse of blue stretched out to the left.

An old 80s J-Pop song began to play from the minivan's speakers, and I couldn't help but think about how unimaginative I was, especially since I'd just heard it on the New Year's music program we were watching earlier.

The minivan cruised along the coastline as the endless blue sea followed beside us.

It wasn't long before four sets of footprints trailed endlessly across the sand, as the children rang along the beach, tumbling and laughing.

Thick cumulonimbus clouds loomed over the horizon in the distance, and beneath them, several large ships in full sail drifted across the sea.

As the sun slowly dipped toward the horizon, the wind came to an abrupt halt.

A moment of absolute stillness—a lull in the sea.

Land absorbs and releases heat more rapidly than the sea, so during the day, the sun-warmed land creates an updraft that lowers air pressure and draws in the sea breeze. At night, the land cools quickly while the sea remains warmer, causing the wind to reverse and flow from land to sea—the land breeze.

This brief pause during the transition in direction was called the wind lull.

With the wind now gone, the lingering summer heat made my skin grow damp with sweat.

"Time to head back soon," I called out to our children as they played by the waves.

Night would fall by the time the land breeze picked up—we needed to leave before then.

Wind lulls are short, after all. Soon, a new gust of wind would begin to blow.

As I drove us home, I glanced at the children, who'd fallen asleep, exhausted from playing.

I then turned to Saki and said something.

She looked surprised at first, before smiling and nodding.

Yet, I couldn't hear what I had said—even though I'd spoken the words myself.

I woke up.

*Ahhh... It really was just a dream.*

Given I had slept with my whole body tucked under the kotatsu, I had begun to sweat.

Feeling self-conscious, I brought my shoulder close to my nose and took a sniff; but, of course, I couldn't tell if I smelled or not.

I turned to look at Saki, still asleep beside me.

Her lips moved slightly as she mumbled something unintelligible. From the peaceful expression on her face, I could tell it wasn't because she was having a nightmare.

*Maybe it was a good thing we hadn't watched a horror movie after all.*

Even so...

I couldn't help but wonder—what did the dream version of me say to Saki?

The TV, which was still left on, now showed scenes of New Year's celebrations from a foreign country, with the calm voice of the announcer describing the faces of people welcoming the new year with excitement.

*I wish this peaceful moment could last forever,* I thought as I enjoyed the New Year's atmosphere.

But I knew it couldn't.

Would a future like the one in my dream—a future with a family of four—ever come true?

*I'll have to focus hard on my exams for that.*

The lull in the sea had ended.

A new season, with fresh winds, was about to begin.

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[\[1\]](#): Ok, here's a break down of the above section:

“里芋の煮物” (satoimo no nimono, literally meaning “simmered taro”) is the dish referring to taro cooked in dashi, saki, soy sauce, mirin, and sugar, with the “煮物” (nimono) part referring to “simmered.” The quirk here is that Akiko usually uses “煮つ転がし” instead (nikkogorashi, literally meaning “rolling simmer”), which isn't really a common way of saying it (although also correct).

The thing is, the dish she's prepared isn't just simmered taro; it's squid with simmered taro, “イカと里芋の煮つ転がし” (“ika to satoimo no nikkogorashi”), with the “イカ” (ika) meaning squid. Given “squid with simmered taro” isn't really a name of a dish, but rather just a pre-existing dish with something else added, Akiko's wondering if there's an actual name for it (like for example, you don't call “sukiyaki” “beef stew with vegetables and mushrooms,” you just call it “sukiyaki”).

So she attempts to combine the words “ika to satoimo no nikkogorashi” into one word, “ikamokkorogashi,” with the “ika” coming from “ika” (squid), the “mo” coming from “nimono” (taro), and the “kkorogashi” coming from “nikkorogashi” (rolling simmer).

Hence our localization “squidaro.” Yes I'm proud of it, if you were asking.

[\[2\]](#): A traditional simmered duck or chicken dish from Kanazawa in Ishikawa Prefecture (Akiko's home prefecture).

[\[3\]](#): “ドカ弁” (dokaben) originates from the combination of the words “どかた” (dokata, meaning “construction worker”) and “弁当” (bento, meaning lunch box), referring to the large bento boxes construction workers would usually bring on the job for their lunch breaks.

[\[4\]](#): “栗きんとん” (kuri kinton) refers to a traditional dish featuring candied chestnuts and sweet potatoes.

[\[5\]](#): “腹八分目には医者いらず,” with the specific phrase “腹八分目” (hara hachi bu) referring to the Japanese practice of only eating until you're 80% full.

[\[6\]](#): Yuuta probably has the homozygous recessive genotype of the ABCC11 gene, encoding for a loss of function mutation resulting in very weakly odored, or even odorless, sweat. It's a genotype carried by 80 - 95% of East Asians, most predominantly in Japanese, Koreans, and Han Chinese (sorry, I reflexively typed this given I'm not only just a biochem major, but someone who's had to explain this to people when they ask why I've never needed to use deodorant).

[\[7\]](#): A traditional low alcoholic drink made from fermented rice.

## January 15th (Saturday) ~ January 16th (Sunday) -

### Yuuta Asamura

I went to bed last night with a sense of fulfillment, feeling I had done everything I possibly could. I had hoped to wake up before my alarm today, get fully ready, and—

“...That would’ve been nice.” I muttered to myself as I washed my face, trying to shake off my looming drowsiness.

In all honesty, I hadn’t slept much at all.

Today was the first day of the Common Test for University Admissions.

In other words, the decisive battle.

If I didn’t pass the minimum cutoff score—around 670 points for The Department of Social Data Science at Ichise University—I wouldn’t even qualify for the second-stage of the exams; that part was a given. Assuming you clear that hurdle, then the passing rate for that was around fifty-fifty, with the borderline for the second-stage of the exams said to be around 85%—in other words, 765 points out of the possible 900. I was ideally aiming for a 770 or even an 800.

I had done everything I could up ’til now, and I was confident in that—or at least I had been. Up until yesterday, I was sure of it.

*...I have, right?*

Damn it. I couldn’t calm down.

Opening the door to the dining room, I saw my family had already gathered.

*That’s early.*

“Good morning, Yuuta.”

“Good morning, Yuuta-kun. Would you like some rice?”

My old man and Akiko-san had already made breakfast and had it all laid out on the table. I hadn't been able to help with any chores at all for the past few days, so I felt a sense of guilt.

"Ah, yes. Thank you very much. Good morning."

As I took my seat, Ayase-san stopped eating and greeted me with a "Good morning."

As I responded with another "Good morning," of my own, she quickly urged me with a, "Hurry up and eat, Yuuta-niisan. You don't have much time left."

"Huh? It's already that—"

I glanced at the clock on the wall.

"...I think I'll make it."

Exam halls for the common test were determined based on the high school students attended and where they live—information used by the Common Test for University Admissions to assign test locations accordingly.

Given both Ayase-san and I went to the same high school and lived in the same apartment, it was highly likely we were assigned to the same exam hall.

*And, in fact, we were.*

Our designated location was a university campus within walking distance of our home.

Had we been placed somewhere in Shibuya, then we would've probably been sent to some prep school in Shinjuku instead, so this was pretty relieving. We both felt lucky that it was pretty close.

"What if you forgot your exam ticket or something?" Ayase-san asked.

A chill immediately ran down my spine.

"Don't jinx it! I checked it over and over yesterday."

“That so? Oh, what if you get an upset stomach and need medicine?”

“No way, c’mon. Besides, I already planned on bringing some just in case.”

“You might forget your stationary.”

“Already checked everything last night and put it all in my bag.”

“You could get caught in traffic.”

“Weren’t we both happy about how our exam hall’s within walking distance, remember?”

“But—”

“Saki. Hol’ on a sec,” I stopped her and looked at her intently.

*Could it be...*

“Are you nervous?”

Ayase-san held my gaze for a few seconds at my words for a few seconds before quickly looking away. Then, she resumed eating her breakfast.

*Yeah... I see how it is.*

“It’s fine as long as *you’re* okay.”

“Look, I’m kinda nervous too to be honest,” I admitted, prompting Ayase-san’s chopsticks to suddenly stop again.

“You are?”

“That’s... well.”

“Even though you studied so much?”

“That goes for both of us.”

If anything, Ayase-san’s final push felt even more intense than mine. I could barely even do anything beyond reviewing my summary notes under the pretense of a final check as the day of the exam drew closer.

“I think you’ll be fine, Yuuta-niisan.”

“If only I could be sure of that...” I muttered, poking at my fried egg with my chopsticks, and before knowing it, letting out a sigh.

“Yuuta-kun,” Akiko-san called out, making me lift my head.  
“Listen, both of you.”

Ayase-san also stopped eating and looked up.

“No matter the results you get, I know how hard the both of you have worked to get there. Taichi-san and I both do. And just that alone makes us proud of you.”

My old man, sitting beside her, nodded with a warm smile.

In other words, they weren’t going to place unreasonable expectations on us, nor would they be disappointed if we fell short, That’s what she was essentially saying.

So I—no, both Ayase-san and I—could stop sitting here curled up in fear. We could move forward.

“Thank you very much,” I said, feeling truly grateful that Akiko-san was here as our mother.

At my words of gratitude, Akiko-san responded with a gentle smile.

Seeing that smile, I felt my shoulders instantly lighten. The weight I’d been carrying immediately dissipated along with the fear that had been tormenting me—the fear of failing and disappointing everyone.

“Mm-hmm. As expected of you, Akiko-san. You’re much better at encouraging people than I am.”

“I only imitated what you always do, Taichi-san.”

“I-is that so?”

“Yes.”

“That makes me embarrassed, ahaha.”

“Ufufu~”

Our parents proceeded to chuckle at each other while sharing warm smiles.

*Huh? That was a pretty nice moment just now, but did they just somehow use it as an excuse to flirt?*

“Yuuta-niisan,” Ayase-san called out to me, looking straight at me.

“Saki...”



“I won’t lose.”

“Ugh... Y-yeah, right.”

*We’ve really made this into a competition, huh?*

Still, I wasn’t expecting her to bring it up now of all times...

Well, maybe this was her way of easing the tension.

“That’s why... I’m going to do my best.”

And I could tell that, deep down, she was wishing for me to do my best, too.

*Even so, she wouldn’t say that out loud.*

Saki Ayase was the type of person to never force her expectations onto others. She wouldn’t stop moving forward even if I were to stumble. Her efforts were for herself, not something she expected from anyone else.

*Though that relentless self-discipline of hers makes me worry sometimes...*

She was always fighting with a heart wound up too tight.

“But yeah, I think I was able to push myself this far because of you, Saki.”

“...Because of me?”

I nodded.

“The competition made it fun.”

“...For me too!”

That’s why, let’s stop getting all anxious for no reason about whatever’s to come. I’ve done everything I could.



We left our house side by side, walking at a steady pace toward our testing location.

The twenty-minute walk was quiet, fitting for a Saturday morning. Although there weren't many people around, I spotted a few students here and there; most likely fellow exam takers.

"I think we left a li'l early."

"Better than being late."

*She has a point.*

As we approached the university's gate, my heart rate naturally picked up.

There, we saw a sign, written in bold ink, that announced the venue and the fact that exams for the common test were to take place.

Even though we had the same testing location, Ayase-san and I wouldn't be in the same exam hall. After entering the building and checking the guide map, we each headed to our designated classrooms.

I spotted a restroom and decided to use it just in case. After drying my hands with my handkerchief, I took several deep breaths.

*Stay calm.*

I walked down the hallway toward my assigned classroom.

And then, the exam began. My entrance exams were finally here in full swing.

I had placed my smartphone on my desk beforehand, before turning it off and tucking it into my bag along with the other students at the proctor's signal.

With another signal, we flipped open our exam booklets.

*Alright, focus...*

At least for this moment, I would forget about my worries for the future with Ayase-san; all that mattered right now was solving these problems.



The chime from the speakers and the examiner's call to stop made me snap back to reality.

I checked the name field on my answer sheet to make sure I hadn't forgotten to fill it in. Then, taking a deep breath, I gathered my stationary and stood up.

There were about 80 minutes left until the afternoon exams, meaning it was time for lunch and a break.

Turning on my phone, I saw a message from Ayase-san.

**Saki:** [What are you doing for lunch?]

A short question, followed by her floor and classroom number.

*She's surprisingly close by.*

Checking the guide map, I noticed a lounge-like area nearby. Snapping a photo of the map and sending it to her, I suggested it as a location before heading to meet her.

"How was it?" she asked the moment she saw me.

"Well, it pretty much felt the same as the mock exams. Probably about the same as usual, I guess," I answered.

"That's great. I feel like I wasn't able to give it my all. Like, I could've done more," she confessed, biting her lip in frustration.

"I think that just shows how seriously you approached the exam, Ayase-san. I had some parts I couldn't really 'get' no matter how hard I tried too, so I just went with my gut. I'm sure every exam taker had a few questions like that."

"I hope so..."

We spent our break eating quietly, washing down our lunches with drinks from a vending machine. We didn't talk much about the test itself; thinking too much about what we got right or wrong would've probably just brought us down.

Still, being able to see Ayase-san between exams like this was a relief.

And though this wouldn't happen for our private university exams or the second-stage exams for the common test, we'd at least always see each other when we got home. Compared to other couples who'd drift apart during exam season and even break up, the fact we lived together was already a huge advantage.

*We'll get to see each other when we get home.*

Maybe that's why my old man could go to work every day with a smile.

As I found myself lost amongst these meaningless thoughts, the time to head back to my exam hall had suddenly already arrived.

"Hey," Ayase-san spoke up as we walked down the hallway.

"Hm?"

"You looked like you were thinking deeply about something just now."

*Wait, what was I thinking 'bout...? Oh.*

"Uhhh, just thinking 'bout the afternoon exam. Japanese, right?"

*A lie.*

No way could I say I was thinking of her.

"Japanese... So modern literature..." Ayase-san uttered and cast her gaze downward the moment I said that.

"Ah—no, no. I didn't mean it like that."

*Wait, the heck did I mean, then?* I thought, scolding myself internally. It was clear my attempt to cover it up wasn't helping at all.

Despite her efforts to tackle it, modern literature had always been a weak spot for Ayase-san, after all.

"Look, I know this might just sound like words of comfort, but you've started reading a ton more than before, amirite? I don't think you need to be so pessimistic."

“Well... I guess. But I still sometimes get confused whenever I read novels. Like, why are characters always saying the opposite of what they’re really thinking?”

*That does happen a lot.* Especially in first-person novels when the protagonist lies; it becomes a real challenge to decipher what’s the truth.

“...Asamura-kun, you’re trying to encourage me, yet you still call what you’re doing ‘words of comfort’?”

“I mean, you don’t like baseless reassurances, right?”

“That’s right.”

“So I figured I’d just come clean and call it what it is. At least you’d know I’m trying to encourage you that way.”

Ayase-san fell into thought at my words.

“I see...”

“Ah, this is my classroom,” I told her.

“Ah, right. Well then,” she said, giving me, giving me a small wave. “You’re good at Japanese, so I’m sure you’ll be fine, Asamura-kun. Just words of comfort, though.”

I chuckled and waved back.

The afternoon exams consisted of two subjects: Japanese and English. With that, the first day of our exams would be over.

The Japanese exam wasn’t too difficult for me, with the only question giving me trouble on interpreting emotional expressions. I could easily tell what the exam writer expected as the “correct” interpretation of the author’s intent, but a part of me didn’t really agree with it.

*Would it really be so wrong to take a different perspective?*

Still, I didn’t want to lose points over stubbornness. The common test didn’t award creativity, after all.

Ayase-san's face suddenly flashed through my mind for a brief moment, and I wondered how she answered that question. Maybe she struggled with it.

English, on the other hand, was a complete disaster for me—especially with the listening portion.

Compared to Ayase-san, who regularly surrounded herself with English audio materials, my lack of preparation clearly showed here. To be honest, there were only some parts I could vaguely understand, so all I could do was hope my answers somehow lined up correctly.

Still, I managed to fill in my answer sheet and finish the exam.

As I packed my stationary into my bag, getting ready to leave, I spotted a familiar face through the open classroom door.

Ayase-san was there, giving me a small wave.

I hurriedly gathered my things and stepped out.

“Here to pick me up?”

“My seat was near the hallway, so I left as soon as the exam ended.”

We left our testing location together.

Blending into the flow of students heading toward the station, we walked side by side, heading home.

“Did you get that message?”

“Huh?”

She held up her phone and showed me the screen, featuring a cute puppy sticker accompanied by a message, “Good job today!”

The pedestrian signal had just turned red, so we stopped walking, allowing me to pull my phone out of my pocket.

Upon turning it on, I saw a notification for a message.

And it wasn't just one; there were five.

It was pretty surprising for me, so I opened LINE to check, wondering who they were from.

The first message I saw featured the same puppy sticker Ayase-san had just shown me. I'd already suspected I would receive the same one the moment I saw hers. Sure enough, it was from Narasaka-san.

It was just a simple sticker—nothing else. But given she was also taking the common test, she must've known exactly when it ended. It was probably why she sent it right after the exam had finished.

I also had messages from friends at work—Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san.

Yomiuri-senpai, who hadn't sent a message in our summer camp group chat for a while now, had sent a simple encouragement.

**Shiori:** [Good job. Keep it up tomorrow.]

*Now that I think 'bout it, she must've taken the same test before.*

She probably remembered its schedule and was checking in on us.

**Erina:** [Do your best, senpai!]

It looked like Ayase-san was checking the same messages too.

"Kozono-san's already talking about hanging out again once it's all over. Isn't that sorta too soon?"

"I mean, she's only a first-year high schooler. She probably doesn't have a real sense of what uni entrance exams feel like yet."

"True."

There were also messages from my classmates—Shinjou and Yoshida.

If I remembered correctly, Shinjou was aiming for a national university, just like Maru. His message was polite and to the point.

**Shinjou:** [Good job.]

**Yoshida:** [So how was it?]

Yoshida's one was way more casual on the other hand.

*'How was it?', huh...? Now that's a hard answer.*

I was about to ask how it went for him, before remembering that Yoshida wasn't taking the common test. He'd already decided to apply only to private universities.

*Guess I'll just reply with "it was so-so" or something later.*

Just as I was thinking that, another notification popped up. It was from Maru.

I hadn't expected him to send a message like this, so it caught me off guard.

*...Why did he send the exact same puppy sticker as Narasaka-san?*

It felt as if she had sent it to him, and, not wanting to be rude but also not wanting to put in that much effort, he just hastily replied with the same sticker back out of laziness—and then forwarded it to me as an afterthought.

As the pedestrian signal turned green, I shoved my phone back in my pocket and crossed the street.

Ayase-san let out a small chuckle at that moment.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Hm? Ah, yeah. It's just Class Rep and Satou-san messaged me too."

"Ohhh."

"All they sent were stickers, but just looking at them made me picture their faces."

"Yep, that kinda thing happens, right?"

People's personalities shone through in their choice of stickers, after all.

*...Well, except for people like Maru, where it's obvious he didn't really put any thought into it.*

Or maybe that, in itself, was just part of his personality.

As we continued chatting about such trivial matters, our apartment building finally came into view.

Our way to the exam hall had felt long, given it was our first time walking that route, but walking and chatting with Ayase-san on the way back made the 30-minute journal feel like it passed in an instant.

“Mom said she’ll be making something delicious for dinner tonight.”

“Oh?”

*Wonder what it'll be.*

A classic like comforting beef stew, or something new?

Either way, I was looking forward to it.



January 16th—the morning of the second day of the Common Test for University Admissions.

Now that I was more familiar with the route, I naturally felt more at ease.

“I’m glad it didn’t rain on either day,” Akiko-san commented as she saw us off.

Come to think of it, I remember hearing about some rumor from back in the Heisei era that the weather would never fail to turn bad during the common test, bringing things like snowstorms. Though it’s not something you hear about anymore.

Yesterday was completely clear nationwide, and today was sunny in Tokyo as well.

That being said, it wasn't like the temperature had risen much. Though clouds act as natural blankets, trapping warmth in the atmosphere, it also meant the temperature would naturally drop when the sky clears at night—radiative cooling, or so it's called.

According to the weather recap, last night's low was a 0°C.

"It's cold," Ayase-san said as she walked beside me.

"Did you bring any heating patches?" I asked.

"Just in case. I have one under my clothes so it wouldn't stand out. I normally just endure it when it's this cold though..."

"You do?"

"Well... yes. I don't like having to change what I wear just because it's hot or cold out. It makes it feel like I'm losing to the weather, or something like that."

*...What exactly are you fighting against, Ayase-san?*

Well, it's very much like her, I guess.

"Just don't push yourself too hard, okay?"

"I told you, I brought one today. And I have a pocket warmer too, see?" she explained after nodding to my comment, pulling it out of her pocket and squeezing in her hand.

"Huh, you have that too?"

"Well, I don't want my fingers getting stiff."

"Ah, good point. Damn, I didn't even think of that."

I'd figured gloves would be enough; I really don't want to start my exam with numb fingers here.

*How embarrassing.*

Ayase-san had put way more thought into staying warm than I had in the end.

As I silently sulked over my lack of preparation, she suddenly stopped walking. Unzipping her sports bag and reaching inside, she pulled something out.

“Here. I brought a spare; you can have it.”

“Ah, yeah... Thanks.”

I pulled the pocket warmer from its packaging and dropped it into my wallet. My hands would now be probably warm enough by the time we reach the exam halls.

*And maybe it's just a placebo, but if it works, it works.*

Taking the same route as we did yesterday, we arrived at the university campus, with it strangely feeling larger than it had been the day before.

*Maybe that's 'cause I've got enough mental clarity today to notice the things I'd missed before, though.*

I had thought the same thing during my open campus visits back then, but the sheer scale of a national university was staggering. The number of buildings they had alone were impressive, let alone how mind-blowing it was that they were able to secure this much land in Tokyo—within walking distance of Shibuya Station no less.

I wonder how many Suisei Highs can fit in here.

“Alright, see you at lunch.”

“Yeah. Uh...” I hesitated, searching for the right words to say to Ayase-san, before taking out the pocket warmer from my pocket and gripping it. “You really helped me out. Thanks.”

I gave it a little shake as I spoke.

A soft rattle came from inside—from the iron powder and the various other materials that generated heat.

“What was that meant to be?”

“Oh, uh... just a li'l morale booster? Think of it like shaking some maracas.”

*\*Shaka shaka.\**

Ayase-san, who'd been tense just moments ago with the faintest wrinkle between her brows, now blinked in surprise, before covering her mouth and letting out a small giggle.

"The heck's with that? That's so weird."

*Welp, as long as it helped her relax.*

"Alright, c'ya later."

"Ah, mm. Later," she spoke, pulling out her own pocket warmer and giving it a little shake in return.

*Yeah, it does look kinda weird...*

I mean, I know I was the one who started it, but what was I even doing?

*Oh well, at least it eased the tension.*

I made my way to the same exam hall as yesterday.

Given we'd arrived early, there were only about five or six others present in it. I found the seat marked with my candidate number and sat down, preparing my stationary.

Then, I spent what remaining time I had aimlessly staring at the table of contents of my reference book. I felt like I'd be pushing what I knew out of my brain if I tried memorizing anything new now, sorta like pushing dough through a pasta machine. So, I stuck to just glancing at the index.

Today's subjects were science and math—my strong suits. My biggest fear wasn't facing difficult questions, but the possibility of freezing up under the pressure and failing to perform at my usual level.

The aircon was set to a comfortable level—not too cold, not too warm, so at least I wouldn't have to fight off drowsiness.

Gradually, the exam hall filled up, and it wasn't long before the proctor entered.

Just like yesterday, we were instructed to turn off our phones and store them in our bags. The answer sheets and exam booklets were then handed out.

The proctor announced the start of the exam.

I flipped open the exam booklet and scanned the whole thing first.

*I'll start with the ones I'm good with, and save the time-consuming questions for later.*

I marked down questions whenever I spotted ones similar to the problems I worked on before for reference. As I focused, everything else started to fade away—the presence of the other exam takers, the anxiety over whether I'd reach Ichise University's cut off, all of it melted into the background.

And as it had begun, the second day of exams—the crucial day—passed surprisingly quickly.

It could be because these were my strong subjects, but I also felt like I was able to tackle the questions with a clear mind today, without any unnecessary pressure.

Or maybe it was because I'd seen Ayase-san's smile before the exam.

With all our exams finished, Ayase-san and I walked home together, discussing our answers for the tests we had both taken.

It allowed us both to realize a few mistakes we had made here and there, but overall, we both felt like we'd done decently well.

And just like that, our two days of the common test came to an end.

## February 27th (Sunday) - Yuuta Asamura

The third term of our third year as high schoolers felt like a flash.

This was especially true on the days between the first and second-stage exams of the common test, which passed so quickly that, looking back on them now, I could barely remember if they had even happened.

*But that's probably because I was too on edge.*

Ayase-san also had to give up with going to school except when absolutely necessary. She even openly admitted how disappointed she was about not being able to see her classmates anymore. Still, the modern world was convenient enough where you were able to "meet" others remotely, even if you can't be there in person.

Through video calls, of course. Occasionally only, though.

It was maybe only once a week or so, but Ayase-san managed to have brief conversations with Class Rep, Satou-san, and Makihara-san—even if just for a few minutes. By the way, when I mean Makihara-san I meant *that* Makihara-san: Yoshida's girlfriend. I had no idea how they got close enough to keep in touch, but apparently they do.

*Now when did that happen?*

As for Narasaka-san, it looked like she and Ayase-san had deliberately kept it to just texting, given talking with her tended to drag on. Narasaka-san, like Maru, was aiming for Todai, after all.

*Speaking of which, I remember her saying she had a ton of younger brothers.*

I wonder if she was really able to study in that kinda environment. From what I recall, they were all still in elementary. You wouldn't exactly call boys that age considerate enough to think they'd need to be quiet because their big sis was an exam student.

“Maaya’s house actually has a strict 8 p.m. bedtime for her younger brothers.”

“That’s early...”

*Were kids in elementary even supposed to sleep that early?*

I felt like I was still being made to study at that hour back when I was one.

“Her parents’ have the philosophy that kids who sleep more grow up healthier.”

“But Narasaka-san’s more on the smaller side, amirite? I mean, not as much as Satou-san, but still.”

“She says that’s because she got obsessed with late-night anime while she was growing up.”

*Wait, wouldn’t you have to already be staying up late to discover late-night anime in the first place?*

“The real battle starts when my li’l bros go to sleep,’ so she said.”

“That sounds like Narasaka-san, alright. Still, it’s kinda amazing that she’s been able to get high grades this whole time.”

Such was a conversation we had over dinner one night, yet I had completely no recollection of exactly when in February it was.

Speaking of which, the start of February was when they had actually released the average scores for the common test. This year’s was lower overall compared to last, with math being particularly difficult—but that was actually kinda a relief for me. Even though I’ve always considered it as one of my strengths, I hadn’t been able to score as well as I hoped, and it had made me anxious.

Comparing the results we predicted we got with the averages, both Ayase-san and I were left reasonably satisfied, so we decided to stick with our original uni choices and move on to the second-stage exams.

For both national and public universities, the second-stage exams were divided into early and late rounds; with the late one being a second chance for those who didn't get accepted in the early round. Despite that, given there wasn't much time between when results would be released for the early round and the start of the late round, it was hard to study anything new in between.

I was ideally hoping to get accepted during the early round and be done with it.

Before I knew it, the days of February, with their stubbornly low temperatures never exceeding 10°C, passed like a whirlwind.

While anxiously waiting for the results for national universities to be posted, we also took entrance exams for several private universities as safety nets, and even begrudgingly paid the non-refundable deposits for schools we might not even be committing to in the end—something Ayase-san and I discussed how absurd it was. But at the same time, it made me appreciate my old man even more, who covered the costs without hesitation, considering them as necessary expenses for our university education.

And then, in the blink of an eye, the second-stage exams for national universities arrived.

Both Ichise University and Tsukinomiya Women's University held their exams over two days—Friday, February 25th; and Saturday, February 26th. The exams were held at the respective unis themselves—I took mine at Ichise University, while Ayase-san naturally took hers at Tsukinomiya Women's University. It was my first time visiting since its open campus.

And now, with my exams behind me, here I was sitting in my room the next day, blankly staring at nothing in particular, reflecting on this final spring of my entrance exam journey.

*This is it—the end of my exam-taking days.*

With the second-stage exams over, there was nothing left to do but wait for results. Now, I should ideally be studying for the late round exams, just in case, but reality was that I couldn't bring myself to do much beyond flipping through my notes.

Ayase-san would be getting her results on March 9th, while mine would come the next day—March 10th.

In a little over ten days from now, we'd know everything.

Until then, our futures were in a limbo—floating, undefined.

*Ten days... Something you'd think is short, yet now feels like an eternity.*

My emotions flipped back and forth every hour. One moment I could be excitedly making plans for what I'd do once I passed; the next, I was crushed by the sheer anxiety of failing. Waves of unrealistic dreams and last-minute regrets crashed over me, leaving me unable to focus on even the books I had been eager to read and get on with.

But before we got to know our results, there was one more major event waiting for us.

March 1st.

Suisei High's graduation ceremony.

That's right—the last day of mine and Ayase-san's high school life.

## March 1st (Tuesday) Part 1 - Yuuta Asamura

There's no such thing as a special day.

To Earth, today was nothing more than another fraction of its 365-day orbit, a simple 24-hour rotation on its axis. To it, it hardly matters which of those 365 segments *we* happened to be passing through. Maybe its oval-shaped orbit causes slight variations in the heat it receives from the sun for it, but the difference is negligible in the grand scheme of things.

There are no special days.

Taking a broader perspective, something unique happens somewhere on Earth every single day—no matter how extraordinary an event might seem to you. Following that logic, every day is special—and if every day is special, then everyday day is just some other ordinary day.

What makes a day special isn't the uniqueness of what happens on that day, but whether the people who experience them perceive them as special.

And it was a feeling I felt this morning—the moment I woke up and glanced at the date on my phone.

The day had finally come.

March 1st. Tuesday.

Suisei High's graduation ceremony.

My graduation ceremony.

Ayase-san's graduation ceremony.

The day our lives as high schoolers would come to an end.

These past three years had felt long, yet now today had arrived, they now seemed so unbelievably short.

An end of an era—an era of the long, continuous years spent in school as I'd always known it.

*But I guess uni is school too, technically.*

Still, I've always felt that going to uni was fundamentally different from everything up to high school.

Memories from my open campus visits flashed through my mind. I recalled how university campus buildings weren't the familiar, flat, rectangular three or four story structures resembling upside down lunchboxes. Instead, they were bigger, uniquely shaped—some looking like office buildings in the middle of the city, while others resembled public halls.

And the people present—students in all kinds of clothing, each individually choosing what to wear instead of adhering to some mandated uniform. The diversity in what people wore was striking.

Unlike high school, where most students came from the same region, uni was also a place packed with people from all over the country too. I was even picking up dialects I had never even heard before during my visits. It was something that reinforced the reality that students came from every corner of Japan.

*Even so, there's one memory that stands out to me extra clearly.*

From when a student in a lab coat strode past me, probably in the middle of some research project. He had dark circles under his eyes, staggering like a ghost while stifling yawns despite it being only in the middle of the afternoon.

He was probably on an all-nighter now that I think about it.

*“Just three more, just three more...”* he had muttered under his breath as he shuffled along. The exhaustion in his voice was so intense, and just hearing it was enough to give me a glimpse into the grueling reality of research.

*Wonder if he managed to finish with whatever three things he was talking about.*

It's pretty crazy to think I could soon be among them depending on my exam results. A completely different life was waiting for me.

*But man, this quiet sense of apprehension sure is killing me.*

I knew it all depended on whether I passed in the end—I understood that.

And yet, I couldn't help but already become sentimental about the days that had passed from just sensing the possibility of change, with those routine mornings of simply “going to school” gradually slipping into nostalgia.

Even my steps toward the dining room for breakfast felt unsteady, as if I still hadn't fully woken up. It was almost like I was still dreaming.

*You're kidding, right? High school's really ending today?* I thought as I opened my bedroom door.

There, I saw Ayase-san in the hallway, having just stepped out of her own room.

“Good mor—Ayase-san?”

“Eh?”

She looked dazed, only shifting her eyes toward me after I called out to her.

“Ah.”

“Ummm... you awake?”

“What... are you talking about?”

*C'mon, Ayase-san, you were totally out of it just now—you didn't even notice me.*

“Good morning, Asa... Yuuta-niisan.”

“Yeah. Morning, Saki. Uh, you still sleepy?”

Ayase-san shook her head.

“It's just... I realized it's really our graduation today when I woke up.”

“Same for you, huh?”

“You too, Yuuta-niisan?”

“Pretty much. Getting into uni means things will change a lot compared to high school, so I can’t stop thinking about it... Well, that’s if I pass, that is.”

Our results still wouldn’t be out for over a week—March 9th for Ayase-san and the 10th for me. Until then, I’d have to put up with this uneasy anxiety.

“It’s kinda like Schrödinger’s cat,” I commented.

“Schrö... what?”

“Ah no, don’t worry ’bout it; just a joke. Not really even the right analogy anyway. We’ll miss breakfast if I explain it now. We can talk about it later if you’re interested.”

*“Haaah. Well, okay...”*

“C’mon on, c’mon,” I motioned for Ayase-san to follow me as I opened the door to the dining room.

Anyway, Schrödinger’s cat was this thought experiment about wave function collapse in quantum mechanics; an idea that, to an outside observer, the state of a cat was theoretically unknown—both alive and dead at the same time until actually measured. The catch, however, is that the cat is a direct observer itself, so it’d always know whether it was alive or not in the first place. To it, it wasn’t just hanging around in some half-dead limbo.

So in reality, my exam results were already decided. Nothing I could do now could change them.

I knew that. But human emotions aren’t rational.

They’re emotions, after all.

And so here I was adrift in this vague, floating limbo, being unable to settle on anything.

I took my usual seat at the dining table.

This would be the last morning where I'd sit with a prepared plate of breakfast immediately out in front of me. We'd be returning to our normal routine starting tomorrow—sharing housework among the four of us. It also meant Akiko-san's "special shifts" would end today.

"Finally graduating, huh, aren't you guys?" my old man muttered sentimentally out of the blue, nearly making me choke on my miso soup.

"It's way too early to start crying," Akiko-san quipped in an exasperated voice.

*Right? Like, look, my old man's even basically already choking up here. Too soon. Way too soon.*

"But, but, just think about it! Both Yuuta and Saki-chan are graduating today! Just the fact they've made it through high school without incident... that alone moves me to tears. I just, I just..."

*Why are you crying before either of us, old man?*

Meanwhile, Akiko-san was acting completely normal.

"See? You're making Yuuta-kun uncomfortable."

"I appreciate the enthusiasm, but I mean, isn't this a little much?"

*Welp, guess it actually isn't that surprising for him to get this emotional*

Considering everything my old man's been through over the years and all.

*Maybe he was hurt way more by the divorce than I had been, I thought for a brief moment.*

I'd never really considered my parents' relationship that much before, but looking at it now, my old man had been in rough shape back then.

"Speaking of which, about the graduation ceremony; Taichi-san took the day off, so we'll both be able to attend," Akiko-san explained as she gently tried to calm him down.

"Understood."

Though it wasn't mandatory, parents were allowed to attend graduation ceremonies at Suisei High. It naturally meant that some wouldn't show up at all. Maybe my old man felt guilty for missing my junior high one.



We left the house a little earlier than usual and headed for school, walking down our familiar route.

It wasn't long before we reached a gentle downhill, asphalt paved slope.

It was narrow, rarely used by cars, making it nice to walk on.

*It gets pretty slippery on rainy days though, so you gotta be careful then.*

It warranted an easy downhill ride by bike too, though the way back was a bit of a struggle.

And today, for the last time, I was walking down that slope in my school uniform, side by side with Ayase-san.

The sky was clear, the weather was perfect, and the breeze carried the scent of flowers from somewhere nearby.

"Daphnes, right?" Ayase-san said, seemingly noticing my nose twitch.

"Oh yeah?"

"I think so. This... is how they smell, isn't it?" Ayase-san tapped the tip of her nose with her finger as she spoke.

*I mean, it's not like you can see what's in the air, but that's it,* I thought as I nodded.

Unfortunately, I wasn't that knowledgeable about which flowers are in which season. Still, this was a familiar scent I noticed every year around early spring.

“Daphnes bloom from February to April. That’s why you get that ‘Ah, spring’s here,’ feeling from smelling them. It’s considered as one of Japan’s three great fragrant flowers. I think there’s some in someone’s garden along this street.”

“Three great... So there’re two more?”

“The other two are gardenia and sweet olives. Spring’s daphne, summer’s gardenia, and autumn’s sweet olives... I think,” Ayase-san explained, nodding slightly while wearing a bit of a smug expression.”

“Ahhh, gotcha. You really know your stuff, Ayase-san.”

It was surprising that she knew this much about flowers—or maybe not. Given her oddly keen interest in scents, it was a very Ayase-san-like thing now I thought about it.

So, Japan’s three great fragrant flowers were daphnes, gardenia, and sweet olives.

I’ve heard all their names before and do remember them.

*Bet I’d struggle to read their kanji the moment they show up in a book, though.”*

“So this scent’s from daphne, huh? I’ll try to remember that.”

“Hmm, I don’t think it’s something you absolutely need to remember or anything.”

“Yeah, but still. Had I not talked ’bout it with you, I probably would’ve gone my whole life without ever paying attention to it.”

“Your whole life? Isn’t that kind of an exaggeration?”

“Maybe, but it’s not something that ever came up in my previous friend groups. Not that I had that many friends to begin with.”

“I didn’t have that many either.”

“Yet we’ve both made quite a lot over the past two years, haven’t we?”

Ayase-san paused, as if thinking about it for a moment.

“Yeah... maybe,” she then nodded.

And just like that, we got lost in reminiscing about our three years of high school together.

From things like how other students had misunderstood and spread nasty rumors about her back then, how I nearly let those rumors cloud my own judgment of her, and that... late-night proposal, to how we worked through our pasts together after rejecting them. Or teaching her modern literature and starting part-time together.

More and more, these memories kept surfacing one after another.

“...Haaah,” Ayase-san let out a soft sigh, as the scent of daphnes mingled with the wind. “We could’ve had so many conversations like this if we had started walking to school together sooner.”

“Together sooner, huh?” I uttered. “But... I think that would’ve been hard for us back then.”

“Ah...”

It has already been more than a year and a half already, looking back.

Back then, the both of us had thought the same thing—that step-siblings were, ultimately, just strangers.

We had no innate sense of closeness as dictated by our genes, nor had we accumulated years of shared experiences as siblings. It was obvious; there was no need to even think about it.

That’s how we thought of it, and why we made a promise to not expect anything from each other the moment we first met.

Expectations lead to disappointment, pain, and suffering.

“I want you to be this way,” “You *should* be this way,” such were expectations that could lead to misunderstandings and miscommunication even among blood-related family members. It was because of that that being honest about what we felt and resolving it together was the way we wanted to go. If we could do that, then even as strangers, we could make it work.

So we decided to adjust—to align our expectations.

Both Ayase-san and I had been happy for our parents' and their remarriage, after all. We didn't want to ruin this newly formed family of ours.

And at first—as awkward as it was—it felt like things were going well.

Looking back, if something had gone different somewhere along the way, maybe we would've remained as just close, ordinary step-siblings, living a pleasant life together.

But that wasn't what happened.

Little by little, I found myself being drawn to Ayase-san. And little by little, she was drawn to me.

We gradually moved outside the realm of just being brother and sister.

"The first time we went out together was... the pool, right?" Ayase-san murmured.

"Yep, at least if you don't count the times our parents sent us grocery shopping together at the supermarket."

"I... guess?"

*Wait, don't hesitate over that...*

"But if we don't count that, then that time we went shopping for Maaya's birthday wouldn't count either..."

"Ahhh, yeah..."

We had never had a bad relationship. In fact, I think the both of us felt that we were somewhat like each other from the very beginning.

*Maybe that's 'cause our family situations were similar.*

It was why we took care of errands together when our parents asked, and it was also why we'd help each other out when we were stuck with studying.

"I was the one mostly getting help with that, though..." Ayase-san reflected.

“And I had you teach me how to pick out clothes. Cooking too. So, let’s just call it even.”

And then, little by little, we started spending more time together.

Halloween, Narasaka-san’s birthday, and even each of our own. Visiting the shrine in Nagano for New Year’s, and our school trip to Singapore too.

“Oh right, I think the school trip was when I became friends with Yoshida and the others.”

“The school trip definitely brought lots of new connections. That’s when we met Melissa, too.”

And if it weren’t for that, we would’ve never gone to Melissa’s concert or met Ruka Akihiro-san for that matter.

“Briefly brushing sleeves is just fate from a past life,’ huh?”<sup>[1]</sup>

“Tashou,’ huh? Like ‘somewhat’? As in, like, a little bit?”

“‘Tashou’ as in ‘another life.’<sup>[2]</sup> Like referring to past or future lives. It’s the idea that even small encounters, like brushing sleeves with someone when walking by, is caused by some kinda fate from before we were even born.

“Oh, so that’s what you meant.”

“It’s basically just kinda saying we should cherish even small connections. Though I don’t think we really have loose sleeves that’d brush against each other that much anymore, with modern fashion and all. Guess that means we’re losing on some of those fated encounters, though.”

*That last part’s a joke, of course.*

“You sometimes talk entirely in idioms or proverbs, don’t you, Asamura-kun? Is that a thing with people who like to read?”

“You make it sound like I don’t speak in human language...”

“Shiori-san does it too, sometimes.”

“Ah—”

“Shiori-san,” aka Yomiuri-senpai, our senior at work—Shiori Yomiuri. I’ve noticed that, at some point, Ayase-san had started calling her by her name every now and then.

“I mean, she *is* a total bookworm; lost beyond salvation at that.”

“There you go again.”

“Huh?”

“Lost beyond salvation”? ‘Bookworm’?”

*...I didn’t even realize.*

“*Uhhh*, what were we talking ’bout again?” I asked sheepishly.

“Ah, you’re changing the subject. Well, it’s fine, though. It’s not like I mind. We were talking about how we went out together quite a lot.”

*Oh, right.*

“We haven’t really in our third year, though. Entrance exams and all.”

“Yeah... Just the summer camp and the fireworks festival, right?”

Even then, both would go down as *just* summer memories from our third year.

And the summer camp wasn’t just the two of us either. We went with our coworkers—Yomiuri-senpai and our junior, Erina Kozono-san. So when we realized we didn’t really have any summer memories with just the two of us at the time, we decided to go to the fireworks festival.

Things got serious by the time autumn rolled around though, so neither of us had much of the mood to go all out and have fun.

Looking back, the only other time we did something together was probably when we went around the cultural festival. We’d stopped worrying about how people at school saw us by then.

Or rather, the idea of secretly dating in silence just sounded too impractical for Ayase-san—who preferred to be upfront about things. As for me, I just didn’t care much about what others thought.

*Neither of us are good at hiding things anyway.*

It was why we chose to tell our close friends about our true relationship before the festival, too.

“Still, no one was really surprised. Why was that?”

“No idea.”

Even though Ayase-san and I ended up in the same class, we didn’t really talk much alone in the classroom. That’s why, Yoshida’s nonchalant “Ah, yeah. Welp, gotcha. Good luck,”<sup>[2]</sup> felt almost too indifferent when I had told him about our relationship.

After the cultural festival, the only major thing we did was our little study camp in Atami. It also was then did Ayase-san reach a resolution regarding her relationship with her biological father.

After that, our lives had become entirely consumed by exam prep.

*And now, all that’s left is to wait for the results.*

“You know, it’s been kind of like this since we’ve met,” Ayase-san suddenly commented.

“Hm?”

She glanced at me, as if gauging whether it was okay to ask what was on her mind. I stayed silent, waiting for her to continue.

“I don’t think we’ve ever talked about our lives *before* we met with each other,” she brought up as we were about halfway down the gently sloping path.

“You mean, like, our childhoods?”

“I’d like to hear about that too, but that’s not it; I meant our first year as high schoolers. We don’t know anything about each other from that time even though we went to the same school, do we?”

In other words, the time between entering Suisei High and meeting her.

*That said, I don’t really have strong memories from back then...*

Spring of my first year of high school? Well, I was completely adrift.

I never had any good memories regarding exams, so when I found out I'd been accepted to Suisei High, I felt more relief rather than joy.

As a result, I had spent the spring break before the school year idly at home, doing nothing—not even reading, something I was supposed to enjoy.

Then came the start of school and the entrance ceremony.

And even when we were assigned our seats in class afterward, I still hadn't noticed something crucial. The ceremony had ended quickly, and we were dismissed right away, after all.

It wasn't until the next day that I finally realized—

*Wait, I don't know a single soul in my class...*

Unlike junior high, where classes were grouped based on their home districts, students had the power of choice in high school.

And in the first place, only three students—including me—had come from my junior high to Suisei in the first place.

And those other two? I didn't know them. And they weren't even in my class to begin with. In other words, I was completely alone in a classroom full of strangers.

“I see. But... you seriously didn't notice that until then?”

“I knew it logically, to be precise. But knowing something and actually feeling it are two different things.”

*Huh, there really isn't anyone I know here,* I thought as I looked around and took in the unfamiliar faces at the time.

And then? You may ask.

“What did you do?”

“Well, there wasn't much I could do 'bout it, so...”

“No way, you didn't seriously start reading, did you?”

“That’s exactly what I did.”

I hadn’t read much at all during spring break, given I’d spent the entirety of it in a daze, after all.

Looking back, it was a complete waste of time. Nearly a whole month had passed since finishing the high school entrance exam and actually starting high school.

*Just think about how many books I could’ve read at that time...*

With that in mind at the time, I decided to fish out a volume from my favorite light novel series and read it until the teacher arrived.

And that’s when something unexpected happened.

*“That’s the new volume, right? You’ve already got your hands on it?”* a guy sitting next to me spoke up.

The volume I had pulled from my bag was a brand-new release that wasn’t supposed to even hit the shelves until the next day. But given I’d been frequenting bookstores for a while at this point, I knew that some releases would sometimes arrive early if their official release dates fell on a Sunday or a public holiday.

“Really? That actually happens?”

“Yep. You see, bookstores don’t get new shipments on Sundays. So if a release date of a new volume just so happens to land on a Sunday...”

“*Ohhh*, I see. They bump it up,” Ayase-san finished my sentence for me. Given she had now been working at our bookstore for around a year and a half now, she now knew her stuff pretty well. “Plus, you could’ve also gotten a new release on your way to school if you find a bookstore that happens to open before it starts, right?”

“That’s exactly it. And actually, there *is* a bookstore in Shibuya that opens at 7 a.m. too. So you’d have plenty of time to stop by before heading to school—Huh? Am I saying something weird here?”

As I started explaining like I was some great detective, Ayase-san gave me a slightly bewildered look.

“You’d... go that far for a book?”

“I mean, I really wanted to read it. It was an ongoing series with over sixty volumes at the time.”

“Sixt—”

“But I didn’t even get to read it before class started in the end.”

*And it’s all because of what the guy next to me had said...*

*“I personally only follow the anime, but have you actually read all the books?”*

“Well, yeah, I guess...”

*“Ohhhh~. That’s good to know. I’ve had some questions about the series for a while now, and I’ve been trying to find someone to discuss them with... Ah, my bad; got ahead of myself.”*

“Ah, no. I don’t mind.”

*“There was no one in my junior high who shared my interests. Guess I got a little excited. I’m—”*

Tomokazu Maru.

That was how he introduced himself, and that was how I met him.

We had, by chance, ended up sitting next to each other, and had completely hit it off by the time lunch came around.

And it was during said lunch break where I heard his plans to join the baseball club, completely taking me by surprise at the time.

I had assumed he was the indoor type, like me, given what we’d been talking about and all. But he turned out to be not just the outdoorsy type—he was a full-on baseball kid.

Still, even though Maru and I both fought on different fronts—with me being more into novels and him leaning more into anime—we shared similar tastes, which made it easy in hitting it off together.

Though, that still didn't change the fact I was more of a so-called "omnivorous" reading addict, someone with a diverse palate who'd read just about anything as long as it was printed—be it pure literature or the food label on a bag of chips. So, it wasn't like I could talk about every book I read with Maru.

It just so happened that he knew a lot of the same light novels and manga that I liked, so before we knew it, we'd become the kinda friends who'd share a review sesh right after finishing a story, whether it be a novel or anime.

"That's pretty impressive. I've never been good at stuff like discussing what I've read."

"No, no, no. You're probably misunderstanding something here, Ayase-san."

"Eh?"

"High school boys talking about manga ain't nearly as intellectual as you're imagining."

"...Then what do you guys talk about?"

"Well for example, Maru loves tournament-style stories. So he'd bring stuff up and ask questions like, 'who'd win in a fight between a time traveler, alien, and psychic?'" I said casually, earning a look from Ayase-san as she tilted her head to the side—to around like, 27 degrees, actually.

"What... is that even supposed to mean?"

"And then we'd debate it seriously, citing in-story evidence and all."

Ayase-san held her head in her hands.

"I've seen kids do that sort of thing, but they were in elementary. Maybe junior high, at best..."

"Hate to break it to you, Ayase-san, but the only real difference between boys in junior high and high school is whether or not they'd have those dumb debates in front of girls."

“I think I might’ve totally misunderstood you, Asamura-kun...”

There’s that proverb, isn’t there? That the only difference between a grown man and a boy was the price of his toys.

*Oh well, guess I’ll keep that one to myself for now.*

So, that’s how Maru and I met.



*Anyway, back to our convo.*

“Actually, when did you start working at that bookstore, Asamura-kun?”

Prompted by Ayase-san’s question, I rifled through my memories.

We were already nearing the station—we’d probably walked about halfway to school at this moment. The scent of daphne that had lingered from earlier had vanished before I noticed, and a glass building nearby gleamed brilliantly in the distance.

Spring’s sunlight had quietly wrapped all of Shibuya in its glow.

*Has it really been three years since then...?*

“I think I started working there pretty early on. Right before Golden Week, not long after we entered high school.”

While most of the other first-years were getting into their clubs in April, I didn’t really have much to do in particular.

And since Maru, the only friend I’d grown remotely close with, got more and more absorbed into his baseball practice, we no longer had the time after school to mess around like we had in the beginning.

So, it wasn’t before long I ended up spending my after-school hours wandering around Shibuya like some member of the going-home club, hopping from bookstore to bookstore before only heading home.

I basically had found myself with too much time on my hands.

“I guess I vaguely felt like I had to do something,” I reasoned.

*Though there was probably some unconscious influence from Maru there.*

Now, Suisei High’s baseball club wasn’t strong enough to be called a powerhouse, but it wasn’t like some weak team that gave up from the start either. For Maru—who’d just joined—practice was apparently much more grueling beyond what I—someone with no interest in sports at all—could even imagine.

Every morning, while I was getting ready for the first period after arriving at school, I'd never fail to see Maru stumble into the classroom, his body swaying with exhaustion from all his morning practice.

Still panting, he'd plop his large frame down onto the chair in front of mine—which he was moved to after a seating change—and I'd greet that broad back of his with a “Morning.”

Yet, Maru would never answer until he finally caught his breath.

“It’s only once he’s settled down he’d finally reply with a ‘G’morning,’ of his own. Still, even from just looking at him, you could tell how exhausted he looked. Like, man, I couldn’t help but think that he was really going through it every morning.”

But even so, that just showed how impressive Maru was. I had never once heard him complain about how hard his practice was. Sure, he might’ve had let out an “Oh man” or two here and there, but not once did he say he wanted to quit or that he hated it.

He had dedicated almost all his free time to baseball. It was probably why he’d already locked down a solid spot on the team by the time we were in our second year, after all.

So it’s not like I can exactly say I wasn’t influenced after watching someone like that up close.

And though I didn’t think there was anything wrong with spending my days just reading the books I loved, even if just a little, I started to wonder if that alone was enough.

*That said, it’s not like I went so far as to join a club or anything.*

But maybe that’s just how contrary I am as a person.

Still, it became the push I needed to take a good look at how I was living my life.

As I found myself reflecting more and more on the same daily routine repeated from morning ’til night, I began to feel that maybe I shouldn’t be taking this life I repeated every day without purpose completely for granted.

Especially as I observed my old man.

Considering my university tuition fees after high school, as well as the cost of rent or boarding if I were to go to a uni I couldn't commute to from home, as well as rainy day funds for any unexpected accidents or illnesses, it became clear that my old man was pushing himself pretty hard—maybe even beyond his limits. It was something I hadn't realized back in elementary.

He would leave for work early in the morning and come back late at night, day after day.

“So you got a part-time?”

“Yep. I’d already given up on cooking for myself from the beginning, but I decided that at the very least, I shouldn’t be asking my old man to pay for all the books I read. Though, I guess the money I made didn’t help our household expenses in any meaningful way—it was just a drop in the bucket.”

“Mom used to stop me when I tried helping out with things besides cooking, too. She’d say stuff like, ‘Thank you, Saki. Just the fact you feel that way makes me happy,’ or something like that.”

“My old man used to say something pretty similar.”

*So I guess I wasn’t just being influenced by Maru, after all.*

“So that’s why you started working at the bookstore.”

I nodded.

And once I’d started working, even just a little, and received paychecks, even if they were small, I gradually began to feel a sense of purpose. I started becoming aware of what it meant to work and to earn money.

“But there’s something else I’ve realized, and it’s thanks to you and your mom coming to live with us, Ayase-san.”

“Thanks to us?”

“Yeah... uh, okay. So, after I started working, I could afford to buy my own books, right? And of course, the amount of money a student can make is still probably nothing to actual working adults.”

“Yeah, true. I can understand that now too.”

“But even so, I was earning enough to meet my *own* needs as a student. And so—”

I began spending all the money I earned on books for myself.

It was completely for my own benefit—reading gave me something valuable.

*And yeah, it was just plain fun, too.*

But then I started wondering—what about my old man?

That thought hit me.

My old man was pouring a huge chunk of his hard-earned salary into the mortgage for our apartment. Sure, that meant he was building up some kinda asset—a home—but the thing is, that home in question felt way too big for the both of us.

Every day, I’d watch him come home, all worn out and exhausted. I couldn’t help but think: man, he works so hard, and yet the money he makes just gets swallowed up by this blank space in our home—a space that used to be filled when my biological mom was still around.

I could still remember how it felt—returning home from the bright outdoors of April, full of the scent of fresh, young green leaves, turning the key to the front door and opening it.

Yet, despite there being plenty of sunlight outside, the only thing that waited for me beyond the slight metallic creak of the door opening was a dark hallway with no lights on.

Dimness, with a faintly cold atmosphere.

“I’m home,” I’d quietly mutter, despite already knowing there wouldn’t be any response.

The words I had used to announce my return had grown smaller day by day, and by that point, they were barely even whispered inside my mouth.

“That’s surprising. So that’s what it was like for you.”

“Surprising?”

“Mm. But I was the same, now that I think about it... I still remember it—about getting back from school and you saying ‘welcome back.’ I couldn’t respond at all at that moment.”

“Ah, yeah.”

*I remember it too.*

It was as if she’d reacted like someone hearing those words for the first time in their life.

“‘I’m home’ and ‘welcome back.’ They’re nice words, aren’t they?”

“‘I’m off’ and ‘see you later,’ too.”

Saying something, and having someone say something back.

The first step to communication.

“That’s why getting home to a place where there’s no reply kinda gets you down.”

All I’d do back then was take off my shoes at the entrance.

Without even putting on indoor slippers or turning on the lights, I’d walk down the hallway with soft patterning steps.

I wouldn’t even bother peeking into the dining or living room.

I already knew no one would be there.

Instead, I’d head straight to my room, toss my bag aside, and flop down onto the bed. Then, after zoning out for a while, I’d finally sit up, and pull a paper bag from the bookstore out of my bag.

I’d take out the new release I bought on the way home, and start by slowly gazing at the cover.

Opening the pages.

Beginning to trace the words.

Diving into the world of the book—only then would I finally be able to forget how hollow the house felt.

And for me, that was enough.

I genuinely thought it was fun.

*But what about my old man?*

Having thought about all that empty space he was emptying his salary into, I felt truly glad in that moment—the day I had become a second-year; the day Ayase-san and Akiko-san started living in our apartment.

At the very least, I could believe that my old man's hard work could finally be put to good use—for his own sake. Because whenever he talked about his new partner, Akiko-san, he always looked so genuinely happy.

My old man usually wore a relaxed, gentle smile with everyone, but even as his own son, I'd never seen him smile from the heart like that.

So at least now, all his efforts wouldn't just dissolve pointlessly into the empty space of our house anymore.

I could believe that.

"My old man was a complete wreck when you and Akiko-san first came over that morning. He was doing his best to not mess things up—probably even trying way too hard to not get on your guys' bad side. I mean, you probably saw that for yourself when he greeted you," I explained.

He'd tried to play it cool—but totally failed.

Ayase-san lips curved into a slight, soft smile, seemingly remembering that moment as I explained.

"It's okay. I think Mom could tell he was doing his best."

"Well, then that's fine, I guess."

"We were worried too, you know? About whether the two of you would accept us. So it was the same."

"The same, huh? That's right. We were so caught up in our own anxiety, but I guess you and your mom were just as anxious."

“That’s right, that’s right.”

“Well, anyway, we’re really grateful that you two became part of our family—both my old man and I. I mean it.”

“Mm. Same here.”

*Same here, huh?*

If that’s the case, then—

“We didn’t just end up as family after everything that had happened—we’ve also ended up like this. But y’know, looking back on everything that led us here, I honestly think it was kinda fun.”

If I could look back on all the twists and turns and call them fun, then maybe all the changes that came from the days with my step sister over the past year and a half weren’t such bad things after all.

It was something I truly thought to myself time and time again.

“Finding the fun in everything, huh...?” Ayase-san commented.

“There were definitely parts that weren’t, though—like our entrance exams.”

“Not ‘were.’ It’s still not over,” Ayase-san let out a sigh far too heavy for a spring morning at my words.

*True...*

“...Let’s not talk ’bout that right now,” I smiled wryly.

*Hol’ on, I’ve been talking about myself this whole time here.*

“I know I kinda went off tangent partway through, but well—that’s what my first year of high school was like.”

“Yeah. Thanks for telling me.”

“So... what about you, Ayase-san?”

Ayase-san’s days as a first-year—ones I hadn’t known. I wanted to hear about them if she was willing to share.

*“Hmm... I guess it was sort of the same for me. I didn’t really have any hobbies to talk about with others like you did, Asamura-kun, so I’d just head straight home after school.”*

Ayase-san then went on to explain that back then, all she’d do was go home to their old tiny, six tatami matted one-room flat. And even once she got home, Akiko-san, who worked the night shift at a bar in Shibuya, wouldn’t have been there.

And unlike my old man, she wouldn’t be back even after midnight, so they probably hardly saw each other at all.

*“That’s something that seems too sensitive to ask about more, though.”*

“So, when did you become close with Narasaka-san?” I asked instead.

“Maaya?” Ayase-san said, her eyes briefly taking on a faraway look.

*“Maybe she’s remembering the day they met.”*

Come to think of it, given they were in the same class, they probably first met at the opening ceremony, just like Maru and I had.

Or so I thought...

“It’s not like Maaya and I were close from the start, like you and Maru-kun,” Ayase-san explained.

“That so?”

“Kinda? I’d love to tell you more about it, but time’s up, unfortunately.”

*“Huh? I was totally thrown off.”*

“Time’s up?”

“Look—we’re already at school.”

Sure enough, the school gate was now in sight. But still, how could I not be curious after stopping right before the most important part after she’d said that much?

“That’s so unfair...” I couldn’t help but say it aloud.

“But it isn’t, at least if we’re talking about past stories. I’ve already told you about that person the other day,” she reasoned, and I couldn’t help but find myself agreeing.

Ayase-san’s biological father—Fumiya Itou.

She’d shared some deeply personal stories about her past with him from back during our study camp in Atami. Stories I had heard deeply, all the way to their roots, far heavier than the little tale I had just shared about my old man.

Even though she’d practically brushed it off lightly just now with a simple “we’re even,” opening up about her history with Fumiya Itou must’ve been like exposing an old, unhealed wound.

*It must’ve taken her a ton of courage*, I thought, realizing that if anything, I was the one who still had more left to say.

“Yeah... you’re right,” I agreed.

“No, I know it’s not fair. I’ll tell you someday.”

We eventually passed through the gates of Suisei High as we continued walking—gates we wouldn’t walk through any more starting tomorrow.

Among the stream of students, I spotted a familiar classmate’s face.

“Ah, that’s Nishikawa-san. She looks like she’s about to cry,” Ayase-san observed.

Sure enough, the girl stood there, staring blankly out toward the track field. Though we couldn’t fully see her expression from where we were, she did look on the brink of tears.

“She was in the track and field club, wasn’t she?”

“Ohhh...”

*That explains it.*

I could more or less understand how she felt.

“Hey, about earlier.”

“Hm?”

“About when I first met Maaya.”

“Ah... Well, whenever the opportunity comes up, then.”

“Yeah. I’ll tell you someday,” she said, looking back toward our classmate—the girl from the track and field club who stood gazing at the field she’d never run on again. “There’ll be plenty of chances for that, right?”

She was right.

We were bidding our goodbyes to Suisei High today.

But our relationship would still go on from here.



We headed to the gymnasium following a short wait in the classroom.

Suisei High’s gym was a building featuring a typical kamaboko-shaped roof, the kind you’d see everywhere. It stood next to the track field, and today, it had a signboard boldly marked with large letters that read “Graduation Ceremony” that stood at its entrance.

“It’ll start soon, so wait here,” our head of year told us, and we were made to line up near the entrance.

“Soon,” so they say; but even so, these few minutes of waiting meant leaving us standing outside and exposed to the still-chilly spring wind. The sky had even started to cloud over, and every time the wind blew with a woosh, it sent shivers running through my body.

Rather than being sentimental or melancholic about the end of high school, my immediate desire to get inside a warm building was winning out.

*To hell with sentimentality right now.*

Actually, what does “to hell with” even actually mean? It’s something I’ve been thinking about for a while now.

*Oh well, not like it matters right now or anything.*

Another strong gust of wind blew over us, causing Ayase-san’s long hair to flutter beside me.

“So cold,” she mouthed without speaking, earning my silent nod in return.

“The hell’s up with puttin’ us—the literal protagonists for today—out here waiting like this?” Yoshida complained from the back of the line.

But even if he said something like that, there was just no way for any normal high school gymnasium to have a waiting room big enough to hold all 300 plus graduating students.

*It just can’t be helped, I guess.*

“Quit with your whining; it’s graduation day! Keep it up and I’m gonna have to revoke your graduation!” someone quipped at Yoshida’s complaint.

I could immediately tell it was Class Rep’s, given it came from right behind me and Ayase-san.

“Oh lord, have mercy on me~” Yoshida whined dramatically, earning chuckles from not only our classmates but also from students lined up in neighboring classes.

I caught a glimpse of Yoshida’s girlfriend, Makihara-san, among them from the gaps between the lines in the corner of my eye; two classes over. Her cheeks were slightly flushed and she smiled wryly.

“Hey! If you want mercy then pipe down already!”

“Okaaaaay~. I heaaaaar you, Class Rep.”

“Good grief. Geez...” Class Rep crossed her arms, her mouth curled into a disapproving pout, clearly unimpressed by Yoshida’s utter lack of remorse.

Now that I think about it, albeit pretty lately at this point, “Class Rep” really is *just* her nickname—she had a proper one.

*Her name... Uhhh, what was it again?*

Well, anyway, “Class Rep” wasn’t her real name, regardless. Still, given the way she’d always push up her under-rimmed glasses and confidently rattle off with precise, well-reasoned arguments, that nickname had stuck to her ever since our first year—up all the way through to our third year.

*Though she unironically hasn’t actually been an actual class representative that much at all...*

It was only until the third term of our third year, when the entire class unanimously voted her in, did she become one. It was a result of our class’ sincere wish that she’d graduate as our real class representative.

“*And the real reason?*” she had asked back then, her glasses flashing with a glint as everyone averted their gazes, looking away.

Silence. That is, until Yoshida, unable to hold it in for any longer, blurted out all our hidden motives.

“*To make finding someone to organize future class reunions easier,*” he had confessed back then.

Class Rep then apparently scolded him so harshly afterward that his ears actually started ringing.

Even so, all she did was shrug her shoulders after with a nonchalant, “Guess it can’t be helped,” showcasing her innate good nature in the end.

I couldn’t help but relive that little memory as I watched Yoshida and the Class Rep banter back and forth.

The once-bustling gymnasium then suddenly grew quiet—our ceremony was about to begin.

Following a teacher’s announcement of the opening, we began to gradually enter as a sense of tension simultaneously returned to the atmosphere.

Our line began to move, and before long, we stepped into the gymnasium.

Just like most high school gymnasiums, Suisei High's was a rectangular, wooden-floored building, featuring a stage set up at one of the shorter ends. It served during school-wide assemblies, student council meetings, cultural festival performances from organizations like the drama or brass band clubs, and of course, the entrance and graduation ceremonies.

The podium had already been set up, and the microphones were ready.

We marched in, embraced by the round of applause coming from our underclassmen and parents, and began to take our seats in order on the folding chairs placed near the front, closer to the stage.

I glanced toward the back as we walked, specifically to where the parents were seated, spotting my old man and Akiko-san sitting side by side.

They noticed me and Ayase-san, giving us small waves.

Of course, given I couldn't exactly wave back in some exaggerated way right now, I simply just raised my hand to around my chest, giving a small wave side to side—just enough to acknowledge them without breaking the atmosphere.

The parents sat at the very back of the gym, meaning that an entire hedge-like block of underclassmen were between us and them. To stand out here would mean to stand out in front of nearly the entire student body.

*Yeah, I kinda don't like the idea of that.*

As our entrance procession ended, the ceremony resumed.

This would be my third graduation ceremony in my life so far, having gone through this twice before—once in elementary and once in junior high.

Given it was the same for everyone else, just one rehearsal was enough for everything to move along smoothly.

We sang the national anthem, followed by the school's own. Given I hadn't been able to go karaoking during all my exam prep, raising my voice in song felt strange; it was as if my throat was in shock.

My voice even cracked a little at one point during the school anthem—which I hadn't even memorized all that well in the first place. It was honestly pretty embarrassing.

Suisei High's anthem had apparently been rewritten around the start of the Heisei era and was surprisingly modern for a school song. It even had two key changes.

It had struck me odd once, so I ended up looking into how other schools did it. To my surprise, I found out that there were actually even some high schools that had anthems with four key changes.

*Thank god I go to Suisei High*, I had thought at the time, as someone who really wasn't confident in their singing at all.

And then, at last, came the presentation of our diplomas.

The stage, where it'd be taking place, featured short staircases on both sides, meant for going up and down. We graduates were to ascend from the right and descend on the left.

Starting with Class 3-1, students rose from their seats and walked to the front.

You'd walk from the right edge of the stage to in front of the principal when your name was called. The contents written on your diploma would be read out loud, but only for the first student of each class. It'd be skipped after that.

That meant that it would be a mostly quiet and solemn repetition: name called, receive diploma, bow, descend the stairs on the left, return to your seat.

Yet, it wasn't entirely that either.

Some students, overcome with emotion, couldn't hold back their tears as they received their diplomas. Other times, you'd hear loud sobbing from where the parents were seated if the student managed to keep it together.

And though it didn't happen often, you'd sometimes even hear cheers or applause erupting from a group of underclassmen. This was especially common for students who had been in sports clubs, probably because their juniors deeply admired them.

Among those I knew, one fitted that description: Maru, who was in the class just before ours.

*Makes sense given he was the baseball captain and all.*

Then, it finally reached our turn.

Because names were called in alphabetical order, I—Asamura—was first. In other words, I was the one whose diploma would be read aloud in full.

People like Ayase-san or others seated farther back could just follow the person before them if they forgot how things were meant to flow. But me? Being in front, I had to lead.

*Though it's not like our class went first, so I guess I've got it easier than some.*

I received my diploma without a hitch.

I caught a glimpse of Ayase-san in the corner of my vision right behind me as I descended the steps, receiving her diploma with a smile on her face.

Right after her was Class Rep.

“Chiharu Ooyama.”

“Yes!” she answered in a loud and clear voice.

*So that's her name...*

As I rummaged through my mind, I also recalled how it was written: Chiharu Ooyama.

“What's wrong?” came a small voice from behind me. Ayase-san had already gotten close.

“Huh?”

“You're holding up the line.”

Only then did I realize I had slowed down, lost in thought.

“Ah, no. Just remembered Class Rep’s name was Ooyama,” I hurried my pace and gave her a quick excuse.

“That so?” she replied in a suspicious tone. I could almost hear her unspoken “Why’re you bringing that up now?” at this point.

“I mean... I’ve never really heard anyone call her by her actual name.”

“*Ohhh,*” Ayase-san muttered, realizing what I meant. “Class Rep’s just... Class Rep after all, isn’t she?”

*Exactly.*

Who knows, maybe we’ll all still be calling her Class Rep even after graduation.

The two of us sat down side by side, and Class Rep took her seat shortly after. I lightly curved the diploma I’d been holding between my fingers as I sat down, making sure not to crease it, before rolling it up completely into the case I’d been given when I stepped off the stage.

*A “diploma tube,” or so they call it.*

On the surface of the diploma tube were the words “Graduation Diploma - Tokyo Metropolitan Suisei High School,” written in gold lettering.

I closed the lid and finally let myself relax a little.

Now, I wasn’t exactly the sentimental type, but even I felt a bit reluctant about treating something like this carelessly.

That said, my elementary and junior high diplomas were still stuffed somewhere in a closet, tube and all, untouched since the day I brought them home.

Letting out a quiet sigh, I rolled my shoulders to ease the tension, all the while Ayase-san continued to gaze at her diploma beside me, with it spread open across her lap.

Her eyes looked a little misty as she looked at it for some reason.

“...Something wrong?” I asked in a whisper, prompting Ayase-san to briefly turn her gaze toward me.

“My name.”

“Hm?”

*Her name?*

As I looked at her closer, I realized she was oddly intensely focusing on the name written on her diploma resting on her lap.

“I’ll tell you later.”

Saying that, Ayase-san began to gently roll the diploma with her slender fingers. \**Fwoomp*\*, she opened the case with one hand, earning a soft yet audible pop of air.

Slipping the rolled diploma inside, she slowly closed the lip, before then returning her gaze to the stage.

I followed suit, turning my eyes forward.

One after another, students continued to make their way up to the stage to receive their diplomas. Our class had already finished a decent while ago, with the last few classes now going up—at least according to the class numbers announced.

Names were called, students walked up slowly and bowed, then carefully rolled their diplomas without creasing them before stepping down from the stage.

*It kinda looks like actors stepping down from a stage after a play.*

And in our case, we were descending from the stage of high school itself.

Some students wore radiant smiles, others had their faces crumpled in tears, with most names announced floating right past my ears without actually registering in my brain.

There were around 300 students in each year—roughly 30 per class. Even after two class changes, I had only met a third of my grade at best.

Unless someone had been in my class in our first or second years, or if I had paired up with them in PE or something like that, there was just no way I'd know them. I hadn't joined any clubs, participated in any committee, or served on the student council—I hardly had any reason to interact with most of the student body, looking back.

So their faces, let alone their names, were all vague and hazy in my memory.

Still, even so, there were a few exceptions.

*Oh that's...* I found myself thinking here and there.

There were only a handful of them, all of them being those I'd never shared class with, with the fingers on my hand being more than enough to count them all.

For example, I was able to remember those we went to the pool with during that day back in the summer of our second year, even going as far as remembering all their faces.

*Ah right, that was their name,* I thought as they were all eventually called onto the stage.

“The one just now...”

*Hm?*

“They were with us when we went to the pool, weren’t they?” Ayase-san murmured.

“Right?” I said just that in response.

*So Ayase-san remembers them too...*

With the final student having stepped down from the stage and everyone returning to their seats, the principal’s speech began, followed by some guest speeches.

Then came the farewell address from the underclassmen, and finally, the valedictorian’s speech from the graduating class.

And maybe it's because we'd all been sitting through this long, monotonous ceremony for a while at this point, but I noticed a lot of the students around me starting to yawn quietly, looking as if they weren't really paying attention.

*And honestly, it can't be helped.*

For most students, those giving the guest farewells, and even the valedictorian, were just strangers—they probably didn't even know their names or faces. People only focus when it regards someone important to them, after all.

Conversely, things strangers say just tend to pass through one ear and out the other.

The valedictorian this year was someone called Kuriyama from Class 3-3.

*Yep, don't even know who he is, unfortunately.*

I didn't even have a vague impression.

So, even though their speech was clearly well thought out, it just slipped right through my mind without sticking.

The valedictorian role usually went to students with excellent grades or members of the student council. Following this line of logic, they were probably one of the top students here—someone whose high school life had probably followed a completely different path from mine.

*Still, a stranger's a stranger.*

Had it been someone like Maru or Narasaka-san—who always ranked within the top ten of our school tests—that had been chosen instead, I probably would've paid more attention.

*I wonder what that would've been like.*

I definitely picture Narasaka-san weaving in some jokes here and there, getting a few laughs, but still wrapping it all up beautifully.

*Though that would only happen if I was a main character of some novel, or something like that.*

That was the only way for someone I knew, like Maru or Narasaka-san, to be able to speak at an important event like graduation.

Only then would the audience naturally pay closer attention to the words being spoken. People don't usually pay attention to characters that don't really interact with the protagonist, after all. That's why background characters rarely take center stage in most stories.

Instead, it's always someone, who, by some coincidence, became close to the protagonist right before the big event. The person who ends up guiding the main character forward.

*But reality's not like that, through and through.*

The very fact that a male student, whose name I hadn't even known 'til just now, was standing on stage giving a speech as valedictorian only cemented that very fact.

*But wait a sec.*

Thinking about it the other way around, there were definitely students here who do know this Kuriyama guy well.

*So that means they're probably experiencing this graduation ceremony as if they were the protagonists of the story, huh?*

Well, it is true that random things do become true if they happen over and over again.<sup>[4]</sup>

*...Anyway, enough daydreaming.*

Still, what a beautiful way to wrap up my high school life it would've been if Maru or Narasaka-san had been the ones giving the speech.

*Reality's reality though, through and through.*

It wasn't before long for the valedictorian's speech to reach its final words. Even so, there were a few lines from Kuriyama's speech that did stick in my mind.

*“Our school years have been a rare time in our lives—a period in which we experience encounters without any thought of personal gain or loss. It’s for these reasons that I want to cherish the connections I’ve made over these past three years.”*

*Connections, huh...?*

That reminded me of my conversation with Ayase-san this morning on the way to school; my meeting with Maru had truly been a coincidence.

We just happened to sit next to each other, and I’d just happened to pull out a light novel that happened to have an anime adaptation, one which Maru happened to like. And he only started talking to me because he wanted someone to share an interest with.

*I mean, I guess you could also frame it as some kinda personal gain or loss here...*

But it was probably not the kind of “gain or loss” Kuriyama—or what adults—were talking about.

And it’s not just Maru.

There was my connection with Ayase-san.

And Narasaka-san, whom I met only because she was friends with Ayase-san.

And from there, more and more connections to.

All of it, just coincidence.

And connections—human connections—were always at risk of snapping.

As fragile as a spider’s thread.

*Even so...*

Just like Kuryama said, there were still connections I wanted to hold on to.

The ceremony continued—slowly, but steadily.

We all stood up and sang a graduation classic, Aogeba Toutoshi, before the principal stepped up to the podium once more and declared the ceremony officially ended.

And just like that—

My high school life, and Ayase-san's, came to an end.

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**[1]:** Some of you may have already noticed, but I've been localizing a lot of Japanese proverbs to their known equivalents in English since the start of this volume (compared to how I'd previously just keep them and make a TN), but this one goes too hard originally that I had to keep it. Here's the explanation:

"袖すり合うも他生の縁" literally translates to "The brief brushing of sleeves is a connection from a past life," and basically has a similar meaning to known English idioms or proverbs such as "The universe has a way of bringing people together," "What's meant for you won't pass you by," or "A meeting by chance is preordained."

It basically means some encounters (implied from "brushing of sleeves," which basically is just another way of saying "bumping into someone") are just meant to happen because of fate (implied by "connection from a past life").

Hence my TL of "Briefly brushing sleeves is just fate from a past life," which I feel sounds way better spoken in English than a true direct translation like above.

**[2]:** Saki first pronounces out what Yuuta's saying in hiragana ("たしよう," pronounced "tashō") as if confused about what he's saying, and then mistakenly misunderstands it for the word "多少" (meaning "somewhat" or "slightly," also pronounced "tashō"), when what Yuuta really meant was "他生" (meaning "another life," also pronounced "tashō").

**[3]:** Ghost being the inconsistent one here, not me. He uses "ああ、うん。まあ、そうか。がんばれ" here despite using "ほーん?" (which can be translated to "Oh really?") in chapter 8 of volume 11.

**[4]:** Referring to the law of large numbers. Ghost's writing is also awfully extra vague here, but he's referring to how the random event of a valedictorian/someone being unknown to someone else, but known to others, happens commonly enough to be logically sound. Yeah, I would've omitted this line if I was his editor; it's basically just one big nothingburger. Like no shit Sherlock.

## March 1st (Tuesday) Part 2 - Yuuta Asamura

Once the graduation ceremony had ended, us third-years began to leave the gymnasium in order, returning to our classrooms after exiting.

All that was left now was our *final* homeroom. After our homeroom teacher shows up a little later to give their parting words, we'd collectively say our final goodbyes and walk out the school gates.

And that would really be it.

Across the entire classroom, students were caught up in their farewells, reluctant to part ways. As I absently gazed around at the scene, I quickly noticed the mood in the room had been mostly split into two distinct groups.

There were those who calmly soaked in the afterglow of graduation, and those who, while chatting fine with their friends, looked pretty restless—as if something was still lingering on their minds.

But it wasn't a difference based on individual personality.

*And why can I say that so confidently?*

Well, it was because of the person who was the most calm in the room right now, Yoshida, in front of me. He'd been going on with his whole lovestruck brag session for a while now, slyly disguising it as some need for advice. If we were going based on just pure personality, then I don't think I've ever seen Yoshida this relaxed at any point since the third term had started.

If anything, he always looked pale and would mutter things like, "Oh shit, oh shit," every time we met.

*Ah, could it be...*

"So like, Yuuka says she wants to take it easy and go somewhere nearby, but I figured—

“Sorry for cutting you off here, Yoshida, but have you already made your mind up, by any chance?”

“—Wait actually, Yuuta, you might know some good spots, or something... Wait, huh?”

*No, you’re asking the wrong guy if you’re looking for places to take your girlfriend to over the spring break here.*

And that’s precisely why I had no problem interrupting him here.

“You didn’t apply to any national universities, did you?” I clarified.

“Pretty much.”

“How many did you apply to again?”

Most private unis should already have their admission results out by now. That said, there was a chance of him not having made a final decision yet if he’d been accepted into more than one, so directly asking if he got in or not was pretty awkward.

So, that made asking about the number of unis he applied to the safe route.

*But still, if he’s this relaxed, then...*

“I applied to four private ones.”

“Ah, same here.”

I had also applied to four private universities.

“Ended up getting into two while being rejected from the other two. One of them was my top choice, though...” Yoshida explained, looking a little disappointed.

“Oh...”

“Oh well, Meio<sup>[1]</sup> still ain’t bad. It’s got the department I was looking for, too.”

“Oh, so you’ve decided on Meio.”

I took the exam for Meio too, as a second-choice fallback. All in all, I applied to four private unis: Keiryou, Waseho, Ritsuchi, and Meio.

“Can I ask what department you were aiming for?”

“Hm? Oh, economics.”

*The Department of Economics at Meio, huh?*

“Congrats.”

“Thanks, man. But, y’know, it’s kinda hard to celebrate openly with this atmosphere in here and all.”

“Right?”

“Results for the national unis still have a long way to go, huh?”  
Yoshida uttered in quiet reflection.

*So that’s it.*

That’s the reason behind the classroom’s divided atmosphere. It came down to whether someone had already secured a spot at a uni.

The results were already out for students which had private universities as their top choice. As a result, they’ve achieved, in a sense, some sorta inner calm—like Yoshida here.

*Of course, there’s bound to be those who’d end up as ronin<sup>[2]</sup> too.*

And as for us other students aiming for national unis, we still had about ten more days before we’d get our results. That was the reason for the restlessness.

As a result, the air from the calm and relaxed group clashed with the nerves from the other restless half, blending together to create this odd atmosphere in which no one was sure whether they were supposed to celebrate or maintain their solemnness.

*Still, the relaxed group’s definitely in the majority here.*

There were fewer students who had national universities as their first choice, after all.

“Oh well, nothing we can do now. Just gotta brace ourselves,” I remarked.

“You sound awfully chill for someone whose top choice’s a national. Both of you, actually.”

“I’m not at all. But, well, Ayase-san’s...”

I glanced diagonally toward the front of the classroom. By “both of you,” Yoshida meant me and Ayase-san.

She was currently chatting with Class Rep, Ooyama-san—who she’s particularly grown close with—and Satou-san, aka Ryo-chin. Today would be the last time I’d get to see the three of them laughing together like this in the classroom.

“Welp, there’s no point flailin’ around at this stage,” Ooyama-san said just then, something similar to what I’d mentioned a moment ago.

*Looks like she’s in the restless camp.*

Satou-san, on the other hand, looked to be in the relaxed camp.

“You’ll be fine, Chiharu-chan~,” she reassured her with a calm smile as warm as a spring day.

Those two practically wore their hearts on their sleeves, so it was easy to tell where they stood.

*As for Ayase-san...*

“I mean, yeah, there’s nothing I can do at this point. But still, it’s pretty hard to feel calm even knowing that.”

“Eh? You too, Saki-chan?” Satou-san asked, surprised.

*See?*

She was exactly like her usual self. If anything, she looked like part of the relaxed group.

“Yeah... Huh? Do I not seem that way?” Ayase-san asked, with Satou-san vigorously nodding up and down in response.

“Not at all! I thought Chiharu-chan was already amazing, but Saki-chan, you’re even more composed. So, I thought maybe you must be really confident about being accepted.”

“No way. I mean... I don’t think I had it as hard as Class Rep, but there were still a few problems I couldn’t solve. I’m worried too, you know?”

“*Haaah.* Saki-chan, saying that there were only a *few* problems you couldn’t get is amazin’ enough,” Class Rep retorted.

“Yeah, super amazing.”

“Eh—”

In fact, Ayase-san’s poker face was so strong that it easily frequently earned that kind of teasing from the two of them.

“T—that’s not what I meant...” she blurted out, flustered—a line she’d been saying more and more recently.

*No, you’re only gonna get teased even more no matter how much you insist you aren’t confident here,* I couldn’t help but quip as I watched her.

Still, I could only look on with a warm and slightly indulgent gaze. They weren’t the type to tease her in a way she’d actually be annoyed with, after all.

“See? Ayase-san’s probably worried too. I still think she’ll be fine, though,” I explained to Yoshida.

“I mean, I’d wanna say *you’re* fine too, Yuuta, but you’d hate it if I made promises I couldn’t keep, wouldn’t ya? Oh well, everything’s gonna be settled in ten days anyway, but if it comes to the point where you’re ever lookin’ for some comfort, just let me know.”

“You sure say some terrifying things.”

*I really don’t want things to turn out like that.*

“Oh, but not on the actual day, okay? Already got plans with Yukka.”

“Makihara-san’s aiming for a national university too...?” I asked, with Yoshida nodding in response.

“Yeah. But I mean, she knows it’s a hard one, so it ain’t like it’s her first choice. She’s already got into a private one, so she says she’s just trying her luck with a national uni. But, y’know, even going into it with low expectations still makes it hurt if you fail. That’s just being human.”

“That’s right...”

Emotions don’t always follow even if you understand things logically in your head. It was something I’d been reminded of again and again over the past two years.

And just like that, our idle chatter came to an end at the sound of the front door sliding open, signalling the entrance of our homeroom teacher.

“*Oiii*, everyone! Take your seats!”

At that, those who’d been up chatting scurried back to their desks.

“It’ll be our last time here, so if there is one thing you’d like to say, now’s the time,” they told us after giving us a farewell address, as they began to call on students one by one, starting from one end of the room.

That was when I finally realized they were calling out everyone’s name without even looking at any kinda roster. Sure, people might say that’s only natural for any homeroom teacher, but considering the fact I had only just committed Class Rep’s name—Chiharu Ooyama—to memory today, I had to admit that it was seriously impressive.

*They really have been our homeroom teacher, huh?* I found myself thinking.

*Thank you for everything.*

Those words came to mind naturally, straight from my heart.

*Oh right, their name’s Watanabe, I think.*

*Right...?*

It wasn’t long before everyone got to finish saying their one last thing, with Class Rep’s final remark being incidentally, “I’ve agreed to be the class reunion organizer!”

*I knew it.*

“Make sure you take everything out of your locker. I’ll have you come back during spring break to get it if you leave anything behind!” Watanabe-sensei declared with those parting words, dismissing us.

Those who’d already tidied their lockers began to file out of the classroom. Given I wasn’t the type to leave stuff behind at school, my locker was basically empty. Same with Ayase-san.

The one who left the whole class dumbfounded was, of course, Yoshida. He had apparently completely given up on the idea of leaving his locker clean from the beginning, with no hesitation at all at that.

He walked up to his locker with the kind of suitcase you’d take on a trip, and started to cram the utter chaotic mess of printouts and textbooks, one after another. His bold decision to abandon any attempt at sorting what he needed and didn’t left our classmates exasperated, yet in the end, they all just accepted it as typical Yoshida behavior.

*Anyway, mine’s empty. My desk, too.*

I’d already finished cleaning them up beforehand.

Given I wasn’t in any club I could go to now, this was really it—I was getting driven out of Suisei High for good.

I felt reluctant to leave, but we’d already made plans to meet up with our parents by the school gate beforehand.

*Don’t wanna keep them waiting too long.*

“Well then, it’s about time,” I prompted Ayase-san as I started to heat toward the door.

“Yo! Good work! C’ya later!” Yoshida called out to me just before I reached the door

“Later?” I asked, tilting my head.

It was now Yoshida’s turn to look surprised—along with a few others standing behind him.

“Huh? You’re comin’, right? To the afterparty.”

“Afterparty...?”

*What? The heck's he talking about?* I thought, confused, but then it hit me.

*Wait a sec. Could it be...?*

That's right—three days ago. From when I had gotten a LINE message from Maru.

**Tomokazu:** **【Wanna meet up after graduation?】**

**Yuuta:** **【Sounds good】**

Of course, I remembered. I had replied, after all. After that, I learned that Ayase-san had also received a similar message from Narasaka-san at the time, too.

The timing was too perfect, and it was something Ayase-san couldn't help but ask about.

**Saki:** **【Is Maru-kun coming too by any chance?】**

**Maaya:** **【Yup! I'll make the reservation and text you once everything's set later, m'kay?】**

*I thought the plan was just the four of us to hang out.*

From my perspective, it just simply looked like Narasaka-san, knowing Maru and I were friends, was being thoughtful, arranging a gathering like that. But now that I thought about it, it was kinda strange.

*The four of us never really hung out as just the four of us, have we?*

And given organizing things was totally something Narasaka-san was good at, I hadn't been particularly worried even though we hadn't heard anything since.

*No way.*

Panicking, I pulled my phone from my pocket and checked my messages.

Yet, there was nothing...

*No, hol' up.*

Just then, a new notification popped up, signaling a new message that pushed my initial curt “Sounds good” reply up the screen. It showed the name of what sounded like a family restaurant as a meetup spot, and its location on a map.

*Huh, right now?*

The restaurant was some family one around a kilometer southwest from Shibuya Station via Tamagawa-dori Avenue. Given it was pretty far from the station, it probably wouldn’t be too crowded at this hour on a weekday.

“What, like, this place?”

“Yep, yep. That’s the one,” Yoshida answered as I showed him the location on the map.

Just then, another notification chimed, this one also from Maru that included a full list of who was coming.

*That's long...*

How many people were on this thing? Definitely over twenty here.

I’ve gotta admit—it is pretty impressive that he’s managed to coordinate an afterparty with this many people. Like seriously, props to him.

But still...

*You should have told me earlier!* I couldn’t help but mentally yell at Maru, who wasn’t even here.

And Yoshida wasn’t the only one on the list. There were others like Class Rep—Chiharu Ooyama-san—Ryouko Satou-san, Narasaka-san, and even Makihara-san; pretty familiar names at that.

*It's not like I don't want to go...*

Despite the fact that I wasn’t the best at big gatherings, I couldn’t deny that a part of me still wanted to hold onto this moment for just a little longer. But then again, I had *already* come to terms with the fact I was probably never gonna see some of these people ever again.

*And I was even feeling kinda bummed about it.*

“You’re coming, aren’t ya? Your name’s on the list,” Yoshida asked with a worried expression.

“Hm? Oh, yeah,” I nodded.

*I mean, I kinda did reply with a “Sounds good” in the first place.*

There was no way I could back out now. And if I was being honest, knowing I’d get to see everyone again for at least one more time was actually making me kinda happy.

“Come on, Asamura-kun, our parents are waiting,” Ayase-san urged me on with a brisk tug on my sleeve. “Hurry up.”

This wasn’t something you’d have seen six months ago—we would’ve definitely left the classroom at completely different times. But now, it looked like she no longer felt the need for that sort of consideration.

It was something you’d think our other classmates—especially those who didn’t know the full picture, unlike Yoshida and the others—would be surprised about. Yet, oddly enough, no one looked all that shocked.

“Asamura-kun, seriously,” Ayase-san urged me again.

Does she not want to stay and talk more with Class Rep or Satou-san, or something? She’s pretty close with them, right?

*No, right—they’re all gonna see each other at the afterparty anyway. Guess that makes sense.*

Wait, does that mean she got told ahead of time?

My questions kept piling up. Still, they didn’t change the fact that our parents were still waiting for us.

“Uhhh, okay then. C’ya later,” I said to Yoshida and the rest, with Ayase-san giving her own little wave after right on cue.

“See you guys.”

Her words caught me off guard.

*“See you guys.”*

Not “goodbye,” or even “farewell,” but “see you.”

Words not only meant for those coming to the afterparty still lingering in the classroom, but to all the other classmates who were still there, despite the fact there were definitely people we’d never cross paths with again for the rest of our lives among them.

I’m sure Ayase-san understood that.

And at the very same time, though surprising to me, I couldn’t help but feel that it was something the current Ayase-san would say. She most likely didn’t want her words to carry the nuance that this was truly the end.

The parting words of a certain third-year student—whose face and name I couldn’t even recall now—suddenly reemerged on the surface of my mind with striking clarity.

*“Our school years have been a rare time in our lives—a period in which we experience encounters without any thought of personal gain or loss. It’s for these reasons that I want to cherish the connections I’ve made over these past three years.”*

It was a standard, almost cliché message. But maybe that’s exactly why it felt so universal.

Maybe even Ayase-san also wanted to cherish the connections she’d made with classmates she might run into again someday. It was why she said “See you guys,” after all.

She let go of my sleeve she’d been pulling, and walked beside me.

As I quietly glanced at her profile, I found myself mulling about how the course of these past three years had come to change the girl who went by Saki Ayase.

What hadn’t changed was her long, sunlit hair.

The earrings that sparkled near her ears.

The upright posture she carried.

Her eyes, always seemingly looking forward, as if in pursuit of something.

The stands of her golden hair that bounced behind her, as if chasing her.

“What?” Ayase-san asked as she glanced toward me, noticing my gaze.

*Shit, I can't think of an excuse for staring at her.*

“No, it's just, your hair... It's gotten long again.”

*That too, was a change.*

Her once long hair had been cut, and now, it had grown back out.

“*Ohhh,*” she uttered, lightly combing through it with her right hand. “I cut it... back in the summer the year before last. It's already been a year and a half ago.”

“Has it really been that long?”

From back when I realized I liked her, and back from when she tried to give up her own feelings for me.

A year and a half ago—a short time when you think about it in terms of a whole life span, yet a year and a half that brought major changes for both Ayase-san and I.

We changed out of our indoor shoes at the entrance. We had to bring them home, of course. Couldn't just leave them here.

I found myself turning back as we stepped out of the school building. The familiar, three-story building shone brightly in the spring sunlight, its silver window frames occasionally glinting. Some students were still in their classrooms, their shadows faintly visible behind the glass.

“It's really ending, huh...?” Ayase-san looking back just like I was, said softly.



“It’s true that everything’s got an end,” I nodded, noticing the tinge of loneliness in her expression, thinking of something to say to cheer her up, “But I think there are things that also begin because others end. Like how our uni life’s about to begin with the end of our high school one.”

“I mean, we don’t know if that’s truly going to happen in your case, though.”

“Ugh,” I stumbled, completely unexpecting to be teased by Ayase-san like that.

“J-just kidding, okay?” she hesitantly tried to follow up.

“I know.”

“It’s not like I’ve gotten my results either. So, in that sense, I don’t know what’ll happen starting April either. I really... don’t know, huh...?”

*What’s with you taking more damage from your own jab now?*

“Let’s not talk ’bout that today,” I commented.

“Mm.”

“Anyway, we’re keeping our parents busy here.”

*We’ve gotta at least get to the front gate and meet with them.*

The front gate came into view as we walked down the gentle slope, bustling with waiting parents and even underclassmen who’d rushed over for a final goodbye. I was worried about whether I’d be able to spot them in this crowd, but it turns out the human eye was pretty good at picking out familiar faces in a sea of people.

My eyes quickly locked onto my old man and Akiko-san standing just before the gate. We approached them as we walked side by side, and it wasn’t long before they noticed us and waved us over with welcoming smiles.

“Congratulations on graduating, Saki. And you too, Yuuta-kun,” Akiko-san said with a smile as I heard my old man give a direct and sincere “congratulations” with a serious face, which felt strangely embarrassing.

“Oh right, old man. There’s apparently going to be an afterparty with the other graduates.”

“Ah, yeah, I heard. It’s the one Saki-chan’s friends planned, right?”

I nodded.

*So Narasaka-san did tell Ayase-san in advance, after all.*

That meant she must’ve told Akiko-san about it beforehand, too.

“Go and enjoy yourselves. There’ll probably be a lot of friends you won’t get to see for a while there. I’m sure you’ve got plenty of memories to catch up on. Just make sure you get back in time; we have a reservation for 6 p.m.”

“Understood,” I nodded, with Ayase-san following suit.

For now, we parted ways after confirming our evening plans with my old man and Akiko-san, as the two of them walked off together, looking close as ever.

*Now then...* I let out a short sigh as I took out my phone.

Pulling up the digital map on my phone, I checked how long it’d take for us to get to the family restaurant. It wasn’t too far from here, and it was currently just past twelve.

“When does it start again?”

“One o’clock.”

“We’ve still got lots of time.”

There was still nearly an hour left.

“Some of the others said they wanted to stop by home first. You know, because it’s a hassle to carry all their stuff around,” Ayase-san explained, bringing Yoshida to mind.

“Yeah, for sure.”

You definitely wouldn’t wanna be walking into a family restaurant hauling around a huge bag stuffed with personal belongings that had been sitting in your locker all year.

“It’s still around lunchtime, though. Feels like it’s gonna be crowded,” I mentioned.

“They’ve made a reservation, apparently. It’s either under ‘Suisei High’ or just ‘Narasaka.’”

“As expected of her; she doesn’t miss a thing, huh?”

*Guess there’s no need to worry with Maru and Narasaka-san organizing it all.*

“Wait, in that case, maybe we should’ve stayed with my old man and Akiko-san ’til then.”

“They’re probably heading to lunch now. Wouldn’t we be too full for anything else later if we sat and ate with them?”

*True enough.*

Still, the family restaurant was only ten minutes away on foot; we’d get there way too early even if we walked slowly. On the other hand, going back to our apartment was a pain. Plus, we had to stay in uniform for our later meeting with our parents in the evening too, so there was no point in changing.

*No, forget ’bout later.*

What matters now is how I spent this bit of time with Ayase-san.

In the end, we decided to take a small little detour and stroll along the main road, window shopping as we went. There, we ran into a small, seemingly independently run vintage clothing shop, with Ayase-san asking if it was okay to take a look. Of course, I said yes and went in with her.

“This one’s nice,” Ayase-san would say as she picked up various clothes, all of which I could easily imagine suiting her well.

Even I, someone completely disconnected from any sense of fashion, could tell she always paid attention to how others would see her in what she wore.

“Was there anything you thought looked good, Asamura-kun?” she suddenly turned the question to me.

I immediately froze up in place, before remembering a time from when I'd gone on a date with her.

*That's right—she's never really looking for a correct answer whenever she asks questions like this.*

"Ah, sorry. *Uhhh*, that was a pretty hard question to answer, right?"

"It's okay."

Had her question been more straightforward, like whether *I* wanted anything from here or not, then I could've just gone with an easy "no."

But Ayase-san's question right now wasn't about getting a correct answer. What she wanted wasn't an opinion, but my impression. In other words, what Ayase-san wanted was just to enjoy spending our time together—she was just tossing me a conversation.

And that meant what mattered most was tossing the ball back, like a game of catch. Doing that meant all I had to do was speak honestly about what I was feeling at that moment.

"I was more focused on watching you pick out clothes than the actual clothes themselves, so I don't really have much to think of them. I just kept thinking about how you're always picking out outfits that really suit you, or how you're really good at finding cute stuff... I was just admiring you, basically," I confessed honestly.

*Okay, that should've been good enough.*

"!"

*Huh?*

"Th—that's not what I meant..." she muttered.

"*Uhhh*, sorry?"

*No way, was she actually asking for an opinion?*

“You don’t have to apologize. *Mm*, I’m happy you thought that, but, um, well... Then, what do you think of this?” she asked, suddenly reaching out and briskly grabbing a T-shirt from one of the display tables, unfolding it open right in front of me.

“.....”

It featured a massive cat with fur spiked up like a rooster’s comb, riding a bright red motorcycle while waving a flag atop a post-apocalyptic, rubble-crowded wasteland—the type that would only come about with some messiah’s arrival at the end of the century. It had a logo that read “Jeanne d’Arc-nyan.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Ayase-san, who was holding the shirt out for me to see, looked even more surprised than I was.

“Looks like it’s got... high attack power, maybe...?”

“...Sorry.”

“Judging from the name, I’m guessing the cat’s supposed to be female?”

“Like I said, sorry.”

“...Well, I wouldn’t wear it for what it’s worth.”

“I knew it... Ah, it’s almost time. Should we go?” Ayase-san pointed out.

*I’ve got a feeling that she’s tryna cover something up. But, oh well, whatever.*

She probably just grabbed a random shirt without thinking and got stunned by how ridiculous it looked.

Before we knew it, the time for the afterparty had drawn close, so we picked up our pace and headed to the family restaurant indicated on the digital map.



We managed to get there just in time.

I pulled open the slightly heavy glass door, entering the restaurant after letting Ayase-san step in first. By then, she was already speaking to the staff who'd come out to greet us.

"I believe there's a group reservation under Narasaka?"

"Yes, there is. Right this way," the waiter said with a polite smile, making a small gesture with one hand before leading us inside.

There, in a corner toward the back of the spacious restaurant, sat a group of students—still mostly in their uniforms—occupying about five booth seats.

"Here they are. Over here, Saki!" a red-haired girl sitting near the center of one of the booths called out to us, raising her hand straight above her head as she gave a little wave.

The voice carried just enough to reach us without bothering the other customers—expertly controlled, belonging to none other than Maaya Narasaka-san.

We thanked the waiter who'd guided us in and slid into two of the booths to the far-right corner from where Narasaka-san had called us from. They were shaped like Us, with each booth facing each other separated from the aisle.

On the right booth was Yoshida, his girlfriend Makihara-san, and Kodama, who'd been on my basketball team from back in the sports festival. I took a seat with them for now.

On the left booth, an inverted U from where we sat, were Class Rep, Ryouko Satou-san—aka Ryo-chin—and Shinjou and his girlfriend, whose name was... Kobayashi-san, I think? All in all familiar faces. Ayase-san sat over on that side.

It looked like Narasaka-san arranged the seating beforehand so that everyone would naturally end up closer to those they were already on friendly terms with.

"Here. Order up, Yuuta," Yoshida handed me the ordering tablet no sooner had I taken my seat.

“...Has everyone else already ordered?” I asked.

“I mean, you two were the last ones to get here. What were you up to?”

By “you two,” he meant me and Ayase-san. Apparently we were the only ones who’d actually taken a detour ’til the very last minute.

“Uh, just taking it easy, that’s all,” I said, a little flustered.

“Takin’ it easy, huh?”

“What did you order, Yoshida?”

“A hamburg steak lunch set and a fountain drink,” Yoshida told me without complaining, seemingly unannoyed at my blatant attempt to change the subject.

*Figures, typical Yoshida.*

I glanced around at the others, and they each started telling me what they’d ordered. Satou-san was the only one who went with just a salad and fountain drink, dodging away at Class Rep’s attempt to pinch her at her side through her clothes.

*Oh, so that’s why,* I thought.

Saying why out loud would probably earn me a decently long silent treatment, though.

I went with omurice; with a fountain drink, of course. Ayase-san chose the doria<sup>[4]</sup>, also with a fountain drink. Both were part of the lunch set menu. Just because we’d graduated from high school didn’t mean our sense of money suddenly changed—wanting to go for the best deal possible was just natural, really.

By the way, just the names I’d mentioned so far only made seven. Add me and Ayase-san, then we already had a group of nine in this section alone. I glanced toward the other booths and saw roughly the same number of people seated there too—a lot of familiar faces at that. Some of them were from the same group that we’d gone to the pool with during the summer of our second year; the one organized by Narasaka-san.

The ones who'd planned today's afterparty—Narasaka-san and Maru—were both seated at one of the booths in the middle

Once everyone returned from the fountain drink bar with something in hand, Narasaka-san, as the host, stood up and declared the start of the gathering in a calm yet clearly audible voice.

Given we hadn't rented out a private room, it wasn't like we could exactly go around each table doing individual introductions or something like that, despite the fact there were some people here meeting for the first time. So naturally, things just transitioned to casual chatter.

*Well, it probably helps that most of us here already know each other.*

"This doesn't feel all that different from the afterparties we've had after tourneys," Shinjou, who'd been in the tennis club, commented straightforwardly.

*Guess that's just how high school graduation afterparties are.*

Light and fluffy—not so different from the carefree chats students would have after school time and time again without ever getting tired from them.

Still, it wasn't as if Ayase-san and I knew the ins and outs of that kind of world, given we'd never been part of any club at all.

Everyone had already started to naturally warm up more to each other by the time the food we had ordered arrived, and the conversations came flowing out more freely. While making sure I stayed engaged with those around me, I casually peeked toward Narasaka-san and Maru, who were seated a little further away.

On one hand, Narasaka-san was constantly on the move, walking from seat to seat as she tossed out conversation starters and lifted the mood of the room with her typical social savviness. On the other hand, Maru didn't move around as much, but he too occasionally switched seats here and there to smoothly connect groups of people who didn't seem to know each other that much.

Though I figured that most of those on their side were Narasaka-san's friends, paired with the fact that Maru hadn't gone to the pool with us back then, he still showed no signs of being out of his depth and kept up with the conversations without any issue.

But of course, for all I knew, Maru could've already known most of them—he had a far larger social circle than I did, after all.

*As expected of the captain and starting catcher of the baseball team,* I thought, finding myself once again impressed by how well he handled people.

Back in our second year, Maru had basically been the only person I could've reasonably called my friend, but he wasn't the same. He was way more sociable than I was. Plus, at a school like Suisei High, one with a mid-tier baseball club—our team probably didn't have fewer than twenty members. The max number allowed on the bench for district tournament games was twenty, after all. Having fewer members than that meant everyone would've made the bench without any competition, something that would've been a complete disaster for even a school of Suisei High's level.

In other words, you'd have to have some considerable amount of leadership and social skills—enough to manage a group of more than twenty—if you wanted to be a baseball team captain.



*“A leader must be able to move others with their words.”*

I think I read that in some how-to book once. It's a role not suited to someone timid.

I understood that much in theory, but being able to see someone like Maru naturally blend in and chat away with a bunch of others reminded me of how much of a shy person I really was.

And it's not like I've ever struggled with customer service at my part-time job, but just striking up a casual conversation with someone I'm not all familiar with still feels like a high hurdle. I was honestly grateful that they'd set up the seating so people mostly ended up around others they were more familiar with.

As these thoughts zig-zagged through my mind, Narasaka-san came walking over.

“What's up, what's up? What'cha guys talking about?”

Almost at the same time, Shinjou and his girlfriend, Kobayashi-san, were called over by one of his friends from the tennis club, and they left their seats to join Maru and the others.

Judging by the time, we were probably into the second half of the afterparty by now.

Sliding smoothly into the seat next to Ayase-san's, Narasaka-san eased into our group's conversation with a bright, beaming smile, not missing even a single beat. Her timing was perfect; I almost wanted to suspect if she'd been specially trained, or something like that.

“What's up, Asamura-kun? Upset your omurice had no heart drawn on it?”

“No way, I've never even made a weird complaint like that before.”

“But you've got your brows furrowed, dontchu?”

I figured she was just joking, but even so, I reflexively touched my forehead and the spot just below it. Even gave it a light massage while I was at it.

“We were just chatting ’bout future plans, I guess,” Class Rep offered, saving me.

*Thank god.*

It’s not like I could exactly admit that I’d just been staring off in Maru’s direction without really participating in the actual conversation.

“Whoa, so somethin’ heavy, huh?” Narasaka-san said with a concerned shift in expression.

“It’s all right,” Satou-san gave a soft, reassuring smile. “I was just talking about how lonely I was feeling since we all wouldn’t be able to see each other that much anymore.”

“But you’re all staying here in the Kanto region, amirite?” Kodama chimed, picking up the thread. “You guys could still meet up if you wanted. How nice.”

Right, Kodama mentioned he was aiming for a uni in Hokkaido once. He probably won’t be able to come back often if he gets accepted.

“So, it wasn’t that the topic was heavy. It’s more that we were discussing what’s coming next,” Satou-san continued her explanation. “I personally haven’t applied to any national universities myself, and the one I’ll be attending is close enough to home that I won’t need to move out, so nothing in my environment is really changing. I think that’s why I’ve been feeling a bit too relaxed. But I was curious about what everyone else is going to do.”

“Me getting in or not’s gonna change my life a lot starting this spring,” Kodama added in response to Satou-san’s explanation.

“Then, I guess that means it’s gonna be super nerve-wracking ’til the results are out, huh?” Narasaka-san spoke up, and Kodama nodded along.

Somehow, having the relatively small and soft-featured Kodama, with the likewise petite Satou-san and Narasaka-san, all sitting together with cheerful smiles gave off a cozy li'l "spring sunshine" kinda atmosphere that concentrated around where they were.

"What's up with the 'koharun' vibe comin' from over there?" Class Rep jested, as if she'd read my mind.

"Koharun?" Ayase-san tilted her head from beside me, as if she was asking who that was.

*Don't think that's a person's name, though.*

"I think she meant 'koharubiyori'<sup>[5]</sup>," I explained, yet she still didn't quite seem to get it.

"So... like a spring kind of vibe?"

"Well, yep, I guess. But technically speaking, 'koharubiyori' doesn't really refer to spring weather in the first place," I added.

Ayase-san tilted her head again, at the same exact angle at that.

*Looks like she really doesn't know. Guess I'll explain about it more.*

Koharubiyori refers to an off, warm, sunny day that comes during winter. In other words, it's one that happens when you're *still* in the winter. Of course, Class Rep was well aware of that, and used the term to mean that while everyone else was still in "winter mode," aka more or less gloomy, that li'l group over there alone felt like spring.

"Now this is just a random bit of trivia, but this kinda weather doesn't only happen in Japan—it actually occurs all over the world. Different countries even got their own names for it, too. A known one's the German term, 'Altweibersommer,' which literally means 'Old Ladies' Summer.'"

"You mean like, a Granny's summer?"

"Doesn't exactly sound like it'd last long, amirite? Sunny spells in autumn or winter usually don't."

“I see...” Ayase-san nodded at my words, before for some reason getting this solemn look on her face as she muttered, “I hope they live a long life, though.”

*What on Earth did you get so emotionally attached to now?*

“No but still, winter or not, you and Narasaka are way to chill ‘bout all this, Class Rep,” Yoshida, who’d been quietly listening the whole time, said in a little grumble.

“Oho, stray shots comin’ this way,” Narasaka-san said with a smile, while Class Rep grimaced as she took a sip from the juice in front of her through a straw.

“Hey now, I ain’t some ‘Yoyuu no Yoshio-kun,’ okay?” she retorted.

*She does occasionally use these weird, old-fashioned expressions.*

Actually, I don’t even remember people saying that kinda thing in the Heisei era, let alone the Showa era. She was probably pulling it from some ancient book that also contained expressions like “Yoyuu no Yocchan”<sup>[6]</sup>—something like that.

“I’m just normal, really. Normal.”

“Yuuta—no, Asamura-danna<sup>[7]</sup>. This girl over here’s saying she’s normal,” Yoshida teased.

“Ah... Well, I mean, what counts as ‘normal’ totally depends on who you mingle with in the first place. Like, if we’re going on Suisei High’s track record, where its top ten percent of students regularly get into the most competitive and prestigious unis across the country, then whether our school’s perspective of ‘normal’ lines up with the general public’s idea of what it is, is... Huh? What’s with the face?”

Everyone in the booth turned to collectively stare at me at once, leaving me completely bewildered.

*Did I say something weird?*

“...Wait, could it be you didn’t actually mean for me to seriously judge whether what Class Rep said was valid or not?”

“More like that answer was so typical of you, Yuuta. If anything, honestly.”

“Top ten percent...” Makihara-san murmured softly.

“Well, if you’re going by grades alone, then the top ten percent are probably the ones with very high chances of getting accepted, at least if you’re talking about Suisei High. Of course, whether those right at the cutoff do get accepted or not depends on a whole lot more factors. Plus, reality is that more than ten percent of us students take these exams anyway.”

“In that case I’m definitely doomed~” Makihara-san slumped her shoulders dramatically, painting a look of panic on Yoshida right beside her.

*I knew it; her confidence of getting accepted really is in the dumps.*

At the same moment, Class Rep bit down on the straw of her juice with an audible chomp. She seems stressed out too, albeit she’s more discreet about it.

*Let’s see... Right.*

There were eight of us here right now—me, Ayase-san, Yoshida, Makihara-san, Class Rep, Satou-san, Kodama, and Narasaka-san—so statistically speaking, only one of us would maybe get accepted. But then again, it’s not like our group here’s a perfect representation of Suisei High’s average.

*Besides... I thought as I glanced over at the other group, spotting Maru in deep conversation with Shinjou.*

Maru had also applied to the same ultra-competitive uni as Class Rep, Narasaka-san, and Makihara-san.

*No, but that guy probably—*

“Oh, Tomo? Guy’s already gotten into a private uni, hasn’t he?” Yoshida spoke up, noticing where I was looking as he followed my gaze toward Maru.

*Tomo. Short for Tomokazu.*

“Maru’s second choice was Keiryou, amirite? Results are already out, aren’t they?”

“He got in. You didn’t hear?”

“Hearing my result ain’t gonna change yours, is it?’ so he told me. He said he’d just let everyone know once everything was all over. But I mean, you knew, huh, Yoshida?”

“That’s ’cause I applied to the same one as him. Tomo’s school was my first choice. Didn’t get in, of course.”

“Gotcha.”

“He’s amazing, ain’t he? I mean, how d’you rank at the top of your class and captain the baseball team at the same time?”

“Well, yep, no denying that; Maru’s impressive. But I think you’re pretty amazing too, Yoshida.”

“Huh, for real? Me? Amazing?”

I nodded.

*At least compared to me, who tends to get complete tunnel vision when it comes to my own stuff...*

He fell short with getting into his first choice and had to settle for a backup—that couldn’t be something you’d feel great about. And yet despite that, he accepted it, immediately moved on, and now dedicated all his energy to worrying about Makihara-san.

*What’s more...*

“Everyone takes their results differently anyway, so I don’t think it makes sense to compare just them alone,” I spoke as if trying to persuade him, though I wasn’t sure of how convincing my words actually were.

Even though Suisei High was a prep school, one which most of its students go on to university, each person’s circumstances were still different. That meant their reasons for going to uni differed as well.

In other words, the things that people look for in a university varies from person to person, so it's not like you could just generalize it to the idea that getting into the more prestigious university is better.

*"There is no meaning in looking at just numbers alone."* That's what Professor Mori wrote in his book.

"That's exactly right," a voice came from behind me, and I instinctively turned around.

Before I had even realized it, Maru was standing right behind me, glass of black oolong tea in hand—probably brought back from the fountain drink bar. Looks like he happened to overhear our convo when he'd gone to get a refill.

"You've got your own goals, Yoshida, and I've got mine. We might be playing on the same board here, but our conditions for victory differ. And if we were using the same board, then we're playing completely different games," Maru spoke, earning Makihara-san's earnest nod.

"Oooh, Tomo-chin's on a roll," Class Rep chimed.

*Tomo-chin... Tomo-chin?*

*Who's that?*

I never imagined anyone calling the burly, muscle-clad Maru with such an adorable nickname like that.

*"Pfft! \*Cough cough cough\*!"*

"You okay, Maaya?"

"Ah, yeah. Just got surprised," Narasaka-san, who'd just spit out the cream soda she was sipping on, said as she waved her hand slightly. "Don't worry 'bout it."

With the whole flow of the conversation now coming to a halt, I decided to set aside that whole weird nickname thing for now.

"Tomo-chin..." Ayase-san murmured softly.

*Crap, there's someone who didn't put it on the shelf.*

“Ryou-chin,” Ayase-san muttered as she turned her gaze toward Satou-san, before turning her eyes slowly to me...

“Yuu—”

“Stop, Ayase-san. Get a hold of yourself,” I said, my words jerking her awake, prompting her to shake her head as though she’d just woken up from a bad dream.

*Class Rep’s off-the-cuff naming sure has some serious influence...*

“Yeah, guess you’re right, Maru. But Yoshida’s really amazing, too. Anyway, Maru, you sure it’s okay for you to be here?” I asked, glancing toward the other somewhat distant booths away from us.

It still looked lively enough, but wasn’t it a problem for both Maru and Narasaka-san, the organizers, to be over here at the same time?

“I ain’t that great with tearjerkers,” he whispered from behind me in a hushed voice.

*Huh?*

Tilting my head in confusion, I discreetly observed the other booths. There, I saw a student—known for being pretty tearful—practically in tears. Straining my ears, I picked up bits and pieces of their wailing, hearing words like “being apart” and “lonely.”

“I mean it isn’t *that* big of a deal. Like, we can still talk with each other anytime through our phones,” Maru said in a low voice.

“Yeah, that’s true.”

You could easily see someone else’s face in real time from anywhere nowadays, even if it’s through a camera—granted as long as you had a smartphone. In that sense, leaving your hometown has become easier compared to the past. The range of universities people could consider has widened, too.

Yoshida, on the other hand, still didn’t seem all that convinced.

“But I mean, y’know, ain’t there still a lotta things you can only do in person?”

“Examples?” Maru asked, leaving Yoshida to think for a moment before replying.

“Like, holding hands, I guess?”

“You’re not, like, a child being led by a parent anymore.”

“Who said a thing ’bout that! I meant with a lover! Long-distance relationships are rough, aren’t they?”

“Look, it’s not like people who work jobs that rarely let them go home are incapable of having families. Of course, there are those who can’t handle it, and sure, nothing’s wrong with that. But you can’t tie someone who’s got their own free will down, in the end. You part when it’s time to part, you connect when it’s time to connect. Encounters and farewells are what’s part of life, after all.”

“How old are you? I mean, seriously, it’s like you’ve got virtually no emotions... Not like I didn’t know that already, though.”

“I’m just used to thinking things through calmly,” Maru replied flatly, without a flicker of emotion.

“*Ehhh?*” a voice rang out while the echo of his words still lingered in the air. “That’s not true one bit! You were bawlin’ our eyes out after the tourney, remember?”

It was none other than Narasaka-san.

*I feel like this is the first time I’ve seen his face frozen speechless like this.*

“Idi—!”

“Idi’?”

“Idiot! Don’t bring that up again!”

“Being told that in such a scary tone makes me just not wanna reflect on my actions at all~,” Narasaka-san teased with a mischievous little grin, just like the one her younger brothers would probably make.

She even averted her gaze on purpose as she spoke, going as far as to let out a sigh. It was incredibly detailed and exaggerated. Of course, Maru wasn’t so dense that he’d miss the fact she was acting.

But still...

“Ah no, it’s not like I meant to give you an order or something...”

“I only revealed the facts for the sake of protectin’ your honor, Maru-kun<sup>[18]</sup>~”

“Ugh... guh... well, I appreciate that, I suppose, but—”

To see Maru—someone usually so calm, composed, and so eloquent in any situation—at a loss for words like this was also a first for me.

“So Maru-kun...”

“Ugh.”

“Was crying his eyes out after the tournament, huh?”

“Guh... So, at that time—no, yes,” he tried to throw an excuse before giving in.

He looked like a child being scolded by his mother, but what was impressive was how instantly he judged that he had no effective counter other than to accept it honestly—and actually following through with it, too.

“Oh, so that’s how you apologize,” Yoshida muttered, impressed.

*No, maybe just don’t piss people off in the first place.*

“Now, now, Maaya-chan. That’ll do; that’s quite enough. ’Tis a most joyous graduation ceremony, is it not?” Class Rep suddenly interjected.

*Just what era are you even from with that kinda tone, Class Rep?*<sup>[19]</sup>



“Yeah, yeah. But I mean, there’s still no need to be so overly detached, amirite? We’ve only just graduated from high school, after all. Right, Saki?”

“Eh? Why me?”

Narasaka-san’s fired back retort ricocheted and hit Ayase-san instead.

“Just because you look mature doesn’t mean you gotta view the world so ironically—we’re still eighteen. If you feel like crying, just cry. It’s normal. Trying to force it back just makes you look like you’re pretendin’ to be an adult,” Narasaka-san explained in a sweet and childish tone, yet her words carried surprising weight.

“But Maaya, eighteen year-olds are already considered adults in this country.”

“With voting rights too, right? Yep, but y’know,” the girl with reddish hair named Maaya Narasaka, who was probably Saki Ayase’s number one friend at Suisei High, spoke, “I think the world today’s too complicated to call eighteen year-olds complete adults. It takes more time to grow up than it used to now. Eighteen years just ain’t enough.”

“Not enough... For growing up?”

Narasaka-san nodded. At some point, everyone around us who had been chatting also began listening in.

“There are those out there who grow up superfast, sure. But I don’t think most eighteen year-olds have grown enough to freely use all the rights they’ve got. We can vote, get credit cards, ten-year passports, and even get married on paper. But hey, Saki-chan, d’you feel confident you could have a baby and raise a kid right now?”

“R-raise a kid...? Um, *uhhh...*”

“Of course, there’s plenty of people who could do that properly. But for me? I still don’t think I could manage that. And I bet society’s probably raising the legal age to marry if everyone started gettin’ married the moment they turned eighteen.”

“Then, why do we even have the rights?”

“Preparation, I guess.”

“...Preparation?”

“Even if two eighteen year-olds get married and have a child, they’re realistically not earning enough to support that kinda life, right~? At least, not normal eighteen year-olds.”

“That’s, well...”

“Point is—it takes time to switch gears mentally. I feel like eighteen ain’t so much of ‘You’re an adult now!’ as it is ‘You’re not a child anymore.’ It’s the starting age for *preparing* to become an adult. That’s a more realistic way of looking at things, I think,” Narasaka-san continued to explain in a more subdued and quieter-than-usual tone, and I found myself listening intently.

She wasn’t usually the type to talk about serious stuff like this, but hearing her now made me think—albeit a little rudely, I guess—that she really knows how to say what matters when she does speak seriously.

*Welp, guess that’s exactly why she’s been able to stay friends with the ever-guarded Saki Ayase.*

“That’s why,” Narasaka-san began, “It’s perfectly fine to be more of a li’l kid, Saki. That whole understanding, mature adult act? Way too early for that. Feel free to come and cry on my chest whenever you’re havin’ a tough time, *wahaha!*”

She spread her arms out wide, bringing Ayase-san back from her thoughts as she shook her head vigorously from side to side.

“No, why are you assuming *I’m* the one who’s going to be crying?”

“Oh? Got it wrong?”

“I’m not going to cry.”

“Right, right. You’re the kinda girl who looks better with a *looovely* smile than tears, eh? *Hehehe,*” Narasaka-san teased with her mischievous little grin, and Ayase-san clamped her mouth shut.

It looked like she realized that any more words she said would easily be shot back at her. But honestly, the way she was already puffing up her cheeks in a sulk made her so adorable to begin with.

“You’ve really changed, haven’t you, Saki-san?” Makihara-san, who’d been quietly listening up until now, spoke softly.

“Eh?” Ayase-san let out a puzzling tone, finally tearing her gaze away from Narasaka-san to turn to Makihara-san.

“Changed?”

“Yes. As for me, we were only in the same class during our second year, and I was closer to Narasaka-san during our school trip too, so I didn’t really have much chance to talk to you much.”

“Well that’s... true.”

“So I saw you as the cool but scary type at first. I’m sorry.”

“No it’s not really...” Ayase-san faltered, trailing off, before continuing in a small voice, “You don’t have to apologize.”

*Looks like the others seem to have different impressions of her, though.*

“Scary, huh? So that’s how you came off to her, Saki-cho?”

“I honestly can’t imagine you being that way, Saki-chan.”

Given Class Rep and Satou-san only became especially close with her during their third year, having been put in the same class only then, they apparently couldn’t picture how Ayase-san was from her second year—let alone her first.

*Saki Ayase during her first year.*

That was a part of her past I had never gotten around to asking about either.

“I actually first heard about Saki-san during our first year. Her face, her name—she was famous,” Makihara-san spoke up.

“Famous?” Yoshida asked.

“Yes,” Makihara-san replied with a gentle nod.

“She had a bit of a delinquent vibe—at least for a school like Suisei High.”

“Heh,” Class Rep blurted as if she was oddly impressed, before making a face like someone who’d just heard some truly unbelievable news. “Saki-chan bein’ a delinquent, hm~? I mean, I guess she had this kinda tense look to her back in April, as if she, like, had trouble fitting into class; I was worried by that. But since summer came around, she’s got this unique kinda presence radiating ’round her.”

“Unique, huh...?” Ayase-san muttered, sounding dissatisfied. “That doesn’t sound like a compliment.”

“That’s not what I meant. My bad.”

“It’s fine, really,” Ayase-san waved her hand lightly without any sign of anger. “But honestly, I think I had a pretty bad personality up until last year. I’ll admit that.”

“Not true at all,” Narasaka-san, usually the first to carefully listen to others before speaking, cut in quickly.

“Maaya?”

“Sayin’ you had a bad personality ain’t right. Let’s see...” Narasaka-san spoke, crossing her arms in front of her chest as she gave a small nod. “Right, it’s just you went a long time without being able to put on a friendly face, that’s all.”

“...Isn’t that what having a bad personality means?”

“Nope, not it—it’s totally different. Not being able to *act* friendly doesn’t mean you’ve got a bad personality.”

“You think so?”

“We’re human. No one’s able to stay cheerful and friendly twenty-four-seven. Even me—don’t be fooled by how I look, I can be *reaaaal* scary if you piss me off, mkay~? I’ve got a serious intimidation factor goin’ when I’m all moody~”

“Oho?” Class Rep reached out and pinched Narasaka-san’s cheeks with a quick movement.

*\*Sqeeeeeeeze,\** she squished them, before stretching them like mochi and kneading them all around, causing Narasaka-san's face to twist into all sorts of funny expressions.

"Intimidation? What intimidation?"

"I'll blithe you, ifh you donth shtop."

"C'mon, let's see you get angry! Go on, go on, *uraaah!* Show me that intimidation! C'mon, c'mon!"

*"Mphgh, mufuuuuu!"*

Narasaka-san's series of contorted faces were hilarious, but given she'd just stood up for Ayase-san, who'd been swimming in a pit of utter self-deprecation, everyone was naturally inclined to agree with her. It left us all unsure on whether it was okay to laugh, bringing an awkward tension to the air.

While everyone sat there unsure of what to do, a burst of laughter broke the moment.

*"Pfft! Hehehe, ahahaha!"*

It was Ayase-san, finally breaking the lingering tension in the air.

Class Rep finally let go of Narasaka-san's cheeks, who began to massage them with both hands, relieving them of the torment they'd endured as she let out a small sigh.

"Well, Narasaka's intimidation's no scarier than an angry squirrel," Maru, who had been silently watching up until then, spoke up. "But yep, I get what she's saying. Being friendly's a skill, and that takes practice. Ayase just didn't have it back in first year, that's all. Doesn't mean she was walking around all grumpy every day, right?"

"...Well, I guess."

"And besides, there's just no way Narasaka would be *this* attached to her if she had a bad personality deep down."

"Attached...? Come on."

“She totally is. All she talks ‘bout is you when it’s just the two of us, Ayase,” Maru let out an unexpected revelation, surprising me—and probably everyone else too.

But what was most surprising was Narasaka-san’s reaction. She’d turned completely red instead of shooting back like she usually would.

“Don’t go blabbing, idiot,” she muttered something along those lines in a voice so quiet under her breath that maybe only I, sitting next to her, could hear it.

*Wait, “When it’s just the two of us...?”*

That means Maru and Narasaka-san meet alone fairly often, doesn’t it? I was only just now realizing that. But I mean, considering they were the ones who organized this whole afterparty in the first place, I guess that kinda makes sense.

The conversion had long moved on as I found myself caught up in such thoughts. Now it sounded like everyone was talking about what we’d all been like in our first year.

*Damn, there goes another chance to hear about Ayase-san’s first year in high school.*

She had a pretty grim look on her face when she criticized her own, quote on quote, “bad personality” with that self-deprecating tone of hers earlier. Yet, she was now fully engaged in the convo, laughing and reminiscing about that past like the rest of the others. Her expression, her tone—obviously, but still—it was all so normal, just like any other ordinary eighteen year-old girl.

Like actors stepping off stage after their scenes, Narasaka-san and Maru had at some point returned to the slightly-far-away booth they’d been sitting at originally.

I couldn’t help but, once again, feel just how deeply important Ayase-san’s meeting with Narasaka-san must have been to her. Back in our second year, when I’d just met her, it looked to many like she’d built a clear and obvious wall between herself and others. Even to me, that’s how it felt.

“*Not true at all,*” so Narasaka-san argued.

She'd reasoned it wasn't that Ayase-san was putting up a wall, but rather that she simply couldn't act friendly.

Putting up a wall around yourself is a deliberate action, and it means you have to have the kind of behavior to consciously carry it out. In contrast, not being able to do something is different. Like Maru had explained earlier, it's a matter of simply not having a specific skill.

So that's how Narasaka-san saw it—Ayase-san just wasn't capable of acting friendly because she lacked the skill to do so.

*I can honestly see it now, too.*

Ayase-san was an only child, one who was estranged from her father at that, and one who was hardly able to talk to even her mother because of how mismatched their schedules were. Knowing that much about her family background now, it's easy to imagine how she basically had no one to have day-to-day conversations with from the end of elementary up to high school.

But I'm sure Narasaka-san probably didn't hear about any of that herself. She didn't need to know—she saw right through it. And maybe it's because she's got a ton of younger brothers who she had to look after in place of her busy parents. She most likely had to keep a close and keen eye on them all the time. That kinda experience, built up over time, was probably the reason for her communication skills.

Now, though I didn't know exactly how Narasaka-san and Ayase-san first met, I knew it apparently wasn't the moment they started high school—like it'd been for me and Maru.

That's why, I think she gradually closed the distance between them. It wasn't a rush on Narasaka-san's part.

She wasn't the type to try and force Ayase-san into a group—I've seen that for myself. She chose to compete in tennis with her when Ayase-san decided she didn't want to play in any team-oriented sports for the ball games tournament back in the sports festival, after all. And even when Ayase-san skipped practice to listen to English comprehension exercises, Narasaka-san didn't even try to stop her or drag her with the others, or even make her attend practice for that matter.

But that didn't mean she did nothing at all.

She would sometimes use the little free time she had after school to visit Ayase-san's new apartment—the one she'd move into after her mother had remarried. Like on that one rainy day—always making sure to time her visits so Ayase-san wouldn't feel bothered at all.

Someone with an extraordinary knack for reading and balancing human relationships. That was Maaya Narasaka.

It was because she'd always been there that Saki Ayase managed to avoid developing any unfixable rifts or conflicts with other students herself. That much became clear to me through their exchange just now.

*And I think...*

That's what Maru's been to me, too.

Saying I don't turn anyone away sure sounds nice, but the truth is I just don't chase after those who leave either.

*That's just how I am*, I thought after finding myself analyzing my own personality again.

It's because of my relationship with my mother that I've become timid when it comes to getting close to others. I learned through the painful lesson that not being able to live up to someone else's expectations for you causes stress—for both sides.

Therefore, I simply stopped expecting anything from others myself.

*Don't expect anyone to stay by your side forever.*

And yet, I'm sure that I was still hoping for it somewhere deep down in my heart—hoping that I'd have someone who'd stay close and never leave me.

*What a troublesome personality I have.*

Even so, Maru stuck with me for three whole years.

With 5 p.m. being the rough time for when to wrap things up, things started to wind down. Just before the afterparty came to a close, everyone started spontaneously exchanging information.

“Hey, let’s swap contacts,” someone had said, serving as the catalyst for everyone to start trading. Both Ayase-san and I exchanged LINE and Discord IDs with other students we hadn’t connected with yet.

In no time, my contact list was filled with more names than ever before. Who knows, among those names could even be someone who might become an important part of my or Ayase-san’s future.

*But I’ve got no way of knowing who that might be at this moment.*

And that’s exactly why I don’t want to carelessly cut anyone off right now.

*Connections, huh?*

That said, it’s pretty worrying I still can’t picture a future where *I’m* the one taking the initiative to do something. Oh well, it’s not like personalities change so easily.

Still, if there’s one thing I feel strongly about...

It’s that I want to stay with Maru and Narasaka-san, even after graduation.

Meeting people like them—that’s what Suisei High was for me.

And with that, the final afterschool of my high school life came to an end.

We pushed open the glass doors and stepped out onto the main street, greeted by the sun that was just beginning to set behind the dense cluster of buildings surrounding Shibuya Station from across the road.

Twilight was quietly creeping into the blue sky—sundown was coming soon.

At that moment, a cold north wind—signifying the idea that it was only spring in name right now—blew against us, leaving a slight chill in the air.

Even so, those of us parting ways were still full to the brim with energy, our noisy voices continuing to float up into the still-blue sky.

The others invited us to a second afterparty, but both Ayase-san and I turned them down, telling them that we had plans afterward.

So with that, we waved and said goodbye.

“C’ya guys,” I muttered under my breath.



Our meeting place with our parents was just a few minutes away by foot from Shibuya Station. That meant heading back to the station from the family restaurant.

That said, we still had around an hour before then; plenty of time. Given that, Ayase-san and I decided to walk along the street killing time with some casual window shopping.

By the time we arrived at our appointed time, our parents were already there, waiting for us.

The location? A photo studio.

That’s right—we were having our grad photos taken here today. We were specifically planning to take two types: one in our school uniforms and one in graduation hakama<sup>[10]</sup>. It was the reason why we hadn’t changed out of our uniforms yet.

Though it was common practice to only borrow a hakama from photo studios—like this one—for when you take grad photos, my old man insisted on having a photo of each of us in our Suisei High uniforms as well.

*“They give out the same hakama no matter what school you’re graduating from, but you can only wear a Suisei High uniform if you actually went to Suisei High!”* he had argued that point passionately.

*Can’t say I really blame him...*

The human memory is unreliable—even the uniforms we wore ourselves would become hazy silhouettes to us in just a few years. Plus, plenty of schools are constantly making changes and redesigning their uniforms to something more modern nowadays. There's no guarantee that Suisei High's uniforms will stay the same.

The fact that both Ayase-san and I attended Suisei High was nothing more than a coincidence. But, who could calculate the odds of two step-siblings—brought together by some remarriage—ending up in, not only the same grade but, the same high school? It's probably close to zero. But I guess that's why my old man saw some kind of fate at work in his remarriage with Akiko-san.

And that's why he wanted to preserve that memory.

After finishing taking our grad photos with our uniforms, Ayase-san and I went to change into our graduation hakama, heading to the dressing rooms to get fitted.

I was glad to have a professional help put it on for me, given I'd never worn a hakama before myself. It was that exact kind of service included in the photoshoot that made a booking with a studio like this worth it. Hairstyling was apparently included too, but makeup cost extra. I only needed my hair to be styled, while Ayase-san had gone ahead and requested that her makeup be done.

While the two of us had two different looks each—one in our uniforms and one in hakama—our parents' hadn't changed. My old man wore a suit, and so did Akiko-san. Though I was more or less expecting her to get in a kimono to match Ayase-san's hakama.

"This way's better for a family photo," she had reasoned. "It's nicer to have a photo of how we usually look rather than being all dressed up."

I could understand her point when she'd put it that way.

*Wait no, by that logic, then Ayase-san and I in hakama don't exactly look like we usually do.*

"That's because it's a special day—your graduation," Akiko-san then explained as I brought that thought up, ending the matter.

It kinda felt like she was just picking at parts of the idea that suited her, but I didn't really mind. Besides, I get to see Ayase-san in a beautiful hakama, decorated with floral patterns and a red sash.

"The sash's too tight; I think I ate too much," she said, a comment I found pretty adorable.

If anything, her blunt and upfront honesty made it feel a lot more like a conversation between family.

We lined up in front of the camera at the photographer's signal. They gave us all kinds of directions—where to look, how to pose, stuff like that. And even though we were all pretty nervous, the more natural it started to feel the more we followed along.

With another signal, the shutter clicked again.

"Alright! Let's go for one more!"

*I'm starting to lose count of how many "Let's go for one more!" I've heard at this point.*

There were probably only three or four in reality, but time sure seems to drag on forever whenever you're all tense from trying your hardest to not move a muscle or shift your gaze from your fixed spot.

"Good job, everyone," the photographer finally said, and I felt all the strength leave my body at once.

*I feel like collapsing right here.*

"I never imagined Saki actually letting us take her picture," Akiko-san, her expression still glowing with emotion, said in a trembling voice as we moved through the studio to the dressing rooms.

Ayase-san had always previously hated having her photo taken, after all, so Akiko-san had basically completely given up on pushing for commemorative photos for days like this.

"You're being dramatic, Mom."

"But I really thought it was impossible."

"I don't really mind... things like this anymore."

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. I’m so glad. Your hakama was really beautiful, it’s a shame you have to change it.”

“It’s just a rental. Ah, whatever, I’ll go change,” Ayase-san, far calmer than Akiko-san, headed into the dressing room with the studio staff who were going to help her out of her outfit.

“Alright, I’ll go change too. I should head to the waiting room when I’m done, right?” I asked as I was guided to the room next door myself.

“Yes, that’s right.”

*Finally, I can get changed—*

“By the way, Yuuta-kun. You look great in that hakama too.”

Her words made me freeze up for a second, mid-thought.

“Oh, thank you very much.”

“Mm. I’d love to see you in it again. You look really handsome. Maybe at your university graduation next time? Oh, or your wedding?”

I almost burst out laughing.

*That’s quite the leap, ain’t it?*

“Well, if there’s ever a chance... Alright, see you in a bit.”

“Yes. See you in a bit.”

At that moment, my old man, who’d been talking with one of the staff members about something, came walking down the hallway. Leaving Akiko-san in his hands, I entered the dressing room. I was already starting to feel how tight the sash around my waist had gotten at this point, so I began to eagerly take off my hakama.

Once I had changed back into my uniform, I quickly headed to the waiting room where my old man and Akiko-san were waiting. Given Ayase-san probably needed more time to remove her makeup and all, I figured she’d take longer.

So as expected, only my old man and Akiko-san were there.

“Thanks for waiting. Saki’s still not done...?”

“Yep. Anyway, we should be heading ho—ah, there she is.”

Ayase-san, now back in her uniform and out of the dressing room, walked up to where my old man and Akiko-san were standing. There, she took a brief pause, before bowing deeply.

“Thank you for raising me, Mom,” she said once she raised her head, before then turning to face my old man. “Thank you for accepting me, Stepdad.”

She bowed once more.

“Um,” she began with a slightly bashful expression, raising her head again, as if searching for the right words, “It’s just, I felt now was a good opportunity, so I wanted to say this.”

“Saki...” Akiko-san murmured, but that was as far as she got. She couldn’t speak any further.

Her face contorted, as if she was fighting to swallow something down, before tears spilled down her cheeks.

Burying half her face into my old man’s chest as he supported her by her shoulders, she began to cry. I could make out the glimmer of tears in my old man’s eyes as well.

“Ah... I, uh, I feel the same as Saki. *Uhhh....*”

*Damn, I’m always fumbling even at times like this.*

In contrast, Ayase-san was the type to never waver the moment she made up her mind.

“So... Thank you for raising me, old man,” I said, before turning to Akiko-san. “And thank you for accepting me... Stepmom.”

“Yuuta-kun...”

“Yuuta-niisan, did you just...”

*Let’s not get hung up on that too much here, Ayase-san.*

Knowing me, I’ll probably be back to calling her “Akiko-san” the moment tomorrow rolls around.

But even then, I felt there was still something else I had to say—as if my words weren’t enough.

*Oh, that’s it.*

“But I won’t be saying this ‘thank you’ ever again. No... not like that. I mean the ‘thank you for accepting me’ part. Saying it to family is kind of weird.”

Because what makes someone family is accepting each other naturally.

That said, I’m also aware that reality doesn’t often work that way. Thinking someone should accept you just because you’re family by DNA is nothing more than an illusion. It’s exactly why sayings like “Good fences make good neighbors,” or “Even siblings can turn into strangers,” exist.

People are able to easily build high walls around themselves. Boundaries that didn’t exist yesterday could suddenly materialize tomorrow, even among family.

Just because you were called family doesn’t mean you’re truly “family.” You could simply just be housemates. It wasn’t uncommon for a group of people to be simply living under the same roof without actually accepting each other.

In other words, what I was trying to say is I want to remain as “family” with the three in front of me right now.

I want to stay as “family” with my old man, with Akiko-san, and with Ayase-san—Saki. I want to continue to accept their presence just as they are. That’s how I feel.



My old man and Akiko-san nodded at my words, before starting to cry again.

As for Ayase-san—

“So unfair.”

“Huh?”

“I wanted to say that too. And you totally copied what I said earlier.”

“No, um, let’s see... Guess I just thought what you said was really good, Saki, so I kinda borrowed it?”

“Fine,” Ayase-san, who’d been pouting, left it at that with a smile. “But in exchange, I want to hear that from you too.”

“Huh?”

“We haven’t said it to each other yet, have we?” Ayase-san pointed back and forth between herself and me at her “we.”

*Ah... She’s right...*

“Or am I the exception—have you not accepted me yet?”

“No, that’s not—”

“Then, please,” she said with a serious face...

*Wait, ain’t there a hint of laughter in her eyes?*

Ah, whatever.

“Thank you for accepting me... um, Saki.”

“Mm. Thank you for accepting me, nii-san. Ah, or would you have preferred ‘onii-chan’ instead?”

Nii-san’s just fine.

*Though if I were to be honest... I trailed into my thoughts, keeping those words only in my heart.*

Then there’s another word I’d rather hear her call me than her big brother.

And it's possible that one day, the premise we'd all just affirmed will break—that we might do something that keeps us from being accepted.

The possibility that we might not be accepted for who we are—from a time that might come when Ayase-san and I will have to tell them both something that could shake our very foundation as a unit.

But 'til then, I want to savor this happy way of being a family.

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[1]: Fictional university, not to be confused for the actual Meio University, given Ghost uses different characters (明央, pronounced “めいおう,” as opposed to 名桜), and the fact that the Meio University in real life is a public one, not private.

[2]: 浪人/rōnin (I'd have put down “rounin” if it wasn't for the fact the widely used/accepted English spelling is cringe and completely disregards the diacritic), meaning a student who's graduated but failed to receive admission from any of the school's they've applied to (applies to both graduating junior high schoolers and high schoolers).

[3]: “じゃんぬ・だるにゃん”, literally the hiragana writing of “Jeanne d'Arc” with a “nyan” (like the cat sound) added at the end. Basically referring the illustration to some weird, modern, cat incarnation of the French patron saint, Joan of Arc. Makes even more sense when you realize there's plenty of paintings of her leading armies across war-torn battlefields while waving a flag while on horse.

[4]: A rice gratin dish featuring bechamel sauce and cheese on top.

[5]: “小春日和” (koharubiyori) literally means “little spring weather,” while “こはるん” (koharun) is just a playful short form of it. The term for it in English is Indian summer, but like you can't really keep the quirk of Saki mistaking what Class Rep said for a name if we'd localized it. You can read what it means in Yuuta's explanation below.

[6]: “余裕のよっちゃん” (Yoyuu no Yocchan) is an old pun/funny way to describe yourself as someone who's got things under control. It's also the more common phrase, at least compared to what Class Rep uses, specifically swapping out Yocchan (as in like the nickname for a girl, “Yo-chan”) for Yoshio-kun (generic nickname for some guy).

I guess I could've gone with a localization like “calm John Doe” or “calm Jane Doe,” but like it doesn't really hold the same old cultural value like the actual phrases in Japanese (or at least I can't think or find any equivalents in English that are).

[7]: “旦那” (danna): an old-fashioned formal honorific used to refer to a married male or someone in a position of respect.

[8]: No this isn't a miss-TL, she does in fact not say Tomo-kun here :<

[9]: “これ、真綾ちゃんや。その辺にしておやりな。めでたい卒業式ぞ。” Class Rep deliberately speaks in a tone resembling early modern Japanese, specifically a mix of the Edo to Meiji periods. Here's why for those who are interested:

- 1) Her use of “おやりな,” an old-fashioned and polite feminine way of telling someone to do something. Hence why I've gone for a Victorian feel with “That'll do; that's quite enough,” (and the fact that it's a period around the same time as the Meiji period).
- 2) The phrase “めでたい卒業式ぞ” gives off an old timey and theatrical vibe, specifically with “めでたい” being an older phrase for describing a celebratory event. Hence why I've gone for a Shakespearean tone with “Tis a most joyous graduation ceremony,” (and the fact that it's a period that also happens around the same time as the Edo period).
- 3) The use of ending particles “や” and “ぞ” rather than the more modernly used “だ.”

[10]: Traditional Japanese trousers or leg wear, typically worn over kimonos, resembling skirt-like pants. Typically worn during formal occasions like graduations, weddings, funerals, etc...

## March 9th (Wednesday) - Yuuta Asamura

The day had come.

I could feel the sunlight was getting softer, yet it was still too early to say that spring had truly arrived. Even so, it was still currently that time of the year when you'd open all the windows, compelled by the urge to let fresh air inside after keeping them shut all through winter. It was the pure desire to take in the smell of the season, despite the fact that the scent of daphne didn't quite reach a third floor apartment.

The dining room was bright with the gentle light of an early afternoon.

On the dining table, dressed only with a simple white tablecloth, laid a single smartphone with a red phone strap, with Ayase-san and I glaring at each other over the phone that had been placed there.

“Not gonna look?”

“It might not have loaded yet...”

“There’s no way that’s—” I paused myself mid-sentence, glancing at the clock hanging on the living room wall.

1:10 p.m.

It had already been ten minutes since Tsukinomiya Women's University's acceptance results had been officially announced. Apparently, going all the way to a uni's campus in person to see the results was something you had to do in the past. Nowadays though, you could just access some website with your smartphone, enter your candidate number, and find out right away. Simple and convenient. Your results, pass or fail, were revealed to you in an instant.

The announcement time had been set for exactly 1 p.m. Naturally, Ayase-san had tapped on the website with her smartphone at the right time. What had happened, however, was a sluggish response from it—like exactly what happens when you try to book tickets for a popular show. She hadn't even made it to the page where you'd enter your candidate number.

“It should've by now, don't you think?”

It's hard to imagine the server being that overloaded when you consider the number of applicants to Tsukinomiya Women's University. It probably had just been some temporary issue, like a weak signal or something.

“But...” Ayase-san uttered as she continued to glare at the phone, refusing to move her hand. She'd been like this for the past ten minutes. “Um, you know... I get what you're trying to say, Yuuta-niisan. But to be honest... I'm scared.”

Her words made me catch my breath.

“Of course I'm scared of seeing the actual results themselves, but I think I'm also scared that I won't be able to believe them even if I see them.”

“*Uhhh...* Can I ask what'chu mean by that?”

“Yeah. I know this is me being completely biased here, but... things on a smartphone, they just don't feel real, you know? It's like, I can't trust them.”

“Ah...”

Both Ayase-san and I were supposed to be part of the digital native generation, yet she was the type who liked history and admired old buildings. I could guess that she was someone who preferred things with a physical presence.

And it is true that digital things have this perception around them that they are easily manipulatable. What you could be looking at on a screen at any given time being rewritten in the next moment isn't something a viewer would notice immediately.

So, even if the actual information was correctly displayed on your smartphone, it made sense that you might still end up having a sense of doubt on whether it was fake or not.

*But nah, I don't think she's really thinking like that.*

She's just simply scared of the results themselves, and that's how it's showing itself now.

*Still, it's not like I can be the one to check it for her...*

"I'm scared to look..." she confessed again while turning her gaze away from the smartphone and toward the window.

*This sure is troubling.*

As I was turning over how to handle the situation at hand, it suddenly struck me. Maybe this kind of thing hasn't really changed at all from how it always was.

The scene of checking acceptance results with a parent or a friend—I'd seen that kinda thing a few times before in old movies and mangas. There was always bound to be one character who was always so scared to the point of not being able to look at the results.

They'd freeze up in front of the board filled with the list of accepted candidate numbers, unable to lift their heads.

*I guess that means people like that really do exist in real life, too.*

I had thought that sorta scene had vanished with the introduction of the modern era; but no, it's still here, just in a different form.

The human heart doesn't change so easily, after all.

It's not like the fear of finding out a result had disappeared. That's why, even if how it's portrayed in media across different generations changes, it'll still be depicted in things like movies and manga from here on out.

*No, this ain't the time to be thinking 'bout stuff like that.*

I glanced over toward our parents' bedroom.

Right now, the only ones in the dining room were me and Ayase-san.

My old man was at work given it was a weekday, and Akiko-san, who came home in the early hours of the morning after going back into her regular work mode, was currently sleeping in the bedroom.

We had planned to send the results to our parents over LINE, but given Akiko-san had already gone to bed, she probably had her notifications turned off. She usually wakes up at around 4 p.m., so she's probably in deep sleep by now.

But maybe Ayase-san would be a li'l more at ease if Akiko-san were here with us.

*But I can't just wake her up for this,* I got that far deep into my thoughts, before realizing that my own thinking was being dragged backwards by Ayase-san's mood.

*Wait, why did I start thinking "If only Akiko-san were here"?*

*I'm right here.*

If this were one of those scenes that have been around since the old days, then I just need to remember how those characters had partners who would support them. Though of course, cool things you see in fiction aren't something you can just mimic as-is in real life.

Still, even if I can't do it like in a story, there are still things I can do in reality.

For example, something like—

“Saki, can you hold out your left hand for a sec?”

“...Eh?”

“Try placing it on the table.”

“Like this?”

I placed my right hand over her left as she'd set it down.

“I'll stay like this for you,” I smiled at her, leaving our hands like that.

I hoped my warmth would reach her through my hand; I knew how hard she'd worked up to this day, after all.

*That's why, I sincerely wish for things to go well.*

I added a gentle pressure to my grip, hoping these feelings—this wish—would get through to her.

“Asamura-kun... Yuuta-niisan.”

*Either one's fine at this point.*

As her boyfriend. As her older brother. I wanted her to never forget that I'd always be by her side.

“It'll be okay.”

“Mm.”

Her right hand slowly glided over the smartphone. The trembling in her fingers had already subsided, and with a smooth motion, she entered her candidate number.

Without hesitation, she displayed the results.

Her eyes widened as she stared at the screen.

“I... passed!” she exclaimed, but I knew it from the expression on her face before her voice even reached me.

*Thank god!*

A surge of relief hit me more strongly than joy at that moment. I'd thought she'd be fine as I had watched her from the side, but I couldn't deny that there had been a small seed of anxiety sprouting within me before I actually saw the results with my own eyes. And I'm sure she felt the same—no, being the one at the center of it all, she must've felt even more anxious.

But now, at last, Ayase-san will officially be a uni student starting this spring.

“Congratulations, Saki,” I kept my voice a little lower as I offered my congratulations, thinking of Akiko-san sleeping in the bedroom. But with only the dining table’s width in between us, I was sure it was loud enough.

“Mm...! Yeah!”

I genuinely felt glad for her as I saw the light sparkling at the surface of her eyes. What remained now was just my own results being announced tomorrow, flickering at the edge of my thoughts.

“Thank you!”

She stood up from her chair, stretched forward, and wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me close, her head resting on my shoulder.

Her long hair brushed against my cheek as it fluttered, and a pleasant fragrance curled around my nose.

*Uhhh... Is this... okay?*

Well, I guess Akiko-san’s asleep right now, and you could also interpret this as *just* a li’l sister expressing her gratitude to her big bro. So it’s not like there’s anything inappropriate going on here or anything.

*...Wait, no. This ain’t the time to be zoning out like this.*

“The message, Saki. You need to send a message.”

“Oh, right.”

Despite being a little reluctant to let go of the arms that clung to me, I held myself back, knowing this was more important.

Ayase-san typed up her message announcing her acceptance, posting it in our family’s LINE group chat.

**Taichi: [Congratulations!]**

My old man instantly replied, leaving me surprised. But what I was even more startled by was the loud thud that shook the apartment floor at the exact same moment, coming from our parents’ bedroom.

“Oweeee!” a cry came a moment later. It was none other than Akiko-san.

Both Ayase-san and I jumped at her yelp, immediately turning toward the bedroom. The door opened, and in stumbled Akiko-san, without even a night gown thrown on. Freshly woken up and wobbling into the dining room, her eyes brimmed with tears.

“I fell off the bed and stubbed my pinky toe~”

I could make out her pitch black bedroom through the open door behind her, the blackout curtains tightly shut.

*Yeah, suddenly jumping out of bed in that sorta darkness kinda tends to do that...*

She had her smartphone clutched in one hand.

“Mom... Is your foot okay?”

“My back and foot hurt. *Uuuu~.* Congratulations, Saki. You did great.”

“Ah, yeah.”

*Now that's weird.*

This was supposed to be some emotional moment, yet here we were in an atmosphere completely lacking an uplifting mood to it.

*More importantly, Akiko-san...*

“Don’t tell me... You didn’t have your phone on silent?”

“Because I was curious! *Ugh, it hurts...*” she complained as she plopped down on one of the dining chairs, checking her injured toe.

“It’s completely pitch black in there, Mom. You should’ve at least turned on a light before moving.”

“But I was curious.”

“You’ve already said that. Also, wear something already, you’re going to catch a cold.”

Saying this, Ayase-san stepped into our parents' bedroom, returning with what looked like one of her mother's gowns and draping it over Akiko-san's shoulders.

"You're planning to go back to sleep anyway though, right?"

"Yes, I'll be sleeping for a bit more. Let's see... It's one o'clock now, right? I can still sleep another two hours."

"Why don't you just sleep 'til evening?"

"Because I'm going to cook dinner before I head out today. I'll be going all out and making something special. It's been a while since I got to do that."

"Ah, wait," Ayase-san stopped Akiko-san, who was already striking a determined pose with her sleeves rolled up. "I'd love that, but let's wait for Yuuta-niisan's results before we celebrate."

Her words made both Akiko-san and I freeze for a second, catching us completely off guard.

"No, it's not like... we can't celebrate today for what it is—"

*—Right?*

Or at least that was what I was about to say, but before I could, Akiko-san had nodded along.

She smiled at me as she looked my way.

"Saki's right. Let's wait until tomorrow to celebrate. You probably wouldn't be able to enjoy the food with your results still on your mind, right, Yuuta-kun? Will that be okay, Saki?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Mom," Ayase-san answered as Akiko-san stood up from her chair.

"Well then, I'll go get a bit more sleep," she said, turning her back to us as she stifled out a soft yawn before heading back to her headroom. The door shut with a click.

"You didn't have to be that considerate..." was what I said, but deep down, I was honestly touched by Ayase-san and Akiko-san's kindness. It spread a gentle warmth that bloomed in my chest.

“Tomorrow’s your turn, Yuuta-nissan.”

“Yep,” I smiled at her.

After congratulating Ayase-san one more time, I headed back to my own room.



With nothing in particular to do, I decided to take a short break and flopped onto my bed. My eyelids grew heavy as I stared blankly at the ceiling, and before I knew it, I’d fallen asleep.

I had a dream.

Everything around me was shrouded in darkness, and I could only make out my body. It was only when my eyes began to gradually adjust to the dimness did I realize I was on a small boat, drifting across a pitch-black sea.

*Or actually, maybe it was a lake.*

I was being carried along adrift, yet I had no idea where I was headed. It crept a sense of unease into my heart, and I squinted ahead to see where the boat was going.

There, a faint light flickered.

As the boat drifted on, the faint light steadily grew larger. It was a lantern—a square one hung from the tip of a long pole that cast a soft, circular glow around it.

Another small boat. A woman stood at its center, raising the pole high with the lantern at its tip, illuminating the path ahead.

As I drew closer, I was able to make out her face.

It was Ayase-san.

My boat caught up to hers, and for a while, the two vessels moved forward side by side. But eventually, I noticed that my own boat had started to slow down. I panicked and looked for an oar, yet no matter how and where I looked, I just couldn't find one. As I was left staring, her back began to grow more distant.

The lantern she held aloft steadily shrank smaller and smaller. It became a single glowing dot, and then, at last, disappeared into the darkness.

*Saki!*

I shouted her name with such a force that it felt like it'd utterly burst from deep within my throat. Yet, I wasn't even sure if I'd actually spoken it aloud or not.

I woke up at that moment, jolting upright.

My breathing was ragged, and my heart was pounding violently in my chest.

“A dream... huh?” I uttered, glancing at the clock right next to my pillow.

*Looks like I was only out for around fifteen minutes.*

What a dream that was; it was almost too easy to interpret.

Ayase-san had gotten into her dream university. She was steadily moving forward.

And I was truly happy for her.

But what about me?

*“Tomorrow’s your turn, Yuuta-nissan.”*

Ayase-san’s words echoed in my mind.

*My turn, huh?*

It looked like Ayase-san completely believed I’d be passing too.

As I laid in my bed and stared at the ceiling, I couldn't help but begin to feel more gloomy emotions seep out from within the depths of my heart—like the night cornering twilight westward, blanketing everything in darkness.

Anxiety. A lingering unease that slowly began to swell.

Ayase-san was changing. She was moving forward in a direction she chose for herself.

But what about me?

I relived the scene from the dream behind my eyelids, seeing Ayase-san's back growing ever more distant, and the light shrinking smaller.

A dim train of thoughts rose to the surface of my mind and steadily soaked into my emotions.

I recognized this feeling. It was the same negative motion that had driven me into a corner during that study retreat last summer. Pessimism. I thought I had shaken it off back then, but it looked like this habit of seeing things in a negative light had seeped deep into me. It hadn't vanished after all.

It was so strong that I felt my heart slowly freezing over. Even the spring sunlight that the dining room had been basked in earlier now felt like a distant memory.

The gloomy mood stayed with me through dinner and well into the night, persisting even past midnight.

Unable to sleep, I went to the kitchen and warmed up some milk in the microwave. The ding signalling it being ready echoed throughout the dining room, leaving me worrying over whether it might've woken up my old man.

*I don't think he heard it with the bedroom door shut, but still...*

I returned to my own room, sipping on the warm milk as I read a book. Normally, reading alone was more than enough to calm me, but not tonight. It wasn't working.

1 a.m. Still couldn't sleep.

The numbers displayed on the digital clock at my nightstand continued to tick forward.

2 a.m. Although I had no school to wake up for tomorrow, I found myself idly mulling over whether I'd end up welcoming the morning without even a wink of sleep.

That's when I heard a faint knock struck at my ears.

A knock so faint that it blurred the lines between what was audible and what was not, to the point where I initially thought it might've been my imagination.

But then, after a short pause, it came again—a gentle rapping on the door. I quietly answered in a whisper, and the doorknob turned with a soft click as the door opened just slightly. A shadow slipped through the gap.

Lit faintly for just a moment by the soft hallway light, I could tell who it was.

“Knew you’d still be awake.”

“Ayase... san?”

“Glad your door wasn’t locked.”

She moved with light, gliding steps through the room, relying on only the soft, minimal light from the dimmed ceiling lamp, until she reached my bedside.

I had a ton of questions about why she was here at this hour. Yet, what really caught my attention was the fact that, although he might be asleep now, my old man was home. There was always the chance that Akiko-san could return home at any time too if she finished work early.

No matter how you looked at it, a boy and a girl—both eighteen year-olds—in the same room at 2 a.m. wasn’t a right look. Even though we weren’t technically high schoolers anymore.

I lifted my upper body and sat up in bed.

“Uhhh... What’s up?”

“That’s *my* line.”

*Huh?*

I tilted my head in confusion, not really getting what she meant, earning a quiet sigh from Ayase-san.

“You really can’t see your own face, huh?” she reached out with her right hand as she spoke, her palm gently stroking my cheek. “You look terrible, Yuuta-niisan... You barely even touched your dinner just now, you know?”

“Is that... so?”

“And how you’ve been calling me since a moment ago...”

“...What? Ayase-san?”

“See? You’re back to calling me that instead of Saki,” she said, and it wasn’t until she pointed it out that I realized. “Do you remember? When we decided on how we’d call each other?”

*Of course I remember.*

It was when we’d ended up in the same class in our third year. It was something that had brought us a step closer even in public outside our home. But it was also because of that that we tried too hard to act like strangers, even in class. As an immediate reaction in response, Ayase-san started to go overboard with her physical affection at home. It was partly my fault too—I had persisted with calling her “Ayase-san” even then in such a formal, distant tone.

So after talking it through, we both decided to change how we addressed each other. Ayase-san started calling me “Yuuta-niisan” at home, to remind herself we were siblings to keep her emotions in check. As for me, I started calling her “Saki” at home—by her given name.

“But you know what? I think it’s pretty normal for people to start calling each other by first names once they grow close. And yet, look at you, Yuuta-niisan. It’s been almost two years now, but you still naturally go back to ‘Ayase-san.’”

I couldn’t argue with that.

Because even I knew she was right.

“What’s more, now you’re this stressed. It’s probably because of what your results tomorrow might be, right?”

“Yeah... probably.”

“And you’re holding all that anxiety in by yourself. You won’t rely on me.”

“That’s because...”

*I had been careless.*

The night before the last; surely she must’ve been anxious too. With her own results coming the next day and all. And if you asked whether I watched over her with the care and concern I should have? Then no, I hadn’t.

Yet, here she was now thinking about me, worrying for me, mustering up the courage to come to my room like this.

And even then, I still couldn’t bring myself to rely on her to ease the anxiety I was feeling about my own results.

Explaining that much to her, Ayase-san gave me a sharp look, looking a little angry. But her expression quickly softened into a more sad one right after.

“I want to support you too, just like when you supported me to face Dad. But you won’t even let me see you when you’re hurt. Is it because of what you’ve told me about your mom? Are you still hurt from not living up to her expectations? So much so that you’re afraid to let anyone know how much it hurts?”

Ayase-san wrapped both her arms around my back as she spoke. She pulled me close, and my face sank into her chest. As she gently tightened her arms, I could pick up her heartbeat from my ear, close to her heart. It almost felt like I was being cradled as a baby. Her body heat seeped into me through our closeness.

“Ayase-san... this is, um, kinda—”

“For two whole years, you, Yuuta Asamura, were the type of person who couldn’t even drop the honorific and call me by my name, weren’t you? Or are you saying that the current you is capable of doing something that would actually make me uncomfortable now? Even back when we fell asleep together in this room, or that time in Atami, you were always unconsciously restraining yourself through all of it. But... that part of you is fine right now. Because this way, I can hold you like this,” she spoke as she held me in her arms. Even so, she continued, “But if you, for some reason, still can’t allow yourself to lean on someone else, then I’ve got the perfect excuse.”

“The perfect excuse...”

“You’re technically my older brother for that one week between our birthdays, right, Yuuta-niisan? That’s just how the calendar works—there’s no arguing with birthdates. I have no choice but to refer to you as my older brother, as frustrating as that is,” Ayase-san explained, giving me a gentle squeeze, putting a little more strength into her arms. “And you know what? I just came up with a really amazing excuse that’s like that.”

She brought her lips close to my ear, lowering her tone to a hushed whisper.

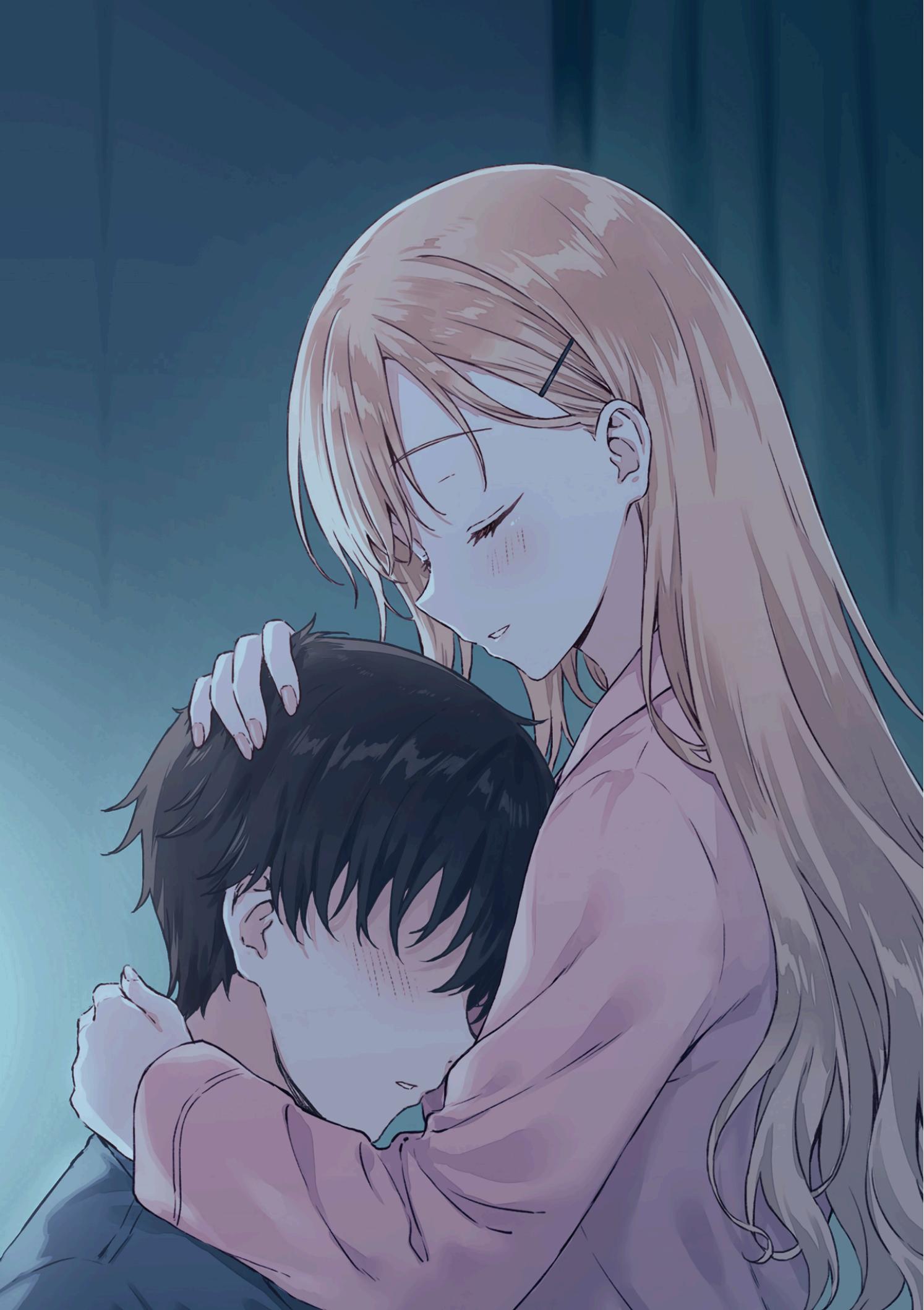
“I’ve already gotten into university, yes? Or no?” she murmured.

“That’s... a yes.”

“Then it’s not wrong to say I’m basically a uni student already, right?”

*That’s... kinda pushing it.*

“But *you* haven’t been accepted yet. You’re technically not a high schooler anymore, just a graduate, but still less than a uni student, yes? Or no?”



*“Ugh... Yes.”*

“Which means I’m your senpai for the next few hours. And since you’re a junior here, Yuuta, you have every right to rely on your senpai.”

*...Huh?*

*Wait*, was all I was able to think before she leaned into me. With a soft plop, we tumbled lightly onto the bed. Without letting go, she kept my face buried in her chest, and began gently stroking my head again and again.

“You’re my junior right now, so it’s okay to lean on me.”

The frantic pounding of my own heart was gradually overpowered by the calm beat of her heart, resonating from within her soft chest.

I felt a mix of embarrassment and shame, yet at the same time, I could feel the raging turmoil in my heart starting to quiet down, little by little.

*\*Thump-thump, thump-thump.\**

Behind my closed eyelids, within all the darkness, I saw the light of a lantern held high.

## March 10th (Thursday) - Yuuta Asamura

There are mornings where, from the moment you wake up, you can tell they're special.

And it's not like I'm claiming I have some kinda ability to sense abnormalities or anything like that, nor am I saying that something truly out of this world was going to happen. But rather simply, my heart knows that today's morning is special.

It was as if the trouble I had with falling asleep had been a lie. My mind felt clear and light the moment I opened my eyes.

After that moment—from when I had my face practically buried in Ayase-san's chest, listening intently to the sound of her heartbeat—my eyes at some point had quietly shut. My consciousness had slipped gently into the depths of sleep, and I had gone through the night without even dreaming.

Ayase-san was no longer in my room when I woke up, of course, and for a moment, I wondered if it'd all been a dream.

I washed my face and got ready.

I exchanged good mornings with Ayase-san as if nothing had happened, and spent the morning just like any other.

And then, the moment came.

The same time as yesterday.

My smartphone sat on the dining table, with Ayase-san and I both sat in front of it—not facing each other like yesterday, but side by side.

I tapped at the screen right at the scheduled announcement time, and my results appeared almost instantly.

**Ichise University**

**Yuuta Asamura:** Accepted

“You did it...! You really did it!” Ayase-san, who’d been peeking at the screen in anticipation with me, whispered quietly.

As for me, I found myself unable to say a single word, even though I thought I would’ve shouted if I passed.

I just kept staring away at the displayed results on the screen intently, as if I was afraid that it might somehow change if I looked away,

But of course, no such occult tricks were gonna happen here.

“Congratulations on passing, Yuuta-niisan.”

“Ah...! Thank you, Saki.”

I picked up my smartphone and sent my results to my old man through LINE. As for Akiko-san, I’d already told her I’d only tell her in the evening. I just didn’t want to rob her of her sleep for two days in a row regardless of what the result might’ve been.

Just like yesterday, my old man immediately replied with his congratulations. And then, right after a slight pause, messages from friends began pouring in—probably because a lot of national university results had come out all at once.

Their notices of success and failures alike flooded the screen; not just on my smartphone but on Ayase-san’s too.

“Maru got into Todai’s Science Division I<sup>[1]</sup>, huh? How expected.”

“Maaya too. She’s so amazing, really.”

*Looks like Class Rep safely passed too.*

Makihara-san didn’t make it though, unfortunately.

I figured Yoshida was already on his way over to her place given I hadn’t gotten any texts from him.

I also got a quick congrats from Yomiuri-senpai in response to the message I’d sent to our small group chat with our coworkers. Kozono-san looked like she was probably still in class judging by the time, given we hadn’t seen her read receipt yet.

*She'll probably react to it after school.*

"Right, classes are still happening around now for high schoolers, huh...?" Ayase-san murmured quietly, seemingly having forgotten about school schedules despite it only being around ten days since our graduation. "Ah."

She then let out a short sound.

"What's up?"

"Hm? Oh, Melissa and Ruka-san messaged me. They gave their congratulations."

"Ah, you told them?"

"Yep."

Looks like the acquaintances Ayase-san had made by chance during our school trip had genuinely become part of her life.

*New connections... huh?*

That's right, I'll be attending the university where Professor Mori is starting spring.

A new life will begin. The sphere of daily life that had always revolved around Shibuya since the moment I was born would now expand dramatically. For both me and Ayase-san.

Many things will probably change. Now we were both adults, our lives would be shifting onto a new stage from here.

New schools, new commutes. New... friends, too.

New connections.

Still, rather than being dazzled by only this sense of newness, there were also connections I want to treasure—to stay tied to.

Like how Maru is to me. Like Narasaka-san is to Ayase-san.

It was something I had thought about even during our afterparty at that family restaurant—for Ayase-san, her meeting Narasaka-san was something incredibly valuable and precious. It was obvious to even an outsider like me.

*That's why...*

"Y'know I was thinking," these words slipped out of my mouth naturally.

"Hm?" Ayase-san looked over at me.

"You know, I think we'll make a lotta new friends and acquaintances once we become uni students."

"Right, that's true. But—"

*Looks like we'd been thinking the same thing.*

"With Maru and Narasaka-san—"

"With Maaya and Maru-kun—"

*—I'd like to stay friends with them for a long, long time.*

"Seeing how the both of them planned that afterparty for us made me think that, y'know, it'd be great if we could do something with just the four of us. You, me, and those two.

"Mm. I was thinking the exact same thing."

Hearing those words from Ayase-san made me even happier.

The four of us, getting along together.

*Yeah, it'd be truly great if we could really do that.*

"So," Ayase-san continued, "Maaya was asking if we wanted to go on a grad trip. She said you should come too, Asamura-kun."

"Huh?"

*A trip...? So that means—*

"The three of us? Me, you, and Narasaka-san?"

"Eh? Oh. I'm not sure. I assumed Maru-kun would be coming too."

"So it'd be the four of us, then?"

Ayase-san nodded.

“It made me think about it when she brought it up, but it always feels like we rely on Maaya and Maru-kun for everything.”

“Yeah. Well... it is true.”

“But it’s too one-sided if we’re always just depending on them.”

I could already sense what Ayase-san was going to say next after hearing just that much.

“Gotcha. So, in other words, Ayase-san, you mean—”

“Yep. I don’t want to completely rely on them this time, so... what do you think about planning it together? The grad trip,” she proposed, and I nodded instinctively on the spot.

*That’s right, just standing around in place forever is pathetic.*

A new life awaits us in April.

And I don’t want to only be pulled along—I want to be able to lead, too.

As a way of showing my appreciation to my close friends, I want us to mark the end of our life as high schoolers with something to show that we’ve grown.

We’ll raise the flag high.

And hold the light to sail the vast open sea!

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[1]: “理一”, short for “理科一類” (Department of Science, Division 1), hence “Science Division 1.” It’s the entry track for students who enter into the University of Tokyo with plans to major in engineering or the physical sciences.

## Maaya Narasaka's "Up 'Til Now" and "From Here on Out"

A voice of admiration came from the other end of the line.<sup>[1]</sup>

"Yeah. Totally, totally! Saki brought it up herself. She said she'd be taking care of plannin' things with Asamura-kun," I replied.

It was about our graduation trip.

To give some context, we'd just graduated from Suisei High, with uni life starting in April.

I had applied to and taken the entrance exam for the University of Tokyo's Science, Division I. All everyone around me had said was stuff like "It'll be a piece of cake for you, right?" but if I'm being frank, I hadn't been *that* confident.

So when I found out I got in, I was genuinely happy. Even going so far to let out a "Yipee!" at the time.

"So praise me, m'kay~?" I asked as I explained to them that.

*Tsk, aren't you being a li'l dismissive here?*

You should be praising *me* more, y'know?

Ah whatever—gettin' back on topic. It's for sure that I'll be incredibly busy starting in April. I've heard stories 'bout how crazy uni science students have it with their schedules. So before all *that* starts, I just really wanna go on a trip with everyone, y'know?

And plus, I've been sayin' this for a while too, right? Yeah, yeah, I have.

I just wanna go somewhere with friends—doesn't even matter where. Eating the same food, seeing the same sights, talkin' a bunch, goofing around.

*That's how you feel too, amirite?*

“What a flat response...”

*This guy...* Don’t tell me, you’ve never gone on a trip with friends before, have you?

Asking him that, he replied about the times he’s been to training camps.

*That ain’t what I meant!* No, I mean, I guess club trips count too, but I’ve never been in one, so I don’t really get it.

I was in the going home club, y’know?

I’ve always been left to take care of my li’l brothers. The youngest one’s still in kindergarten, so I’d pick him up in the evenings, and then I’ve got two brothers in elementary too, so I’d make dinner and stuff.

Both my parents are busy with work, so that’s where ol’ onee-chan here comes in.

“Oh, right, right. You met them the other day, didn’tcha? Aren’t they cute? Y’know, all that aside, it really makes me happy when they rely on me.”

Hm? Sounds like it gives me a sense of purpose, you say?

Well, yeah. Guess so.

...*Mm.* Yep, yep, yep. That’s the kinda reaction I was hopin’ for~

No, it’s okay. It’s okay, really. But it was just always... different, y’know? Back in junior high and even after getting into high school, every time I told someone ’bout how I was taking care of my li’l brothers, they’d always say the same thing.

“*Sounds like you don’t get to do what you want.*”

“*Living without much freedom; must be tough, huh?*”

And then they’d always say I was “pitiful.”

Like, what does that even mean?

Don’t go pushin’ your assumptions on me.

*I don’t think I’m pitiful at all, m’kay?*

Don't go defining my "pitifulness" for me.

Just kiddin'!

So yeah, that's why I was totally surprised, y'know?

Up 'til then, in my whole life, it was the first time someone listened to my story and replied with just a, "Hmm?" and left it at that.

And that's why I got curious—about that person, Saki Ayase.

"Wait, wait. What's with the exaggerated yawn? What gives!?"

*I know you're teasin' me here.*

"What? 'Another story 'bout Ayase?' Tsk. C'mon, lemme talk 'bout her. *Lemmeeee~*"

The more I got to know Saki Ayase, the more mysterious she got.

Long hair dyed a bright color, within shining piercings in both ears. You'd think she was a delinquent, right? But reality is, she was ridiculously serious. She never slacked off in studyin', kept getting great grades, yet never hung out in groups and always kept to herself.

Like, what's with this girl? She's so cool.

I kept bugging at her all the time after that. She made it very clear she found me annoying at first, but I was used to handling my mischievous li'l brothers, so I knew how to be patient. I'd back off just in time whenever I sensed she was seriously 'bout to snap. And on the other hand, if I felt like I might've a chance, I'd keep at it with my attacks 'til she gave in. Eventually, doing that li'l by li'l, she started talking to me bit by bit.

Huh? You're saying it kinda sounds like I was seriously tryna win over someone I liked?

"What, you jealous?"

*Wahaha, nice reaction!*

So, 'bout my red hair, right? Well, my hair was already naturally slightly reddish to begin with, but I dyed it all the way to how it is now 'cause I wanted to try being stylish, like Saki. After talking more to her and realizin' just how sweet of a girl she really is, it kinda bugged me how she got labeled as a delinquent just 'cause of her hair color. I mean, Suisei High's full of the honor roll type, so it actually makes the unbalance worse that way, amirite? Figured if I dyed mine too, it'd be like, "Hey, it's okay to be more free," and maybe other students would break out their goody-two-shoes act and make our class more vibrant. I did kinda hope that, for real.

So, when I decided on my hair color, I even asked Saki for advice.

So yeah. That's how we've got to this point.

But yet, even now—aside from the school trip—Saki and I have actually never gone on a proper one together.

That's why this grad trip matters. To me, goin' with Saki's the key part. Get it? *Mm*. As long as you get that, it's fine.

If it's Saki and Asamura-kun the ones planning it, then I think I'll really leave it to them.

I'm really looking forward to it. Where d'you think they'll have us go? What kinda trip will they come up with?

All of us going on this trip together...

I think it'd really get us even closer.

---

[1]: This chapter is written in a mix of an outsider, third person perspective, as well as Maaya's first person perspective. Basically the narration is from her POV, and we hear her thoughts, but it's also treated as if we're outsiders listening to her speak with someone over the phone. We can't hear what the person she's talking to says, but instead read Maaya's reactions to what they say or how they respond, so it's up to us readers to interpret what they say and how they talk based on that.

Also a shit ton of her monologues are implied to be simultaneously spoken, but not actually put in speech marks (while few are). So read with the idea in mind that a lot of the stuff said in narration is also spoken to the person she's talking to over the phone.

## Tomokazu Maru's "Up 'Til Now" and "From Here on Out"

"Hey. Sorry for calling you out here like this."<sup>[1]</sup>

We were at a two-person table by a café window.

I waited for the other person to sit down before I started speaking.

The University of Tokyo, Department of Science, Division 1.

It was what I'd aimed for. I had managed to pass the entrance exam and got officially accepted. Of course, I'd already spoken to them this much over LINE.

But that was only the bare outline.

What I wanted was someone I could talk to about all the prep work we'd need to do before the entrance ceremony. It'd be my first time entering uni, after all. There were a ton of first-time procedures to get through with. Figured it'd be nice to exchange info with someone walking down the same path.

"No way it's just an excuse. I'm really here to just exchange info."

*I hope she believes me here.* I've always been the cautious type who always likes to prepare in advance when tackling something new, after all.

I pulled out an enrollment pamphlet from my bag and laid it on the table. Together with the person sitting in front of me, I read through it carefully, saving everything I needed to do one by one on a to-do list on my phone.

The person in front of me has got an incredibly sharp mind, especially when it comes to efficiently and smoothly progressing through tasks like this. Honestly, you could even say that she's more capable than *I* am. She was the one who pretended to be a uni student when we first met online, after all. And I totally believed her.

We had nothing left to do once we finished all our necessary tasks.

*All that remains is...*

“Wanna just chat for a bit?”

Huh? “If anything, wasn’t that meant to be the real deal here?”  
you say?

Well that’s pretty rude. I’m just the kinda guy who prioritizes what needs to be done first.

Oh well, even *I* make mistakes sometimes. What kind? *Hmm...* If you ask... well...

I guess there’s one mistake I still regret.

From when I told Asamura those baseless rumors ’bout Ayase.

I thought he’d gotten involved with some weird girl back then. Oh, just so we’re clear, I don’t mean “weird” in the bad way. You get what I’m saying, right?

Anyway, in other words, I basically thought it was my duty to warn him to stay away, or something shallow like that. Lookin’ back on it now, it’s something so embarrassing it makes me want to burst into flames.

Sorry.

“Why am I apologizing to you...? ’Cause it’s like I insulted Ayase. Wouldn’t blame you if you got mad at me.”

*Wait, why are you laughing at that?*

...Can we drop this topic now?

I’d rather have a more productive conversion here.

Like what, you ask?

“Well, what anime are you watching this season?”

Or, y’know, something like that.

So again, what’s with you laughing like that?

Anyway, from now on, I think I'll continue to balance my hobbies and responsibilities, and do my best with both.

But y'know, it's surprising to even myself as I talk with her like this—and it's something I absolutely *cannot* let her, sitting across from me, catch on to—but it's hard to believe that I, who always thought dating was the biggest waste of time when it came to balancing responsibilities and hobbies, would actually end up doing something like that.

It's earth-shattering.

But we just had too many things in common, and before I knew it, things ended up like this.

*You really never know what life has in store, huh?*

In that sense, I've probably changed a lot over these past three years myself.

Oh well, I think it's the good kind of change.

“Don’t you think?”

Outside the café window, bathed in sunlight that hinted at spring’s full arrival, the green leaves planters sparkled.

---

[1]: Similar writing style to Maaya's chapter except this time the conversation Tomokazu is having isn't over the phone. We still don't hear what the other person is saying, instead relying on Tomokazu's reactions. Also read with the assumption in mind that a lot of his thoughts and monologues are conveyed in speech to the other party.

## Saki Ayase's "From Here on Out"

It was currently the day after Asamura-kun's results were announced.

Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes just after waking up, I looked around, and—though it may have just been my imagination—everything in the house seemed tinged with soft colors

I headed to the bathroom. Sunlight streamed in through the frosted glass window at the end of the hallway, casting a rainbow mosaic-like pattern on the floor.

It was a scene I had been seeing every morning, but right now, it looked like something special. Today just feels a little warmer than usual. Winter was over. And maybe it's just me jumping the gun, but that's just the kind of feeling I was getting right now.

I can't be passive from now on—I need to start pulling my life forward with my *own* hands. For my relationships; in everything.

That was the kind of positive mood I was in.

*But first, I need to start with making breakfast.*

It's my turn today. Tomorrow's Asamura-kun's. Now that our exam period is over, the two of us have gone back to alternating.

Plus, having a rival to compete with always gets me fired up.

Though Asamura-kun only started helping with cooking for around a year, he's been making these oddly elaborate dishes lately, so I can't exactly afford to let my guard down.

*Still though...*

We'll really be uni students starting in April, huh? It doesn't feel quite real yet at all. Even so, I'm sure I'll grow into the "university student" title little by little as time goes on.

But it's only still March. We've got our grad trip before that first.

It'll be my first step to becoming someone who's no longer passive. Asamura-kun and I will be organizing this trip.

*I think this might be the first time we'd be actually planning something together.*

And it's not just that I was purely looking forward to the trip itself either—I just couldn't stop feeling excited about being able to plan it together with Asamura-kun.

*Ahhh, I'm so excited.*

I feel incredibly happy right now.

Still, I knew. I knew that the real turning point of my life was still ahead of me. What's more, I had a sense that the current phase of my life was slowly drawing to a close.

And for that moment, I want to gain the strength I'll need as a person. Or rather, the strength to properly face others.

The moment I bring an end to this “Days With My Step Sister” life of ours—the moment I come out to Mom and Stepdad about my relationship with Asamura-kun.

*Only when I can do that I'll...*

Be able to be truly independent

And be able to be truly an adult.

I opened the window.

The spring breeze blew in and gently pushed my back as I headed toward the kitchen.

## Author's Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the 13th volume of the Gimai Seikatsu light novel. I'm Ghost Mikawa, the author of both the YouTube series and the light novel.

At long last, the time has come.

Yuuta and Saki, who slowly matured over time, have graduated from high school and are now facing the results of their university entrance exams.

Perhaps it's because I've spent so much time with the two of them, but I felt deeply moved when I was writing the scenes surrounding their graduation. It was as if I were watching them through the eyes of a parent—I almost teared up.

Ah, so this is one of life's milestones.

They'll be parting ways with the friends they've made up to this point and stepping out into the world on their own.

So many moments from Yuuta and Saki's high school years had flashed through my mind like a revolving lantern, and I couldn't help but feel a resistance rise up within me—wishing their graduation might be delayed, even a little.

Maybe that's what people call parental love.

But if what I am feeling is truly parental love, then I should be all the more happy for my children as they leave the nest.

From here on out, the two of them will fly off into the wide world, take on new challenges, suffer setbacks, and their relationship too will begin to show signs of change.

Just like the lives we ourselves lead in the real world.

As their "parent," I must keep a proper distance and watch over them. I have to learn to let go.

It's a little lonely, but that's how it is.

We'll be depicting their lives as adults from the next volume onward.

First comes their graduation trip, where they'll make one last, childlike memory of their high school days, and then they'll dive into a new life.

Naturally, this won't be just a step forward in their life paths—but also a step forward in their romance...

Please look forward to seeing what kind of love story will unfold from here on.

Now, for the acknowledgments. Thank you as always, Hiten-san, for your wonderful illustrations. I'd also like to thank the voice actors who have helped with the YouTube series: Yuki Nakashima-san, Kouhei Amasaki-san, Ayu Suzuki-san, Daiki Hamano-san, Minori Suzuki-san, director Yusuke Ochiai-san, as well as all the staff and companies involved, editor O-san, mangaka Yumika Kanade-san, the director and staff of the anime production, and everyone involved in publishing. Thank you, as always.

And above all, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to you all, the readers who have followed the story up to this point.

That's all from me, Ghost Mikawa.

## E-Book Exclusive Bonus: New Short Story - The Day She Became Ryo-chin

It was spring of her second year, late April, when all the cherry blossoms had already completely fallen.

With the class shuffle, Ryouko had once found herself without any close friends again, and her naturally shy personality led her to become a loner in the classroom.

Her desire to not stand out was evident—her self-introduction had ended with just her name, and although she knew it'd make her lonely, she couldn't even secure someone to eat lunch with.

A sigh fell onto the rolled omelet that sat quietly in her bento box.

By the way, Ryouko was currently eating her lunch in the cafeteria. Eating alone in the classroom would only make her isolation more obvious, after all. And besides, the tea was free here.

As she gnawed at a piece of simmered kelp, Ryouko wondered how she could break out of her current situation.

She had a clear grasp of the distribution of friend groups in the classroom right now, but her standing in class could also be affected depending on the group she approached. She had to choose carefully.

Thinking through things like this was actually something she enjoyed. Ryouko was a girl that had a small fondness for daydreaming.

“This seat free?”

She looked up at the sound of a voice, yet almost reflexively looked back down as she saw the dazzling smile that lit up the face of the girl standing before her.

“U-um...”

The person radiating that naturally, sunny smile and speaking to her was none other than Maaya Narasaka, the most outgoing, socially adept girl in class. She was actually even Ryouko's number one pick on her "People I wanna Be Friends With!" list.

"Let's see, Satou-san... amirite?"

"Y-yes! I'm Ryouko Satou! M-my favorite constellation is Virgo!"

"Virgo? So you were born in September?"

"Ah, no, that's not it. I just like it. I was born in—"

*Wait, what am I even saying!?*

"Ahaha. So it's just that, huh? You're funny, Satou-san. Um, so, can I?"

"Ah, please, yes. It's totally fine."

What was exactly totally fine though, you might ask? She had no idea. Ryouko sank into dismay.

Of course, Maaya had no way of noticing Ryouko's inner turmoil. She set down a tray with curry udon and sat beside her without hesitation.

*Curry udon? How terrifying.*

For Ryouko, curry was absolutely forbidden—there was just no way she could eat it without getting splashes everywhere. The fact Maaya had ordered it so boldly was unthinkable to her.

With Maaya sitting as the cue, her friends began settling into the other seats, across from them, beside them.

They were all students at Suisei High, of course. Still, some weren't classmates and had unfamiliar faces.

"Thanks, Satou-san~"

"It's getting kinda crowded, isn't it?"

"Alright, let's eat, let's eat!"

Surrounded by four girls, Maaya included, Ryouko began to quietly panic.

*There's no way I can relax and eat in such a dazzling crowd!*

It couldn't be helped. She would just eat quickly and return to the classroom.

With that in mind, Ryouko turned her stealth mode up to the max. She'd become a roadside stone.

A classic loner mindset.

"Ayase-san's pretty scary, don't you think?"

Startled, Ryouko lifted her head.

*Uhhh, that just now was...*

"What exactly are you tryna say?"

"I mean, you think so too, don't you, Maaya?"

Maaya's friends had brought up the topic of one of their classmates, a girl named Saki Ayase.

Of course, Ryouko knew the full names of all of her classmates herself, just in case someone ever talked to her. Not like it had come in handy so far though.

Saki Ayase was a formidable girl with long hair dyed a bright color, fashionable accessories, and a confident presence. She gave off the air of a mature woman, totally different from Ryouko's own childish self. She was someone Ryouko admired.

She also happened to be ranked second on her "People I wanna Be Friends With!" list.

And right now, it sounded like the topic was indeed Saki Ayase. Ryouko enjoyed gossip herself, but not bad-mouthing. Her favorite kind was the "Who's dating who?" type. She adored love stories.

Her favorite constellation was, after all, Virgo.

"Let's drop it. That one's on Chobi."

“Ehhh~?” came a dissatisfied protest from Chobi, real name Yoshiko Inomata.

The nickname came from the characters “Ino” and “Mi”, becoming “Chobi,”<sup>[1]</sup> and had been bestowed upon her directly by Maaya herself.

Ryouko couldn’t help but envy that.

“She was standing in the way at the exit, so yeah, that was annoying, but that’s no reason to say something like that,” Maaya spoke with a firm tone, gently chiding her friend.

Yet immediately afterward, she lightened the mood. “Oh well, I tend to do that too, so if I’m ever in the way, just call me out. You can even kick me in the butt!”

*Isn’t this exactly the kind of person you call a true social genius?* Ryouko felt strongly.

Yes, she really did want to become friends with her.

*Hm? Um, did she just call my name?*

Ryouko lifted her head.

“So um, Satou-san. D’you wanna go? To karaoke.”

The conversation had already moved on by the time she surfaced from the sea of her thoughts. What’s more, she was being invited to after school karaoke.

*Ah, um, uhhh... I’ll go. I wanna go. Of course I’ll go!*

Yet, no words came out.

“You don’t gotta if you don’t wanna. But I think it’d be really fun if you came along, Ryo-chin.”

“Ryo-chin!?”

“Ryouko Satou-san, right? So, Ryo-chin.”

“I’ll go!”

And just like that, from that day on, Ryouko Satou became Ryo-chin.

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[1]: “猪” can be read as either “cho” or “inoshishi,” specifically becoming “Inomata” when written with “俣” to become “猪俣.” One of the two ways “美” can be read are “bi” and “yoshi,” specifically becoming “Yoshiko” (literally meaning beautiful child) when written with “子” to become “美子.” Hence, “猪美” becoming “Chobi” (チヨビ).

## Fan Translator's Note

Yo. Thanks for reading our fan-TL of Gimai Seikatsu Volume 13! We hope you enjoyed it. Feel free to take the time to rate the series on [Novel Updates](#) if you did!

As always, I'd like to express my gratitude to yuituri (Castorice loves me more don't listen to him) for helping with accuracy checking, as well as Kei, existence is pain, and rsa16 for helping with proofreading. They were big help and I wouldn't have been able to translate this volume without them. Huge thanks to Indi for typesetting English translations onto the colored illusts, and Iviera for coloring the black and white illustrations, too!

Anyway, who else got baited with the illustration with their parents lol? I really thought we were getting the story's climax when that was leaked. Oh well, that Saki illustration in Chapter 7 made up for it (she's just so perfect man; with Iviera's coloring too omg 😭).

We got robbed of Saki's diary in this volume, oof. Not being able to read her POV through her own chapters was already a huge loss; not even having her diary anymore is just insane, but it's whatever.

Volume 14 drops in late June, so I'll be getting my way through the Shiori spinoff 'til then. I know we initially said yui would be doing that spinoff volume at the same time as I was doing this volume, but we had a change of plans (sorry 'bout that). It's considerably shorter so I'll probably be done hopefully by the next volume's release. If not, I'll just do both simultaneously.

Anyway, I'll catch y'all in both those volumes! We'll continue to post chapter-by-chapter on our [website](#).

As always, please support the author by buying the [official translation](#)! **Please do not reupload or resell our fan-TLs.** Our operation is just a hobby for us, and is strictly non-profit (looking at you bastards who reupload our PDFs and EPUBs with your own ko-fi links and ad-link shorteners; like seriously, what the fuck man!!!). If you'd like to share our fan-translations, please link them directly from our site *without* any ad-link shorteners or other revenue making methods.

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