

14



Ghost Mikawa

Illustration by Hiten

# DAYS with my STEP-SISTER

FAN TL

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Translations

# DAYS with my STEPSISTER FANTL 14



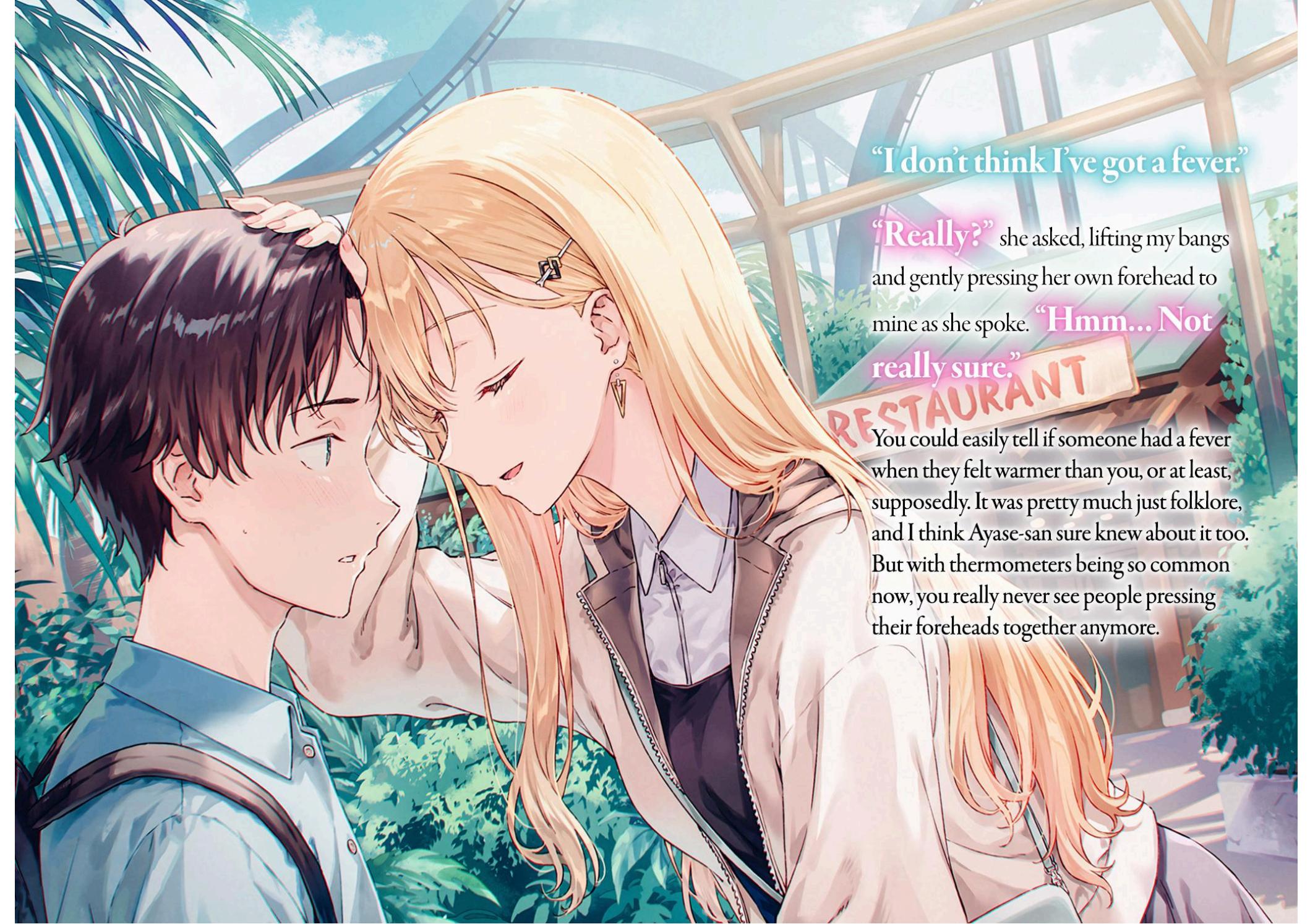
Ghost Mikawa

Illustration by Hiten





“Cherry blossoms really  
are nice, aren’t they?”



"I don't think I've got a fever."

"Really?" she asked, lifting my bangs and gently pressing her own forehead to mine as she spoke. "Hmm... Not really sure."

**RESTAURANT**

You could easily tell if someone had a fever when they felt warmer than you, or at least, supposedly. It was pretty much just folklore, and I think Ayase-san sure knew about it too. But with thermometers being so common now, you really never see people pressing their foreheads together anymore.



# Days with my Step Sister

presented by  
ghost mikawa

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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

The clock on the wall pointed to 7:30 a.m.

Ayase-san and I had just hurriedly seen my old man off, while Stepmom hadn't returned from work yet. We finally settled down and got started on breakfast.

As I picked up a slice of ham with my chopsticks and neatly laid it atop my piece of toast, Ayase-san and I started off our first convo of the morning by talking about how those two friends of ours had safely passed both their entrance exams.

The fact that they'd both secured their spots—in the first round of exams no less—at what's widely thought of as the most difficult national university to get into was really something to celebrate about.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Ayase-san commented, her voice carrying a hint of emotion.

And she wasn't wrong. The two of them were beasts, consistently ranking in the single digits for Suisei High's tests, a prestigious prep school.

I had already thought that their chances of passing were pretty high, but being able to actually witness it happen still left me both happy and a little stunned.

In any case, that made all four of us safely moving on to our uni lives come April.

Plus, both of us passing the first round as well meant we didn't need to bother about the second round too. In other words, we could get back to working part-time.

Ayase-san and I had initially both told our manager that we'd only be back starting in April, just to be safe, but I figured they'd probably be able to slot us in as early as today if we asked. Might even get a "Can you come in this afternoon" sorta call from them.

We discussed trivial matters like this too.

*Basically just all small talk up 'til this point...*

“So, on to the main thing,” I began.

Ayase-san nodded as she munched on a slice of Japanese pickled radish, chewing on it with a few crisp, crunchy bites.

“You mean our grad trip?” she then spoke.

“Yep. We really should start moving on it now that everyone’s passed.”

“Figured as much. I actually did a quick search last night and looked into it a little.”

“My bad, I haven’t looked into anything yet myself,” I confessed.

She responded with a shake of the head, as if to tell me not to worry about it, before sharing what she’d found online.

Apparently, those going for more elaborate graduation trips actually start planning in February, booking hotels and flights a whole month ahead.

*So early; no way we could’ve done that.*

As students who had attended Suisei High, a prep school where exam results usually didn’t come out until the very last minute, planning for a trip a whole month in advance was basically just impossible.

“In that case, flights are already out of the question. Can’t reserve tickets anymore.”

“So long-distance trips are a no-go, huh?”

That basically ruled out Okinawa and Hokkaido. Hawaii, of course, was out of the picture as well.

Though it’s not like we’re looking to spend a bunch here, so I don’t feel so bad about it.

*Wait, we shouldn’t be deciding this all on our own,* I suddenly realized as we continued to discuss our plans.

This trip was meant to be for the four of us—it doesn't seem right to pick out a destination without at least asking the other two. I'm sure Narasaka-san and Maru had places they'd feel like going to as well.

So that's how we decided from there: I'd call Maru, while Ayase-san would talk to Narasaka-san.

We'd each check in with our friend, then come back and share the info.



"That being said," I stated, "is there anywhere you'd wanna go?"

*"Oarai, I guess?"*

It was currently after lunch, and I had gotten in touch with Maru and asked him to think of some place. Considering a budget and schedule of course—it really wouldn't be realistic for us to go *too* far.

He had hummed at my question, hawing for a brief second before finally coming up with a suggestion of his own: Oarai.

A town on the Pacific coast of the Ibaraki Prefecture, known for its popular seaside resorts. I knew at least that much.

But a seaside town in March when it's still cold out doesn't exactly sound like the ideal place to wander around.

*So why Oarai?*

Putting my immediate thoughts into a question, Maru then brought up the name of a certain anime.

*"Ahhh, gotcha."*

A so-called pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Nowadays, fictional media like anime often focuses on portraying everyday life as realistically as possible. It's common for settings to be modeled on actual real life locations, and things as simple as school commutes are portrayed just as they are in our world.

It's for that reason that fans often want to visit such places, as they feel that doing so is akin to stepping into the world of the characters they watch or read about. Hence why it's like some pilgrimage to the Holy Land. An anime pilgrimage, if you will.

"I don't mind going," I said, "but Ayase-san and Narasaka-san probably wouldn't be all that interested, dontchu think?"

*"Narasaka actually loves that anime."*

"Huh, for real? That's kinda surprising."

"Ah, no, it's only something I kinda heard about, or I guess maybe not... More importantly, the real issue's Ayase, right? Ain't it?"

Even *if* we got Narasaka-san on board, it was pretty much a guarantee that Ayase-san hadn't seen that anime at all.

In other words, Oarai this early into spring probably wasn't a place *everyone* would enjoy.

*Right then, what should we do?* I mulled that thought over, as a knock came at the door.

"Hang on a sec," I called out to Maru, before answering with a "Come in."

Ayase-san peeked her face through the door the moment I did.

"Ah, I thought you'd already started. I was just about to, too. Want all four of us to talk together?" she suggested, holding up her phone.

*"Let's do a video chat while we're at it too! I wanna see everyone—it's been forever!"* Narasaka-san's voice came from the other end.

Ayase-san looked like she was all for it too. And sure, the four of us really hadn't even had a chance to see each other in person.

Maru agreed too, so we ended our call and switched to a group video chat.

But it just didn't work well once Ayase-san and I tried joining the call from the same room. It was a given—we were sitting less than a meter apart, so my phone ended up picking up both our voices.

Same issue on her end too.

*"I'm hearing you guys twice at once."*

*"I can't understand a thing you're sayin'~"*

*Yeah. Big flop.*

Logically, all it'd take was for Ayase-san to retreat to her own room to easily solve the problem. But like, come on, why should two people living under the same roof lock themselves away in separate rooms just to see each other again on some video call?

After some trial and error, we settled on using only my phone.

Ayase-san and I sat side-by-side on my bed, adjusting the camera so we'd both be in the frame. Our call ended up with three windows in the end: Me and Ayase-san, Maru, and Narasaka-san.

After a round of long-time-no-see greetings, we got down to business.

*"Anyway, I think we should pick some place everyone can enjoy,"* I started.

For example, places like zoos, art galleries, museums, aquariums, theme parks—tourist attractions and entertainment, really. There's plenty of that in the Kanto region alone.

Narasaka-san's eyes instantly lit up at my suggestions, and she immediately brought up the name of that massive theme park in Chiba—the one that has "Tokyo" in front of its name for some reason in spite of that.

*Yeah, you can really see the sparkle in her eyes when video calling her.*

She was practically ready to slap on a pair of mouse ears and start dancing at any moment.

In contrast, the light visibly drained from Maru's eyes.

*“All that playing around does is drain your energy,” he reasoned.*

*“That ain’t true! Or rather, getting exhausted from having too much fun’s the whole point!”*

*“The heck are you on about...”*

*“Spoken like a true baseball team captain,” Narasaka-san sarcastically quipped back.*

*“Ex. I’m retired now.”*

*“Lost all that youth of yours already, huh?”*

*“Whatever. Besides, think about it. We live in Tokyo. How’s this supposed to feel like a real vacay if all we do is take a trip to some neighboring prefecture? It’s a grad trip, y’know? We’ve gotta have that sense of journey. Now I’m not saying we have to go abroad, but still.”*

*“Ehhh~? But Oarai’s in Ibakari. That’s close too.” Look, look, look. If Ibakari’s fair game, then Chiba’s gotta be too, right? If Chiba’s too close, then so is Ibaraki!”*

*“Guh...”*

Maru was unusually at a loss for words, completely shutting up his mouth with a defeated frown.

*This whole call’s supposed to be ’bout hearing everyone out, but...  
Hmm.*

Yeah, this is troubling, alright. Were we even getting closer to a decision at this point?

*“Hey, Narasaka-san, does it have to be that one in Chiba if we’re talking theme parks?” I asked, receiving a puzzled look in response.*

*“Why?”*

*“Look, there’s a ton of other theme parks out there too, right, Ayase-san?”*

“Eh? Ah, right, maybe. *Uhhh*, let’s see... There’s Universal, Huis Ten Bosch, Hello Kitty Land, Shima Spain Village. Yeah, there’s a bunch of them,” she started reading out the names she’d clearly searched about last night.

“Yep, yep. Are those places good too?” I asked.

“*Of course!*” Narasaka-san answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

*I still don’t know her well enough to take that expression of hers at face value, though...*

“It’s not ‘bout where we go to, but who we’re going with, amirite? As long as it’s the four of us, even Ueno Zoo’s cool with me!” she then explained with such ease.

“Then Oarai’s just as good, ain’t it?” Maru muttered sulkily off in the corner of the screen.

*He’s not wrong.*

“What’s with you, Tomo-kun~? We’re talkin’ about our grad trip right now, y’know?”

“That’s my line! Why, in the name of all that’s good, do we gotta pick a destination you can get to from Shibuya Station in thirty four minutes? Oarai takes two hours, y’know!? That’s, like, 3.5 times the travel time!”

“It’s still a place you can go to and back within a day either way, riiiiight~?”

*That’s true.* Or rather, how does Maru even know exactly how long it’d take?

Watching the back-and-forth between the two out of the corner of my eye, I noticed how Ayase-san had been mostly sitting silently up to this point, deep in thought, and decided to ask for her opinion.

“What kinda place would *you* like to go to, Ayase-san?”

“Right, let’s see... Places with castles, ruins, shrines, or historical buildings—I’d like to go somewhere like that. Also, if possible, someplace with good food, or somewhere culturally different and interesting... I think discovering new things like that would be pretty fun.”

*I see.*

A very Ayase-san kinda answer—she does love her history.

I like the idea of visiting a place with a different lifestyle culture too myself. Living with Ayase-san has surprised me time and time again with just how different our habits were, despite the fact that we both lived in the same Shibuya cultural sphere.

*A place where life seems different, huh?*

That includes food, but a place where we could feel the difference from the people’s values would be pretty neat, even if it’s just for two or three nights.

With that, everyone’s opinions were basically on the table now.

Looking back in my attempt to summarize the conversation so far, it was clear that Maru was dead set on going on an anime pilgrimage, while Narasaka-san valued having a place where everyone could enjoy themselves, like a theme park. On the other hand, Ayase-san was interested in historical sites, and places with different cultural atmospheres.

*Is there a destination that can satisfy all those desires like that, while still counting as a proper trip without being too far?*

“Kansai, maybe...? Maru, are there any anime pilgrimage spots you’d be happy with there?” I asked, and he closed his eyes in deep thought, as if he was trying to rack his memory.

*“Hmm... There is one. Around the Kandai-mae and Senriyama Stations.”*

*Where’s that?*

*“Isn’t that in Osaka?” Narasaka-san asked. “Kandai-mae Station, so Kansai University, right?”*

*“Yep. That area’s the setting of an utter soul touching masterpiece.”*

It really must mean a lot to him if he’s going as far as to call it a soul touching masterpiece. Looks like Narasaka-san knows her geography pretty well too.

“There’s Universal if we’re talking Osaka,” Ayase-san chimed in, springing Narasaka-san’s eyes into sparkles all over again.

*“Sounds great!”*

*“Hol’ on, hol’ on. It might be fine for us, but what about you, Asamura? If you don’t speak up now, the whole trip’s gonna end up with you being dragged around a theme park.”*

“It’s not like there’s anywhere in particular I wanna go to. Osaka’s got a pretty different culture, so I feel like it’d be a fresh experience.”

“That’s not good enough, Asamura-kun. Both Maaya and Maru-kun have clearly stated what *they* want. And for me, going to Osaka means I’ll be satisfied since it’s full of historical architecture. But that still means we’re not going to places *you* want to go specifically,” Ayase-san gave me a worried look.

*“Even if you say that...”*

*I just can’t think of any one place I want to go to that badly.*

“You don’t have anything in mind? Like a museum, a zoo, an art gallery, or an aquarium? There should be tons of those around Osaka. You seemed really into it when we were looking around at exhibits when we went to that local museum. I kinda figured that you liked those types of things.”

*“I... was?”*

I hadn’t really been aware of it myself, but according to her, I was way more absorbed in the exhibits than she was.

*So it was like that, huh?*

*“Hmm. If I had to pick from those then... maybe an aquarium?”*

*“Oh? So you like aquariums, Asamura?”*

“My old man used to keep some tropical fish when I was a kid.”

“Stepdad had that kinda hobby?”

I nodded.

It was from way back when I was still super small—barely old enough to remember. I had some memories of enjoying watching the tropical fish my old man kept. I apparently cried buckets when they reached the end of their two year lifespan, though, and the idea of buying new ones never came up again.

*That fish tank’s probably quietly laying somewhere in the back of our storage room.*

Fish swimming leisurely through the water, aquatic plants swaying softly among the tides, and bubbles rising up in clusters that also happened to push around and spin this plastic car placed at the bottom. The sunlight that streamed through the tank’s glass would diffract across and bounce off the table. Just watching all that was enough to keep me entertained for hours.

“Well, it doesn’t *have* to be an aquarium or anything. I’ve just got these good memories from when my old man had this phase where he’d drag me along to all sorts of places. I remember enjoying them, so I think I’d be good with a museum or a zoo too.”

It was from after I ended up failing my entrance exams—after I had practically studied the life out of me just to meet my mom’s expectations—from a time specifically where I was going through a phase where I had grown to hate studying. It had sparked a worry in my old man, so he tried to foster my sense of curiosity by taking me to different places.

*“There’s this place called Kaiyukan near Universal,”* Narasaka-san, who looked to be fiddling with her phone, spoke up. *“A massive aquarium that perfectly recreates the Pacific!” it says. They’ve apparently got some really huge fish there too.”*

“Ohhh, I think they’ve got a whale shark, don’t they?”

*“You sure do know your stuff, Asamura-kun!”* Narasaka threw praise my way, but the truth was I had just seen it on the news one day by chance.

*I’m not actually that knowledgeable. Oh well, looks like everyone thinks I’m really into fish now.*

*“Hm, then it’s settled. So then, how ‘bout a trip to Kansai with Kaiyukan aquarium included?”* Maru said, with Ayase-san and Narasaka-san immediately agreeing.

“Got it. Gimme a second then,” I told them.

Asking Ayase-san to keep Maru and Narasaka-san occupied for about ten minutes, I faded out of the camera frame. I pulled out a notebook from my desk and started scribbling out a rough plan with a marker.

With a, “Thanks for waiting,” I returned to the front of the camera and flipped the notebook around to show everyone.

*Here’s the memo I’ve put together,* I thought as I sat back down.

---

### **Day 1:**

- Shinagawa → Shin-Osaka Station (early morning by Shinkansen).
- Stroll around central Osaka after checking into the hotel (Osaka Castle → Dotonbori → Namba Grand Kagetsu).

### **Day 2:**

- Universal Studios Japan.

### **Day 3:**

- Check out of the hotel, then take a morning stroll around Kandai-mae Station (anime pilgrimage).
  - Have lunch and head to Kaiyukan aquarium.
  - Osakako Station → Shin-Osaka Station →Shinagawa (evening by Shinkansen).
-

“How about it?” I then asked.

We’d book a hotel near Shin-Osaka Station and do some sightseeing around.

“The first day would be for exploring historical architecture and Osaka’s culture, the second day would be for the theme park, and the third would be for the anime pilgrimage and the aquarium. Or something like that,” I explained.

This way, everyone’s wishes would be covered, and we could all enjoy ourselves.

Everyone looked over the memo I had written and started to dish out their thoughts. This and that, here and there, back and forth. They also checked the locations on maps on their phones and such.

Ayase-san initially nodded in understanding, but then raised a concern not long after.

“Wait, Asamura-kun, isn’t the schedule a little too packed with what you and Maru-kun want to do?” she said with a hint of concern in her voice, with Narasaka-san nodding on the screen in agreement.

*“You don’t have to prioritize us so much, y’know?”*

“No, that wasn’t my intention at all.”

It wasn’t like I thought of giving special treatment to anyone. All I’d done was just calculate what looked to be the most efficient way to get around to where everyone’s interests were.

*“Well, I guess that’s true,”* Maru commented after I explained my rationale. *“The anime pilgrimage shouldn’t need that much time; it’s not like I intend to make a ruckus and party like some idiot at such a sacred ground. That would be an act of disgrace that I, as an anime fan, would never condone. I simply wish to walk quietly, take it slow, and soak in all the nostalgia as I trace the steps of memories past. Like deeply soaking it all in.”*

*“Those ‘memories’ never existed in real life, though~?”*

*“What are you on about? Even simulated experiences from anime are still experiences. Having a wide variety of experiences colors life brilliantly.”*

*“There you go always sayin’ stuff that sounds all wise and deep, but honestly, you really just sound like my li’l brothers, Tomo-kun.”*

“Alright guys, alright guys. Either way, we’re not pushing ourselves. Plus, we’ll have plenty of time as long as we take the last bullet train home. It’s totally fine,” I interrupted their slapstick routine.

Anyway, to begin with, as a basic principle, I made sure to not include any places in our plans where even one person would be bored.

“For example, though it might not be this sacred and important place for Ayase-san, even just walking around in some ordinary town in Kansai could be a unique cultural experience, I think.”

“Strolling around a regular town does sound nice, even if it’s not that historically significant,” Ayase-san agreed with my line of reasoning.

“And Maru, it’s not like you have *no* interest in Universal at all, right?” I followed up.

“Well yeah, I guess. They’ve been doing a bunch of collabs with a ton of manga and anime recently, not just movies. I guess I’ve always wanted to check it out at least once,” he admitted.

“I wanna see that whale shark toooo~” Narasaka-san chimed.

*That’s exactly how it is.* It’s not like the places we were each individually interested in were ones someone else absolutely didn’t want to go. Everyone’s suggestions were based on the assumption that we’d *all* enjoy them in the first place.

“So yeah, I think this kind of balance works just fine,” I said, with Ayase-san, Narasaka-san, and Maru all seeming to agree.

“You’re really good at organizing and planning stuff like this, Asamura-kun,” Ayase-san commented as she looked over the schedule outline I’d scribbled together with the marker. “And to make something like this in just ten minutes is seriously impressive.”

“Getting praised for something like this is kinda embarrassing, though.”

“That’s not true at all. It’s a solid summary—nice job!”

“Ah... Yeah, thanks,” I managed to thank her honestly, though I admittedly couldn’t help but feel a little shy about it.

“Right then, let’s build on this and work out the details together, the two of us.”

“Yep.”

“Mm. It feels like things are going way more smoothly now. Thanks, Asamura-kun.”

“Nah, it was nothing.”

“No like, honestly, I wouldn’t have gotten this far this fast if it were just me... What?” Ayase-san started, before trailing off and turning to look at Narasaka-san on screen. I followed her gaze.

There was Narasaka-san, with a wide, sly, catlike grin on her face. It was the kinda smile that reminded me of a certain Yomiuri-senpai.

*“Maaaaan~, just watching you two through a screen’s really a treat for the eyes.”*

“Huh?”

*“I mean how lovey-dovey you two are~. That’s what I’m gettin’ at~”*

“Mm-hmm. Let’s clip that and post it online. Might even go viral,” Maru chimed in.

*“And title it ‘A Married Couple’s Back n’ Forth.’ Let’s do it~”*

“Idiot!” Ayase-san almost blurted out before stopping herself. “Wh-what are you even saying!”

She reacted with a rare mix of embarrassment and flustered anger, having been teased by the two of them.

“Anyway, this concludes our grad trip meeting!” she then abruptly declared the end of the call, panting a little heavily.

*“Haaah, haaah... Geez, Maaya!”*

“There there, relax. They were just teasing us, that’s all.”

“I-I know that, but...”

“More importantly, you raised your voice, so...” I said, cupping one hand around my ear, as if telling her to listen closely.

We could hear a voice coming over from the living room. It was none other than Stepmom.

*“Are you both there~?”* she called out.

I glanced at the clock—it was already past 2 p.m.

“Looks like she’s woken up.”

Welp, it’s not like we were doing anything we needed to feel guilty about. We’d already told our parents that the four of us would be going on a grad trip, so there was no reason to panic. Even so, Ayase-san hurried out of my room and headed to the living room.



Left behind alone, I looked over the outline of our schedule again.

*Alright, looks like we've got only around ten more days 'til the trip judging by everyone's availability.*

First, we needed to fix the dates and get the hotel reservations done. Once that foundation was set, we could fine-tune the rest of the details.

Though I was admittedly the type who preferred to stay home and read books over going out—let alone consider myself a travel lover—once we got things moving, I couldn't help but realize the excited anticipation that bubbled up inside of me.

## March 22nd (Tuesday) - Yuuta Asamura

7 a.m.

Weaving our way through the crowd of commuters and students, Ayase-san and I finally made it just in front of the Shinkansen ticket gate. Hanging beyond the gate was an overhead display that showed which Shinkansen series<sup>[1]</sup> we'd be taking, as well as its departure time. Today marked the beginning of our three-day graduation trip.

“Yooo. Over here. Finally made it, huh?” a voice called out, and I turned my head toward it.

It was none other than Maru, standing in an open spot near the wall beside the ticket gate. He had his smartphone in one hand and waved the other lightly toward us.

The moment we made eye contact, he immediately dropped his gaze to his phone, tapping away at the screen with small movements.

*Looks like he's killing time with a mobile game.*

Ayase-san and I rolled our suitcases over and approached him.

“You’re pretty early, huh, Maru-kun?”

“Did we keep you waiting?”

“Nah, only about ten minutes,” Maru replied casually to both our questions.

Still, given we’d arrived twenty minutes before our predesignated meeting time, it meant he’d gotten here a full thirty minutes early.

“You’re way too early man,” I brought that thought up, teasing him a bit, and he responded with a sad memory from junior high.

There'd apparently been an event he was really looking forward to at the time, but because he'd left home at the last minute, he ended up being caught in the middle of a train delay, not being able to make it in time in the end.

"I try to leave with plenty of time whenever it's something I'm excited for since then," he reasoned.

"Gotcha."

"Missing a Shinkansen's no joke, after all..." Maru glanced to his side as he spoke.

Ayase-san and I also found ourselves glancing at others that walked by.

*Right, Narasaka-san's not here yet.*

Almost instantly after I mulled over the thought, Maru's phone chimed. Almost simultaneously, mine buzzed with a message notification. Ayase-san also pulled out her phone from her pocket.

"That girl..." Maru frowned.

"Looks like she's still on the train," Ayase-san said.

I checked our LINE group chat myself on my own phone and saw the sticker she had sent. It was a stamp featuring a cat sprinting at full speed, screaming an "*Uooooh!*" with a speech bubble.

*Narasaka-san... Running inside a train ain't gonna make you go any faster, y'know?*

"She's always like this every time we meet up..." Maru complained, exasperated.

"C'mon now, it's still not past the meeting time. And in the first place—"

"Ah, there she is," Ayase-san pointed.

Maru and I turned around, and there she was, Narasaka-san, booking it toward us with her red suitcase bouncing behind her in tow.

“T-thank you for *waitiiing~*”, she said, panting for breath as she finally arrived.

“We haven’t been. It’s still before the meeting time,” Maru said while glancing up at the station clock.

Not trying to guilt-trip anyone about having arrived first was a very him-like thing to do.

“It’s okay, Maaya. Look, there’s still fifteen minutes before the train departs,” Ayase-san then called out to her.

“Oh, that so?”

“Right, I’ll hand out the boarding and express tickets<sup>[2]</sup> now. Here.”

Pulling out all our tickets, I passed them around.

We each fed the tickets into the automatic ticket gate, retrieving them back as they were spat out the other side. Now though it was true we had some time to spare, missing the train wouldn’t have been a laughing matter either.

Walking past the shop that sold station bento<sup>[3]</sup> on our left, we then headed down the escalator that led to our platform.

“Ah, station bento!”

We suddenly stopped.

Like a moth to a flame, Narasaka-san drifted toward the aforementioned shop.

“Wooow! A charcoal-grilled beef kalbi<sup>[4]</sup> bento! It looks so good!” she exclaimed in excitement.

“Hey, Narasaka!” Maru cried out in a somewhat stern tone, rushing after her in a panic.

“Mmm, this thick-cut pork loin cutlet looks tempting too. Mm, mm. The highlight of any trip’s the station bento, after all!”

“Is the station bento,’ my ass. You—”

“You’re not eating then, Tomo-kun? Aren’t you hungry, hm? Or maybe... You’re already full? Is that it?”

“Ah, no. I haven’t eaten yet...”

“Which d’you want? The beef kalbi or pork cutlet?”

“It’s ‘bout the balance, not just the meat. I’d go for this one if it were me—with both meat and fish—wait, that ain’t the point here!”

“Then I think I’m gonna go with the beef kalbi. *Ohhh*, but this fukagawa meshi<sup>[5]</sup> looks good too!”

“Naaraasaakaaaaa!” Maru bellowed.

\**Swish*\*, Narasaka-san turned around with a spin.

“Raising your voice like that in front of a store’s a nuisance, y’know?”

“Y-you little—” was what Maru only managed to get out with an exasperated expression before I patted him on his shoulder.

“There there, calm down. Look, we’ve still got more than ten minutes.”

“We’ve all skipped breakfast too, so why don’t we all buy some here?” Ayase-san added gently, and so we each bought a station bento that caught our eye, taking them down the escalator to the platform with us.

Hardly any time passed before our train glided into the station, and we ended up departing from Shinagawa station right on schedule.

We had initially booked some two-person seats behind and in front of one another, but after checking the posted notices and confirming we were allowed to, we rotated each of them to face each other before sitting them. Of course, had there been other people already seated around, we couldn’t just rotate them without asking. Being considerate of others is important, after all. Fortunately, the surrounding rows were all empty, so there was no need to ask.

Narasaka-san sat on the aisle, with Maru taking the seat beside her. I took the window seat across from them, with Ayase-san ending up on the aisle.

We stowed our luggage in the overhead shelf and gathered with just our station bentos and drinks in hand. The train had begun to move by this point, yet it was completely smooth—there was barely any shaking at all.

*As expected of the Shinkansen, Japan's pride.*

Only the scenery beyond the windows soared rapidly backward, and a bright blue sky stretched wide beyond the streaming view of Shingawa's cityscape. The temperature had already risen from last night by the time we met up, so it looked like today was going to be a warm, springlike day.

“*Whew*, can finally catch a breath~”

“We could've taken things easier if you hadn't insisted on buying station bento though.”

“*Ehhh~?* But we *do* need them, right? The bentos,” Narasaka-san said as she held up the station bento on her lap as if to show it off.

“I didn't say we *didn't* need them.”

“Someone's not being honest~”

“Well, it did work out perfectly,” I interjected. “We met up early, plus we did skip breakfast to get here.”

“Oh yeah, I was wondering that. None of you ate breakfast?” Narasaka-san asked while loosening the wrapping on her bento.

“Hol' on a sec. If *you're* asking that, does that mean you've had breakfast?”

“Skipping breakfast's just now an option, isn't it? You at least had a li'l something too, didn'tcha, Saki?” She then directed her attention to Ayase-san.

“Well... just an apple, I guess?”

And that was exactly true. Ayase-san did eat—we'd shared half a sliced apple.

*Wait, huh? You're seriously really gonna eat right now?*

She was.

After properly putting her hands together and letting out an "Itadakimasu," Narasaka-san dug her chopsticks into the bento on her lap.

What she'd chosen in the end was the fukagawa meshi—a mixed rice dish cooked in broth made from simmered clams and vegetables. Scooping up the brown-tinged rice, along with some clams and veggies, she popped a pip into her mouth.

"Mmm. So good!"

My stomach nearly growled in response.

The aroma of dashi from her opened station bento box wafted over to us, tickling my appetite. Ayase-san gazed down at the bento on her lap.

"It still feels a little early, but if we think of it as breakfast..."

*She's being totally swayed here.*

"I think it's fine to eat now," I gave in. "It'll be just about time to get hungry by the time we arrive anyway."

When I said that, Maru also nodded in agreement.

"You really do eat with the happiest look on your face, don't you?" he couldn't help but remark to Narasaka-san.

"It's just so yummy~. Super happy right now~. Tomo-kun, we humans can only eat for a limited number of times in our lifetime, y'know? Each one's important. We absolutely can't waste 'em. Got it?"

"Yeah yeah."

"Yummy food, a beautiful scenery out the window, and spending time with dear frien—oh! There's a pun on 'friend' and 'Tomo-kun'!<sup>[6]</sup> Did you catch that?"

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Enjoyin’ some convos with friends—that’s the real joy of traveling~”

“I get it already, eat. Eat quietly.”

*They’re really close, huh?* I thought, with Ayase-san most likely thinking the same.

“You and Maru-kun sure have gotten pretty close, haven’t you, Maaya?”

“That’s ’cause we’ve been together since the school trip. Plus, the four of us have been hanging out for over a year now.”

I almost instinctively tilted my head in confusion before remembering. That’s right, our group—with Maru as our leader—and Ayase-san’s group—with Narasaka-san as theirs—ended up going to the zoo together on the second day of our school trip to Singapore. We’d actually only happened to run into each other at the zoo’s entrance, but we all naturally gelled together all the way through dinner at the Night Safari.

“I wished we’d been able to spend more time together back then too,” Maaya confessed.

“Well, we were in different classes for our second year. And besides, putting you aside, Maaya, I haven’t really seen Maru-kun all that much myself,” Ayase-san explained

“That’s true,” Maru agreed. “You came during our summer tourney too, but we really didn’t get to talk much. I heard you tagged along with Narasaka to cheer us on for that... It’s kinda late, but thank you.”

“You sound so formally distant~” Narasaka-san interjected.

“Oh no, I should be the one thanking you. The baseball was actually pretty fun to watch,” Ayase-san followed up.

“See, we told you we really didn’t talk all that much,” Maru then solidified Ayase-san’s earlier comment.

“For real~? I dunno, it just feels like we’ve always been hangin’ out as a group of four or something. *Mmm*, so good! So delicious even though it’s cold,” Narasaka-san said between mouthfuls of fukagawa meshi, cheeks stuffed full.

“Oh well, I guess I’m pretty much in the same boat—Ayase-san’s probably right. I don’t really have clear memories of having any proper conversations with you either, Narasaka-san. Mostly just occasionally heard about you from Maru now and then,” I explained, earning a vigorous nod from Narasaka-san, as if to say she completely agreed.

“That’s it, that’s it! I’ve just been always talking ’bout you guys with Tomo-kun all this while, so it just totally felt like the four of us had already spent tons of time together to me!”

“Always?”

She nodded with little bobbing motions. Her cheeks were still stuffed, making her look exactly like a small animal.

*Ah, there’s a grain of rice stuck to her lip.*

“I told you, eat calmly. Don’t talk with rice stuck to your face,” Maru jested in exasperation.

“Hm?”

“Don’t ‘Hm?’ me here. Here,” he continued, reaching out to pluck the grain of rice from the corner of her mouth.

At that moment, Narsaka-san then, without a single ounce of hesitation, leaned in forward to nibble it off his finger.

*...What? Huh?*

“Wait, Maru, Narasaka-san... Are you two dating?”

The words that had floated into my mind slipped out of my mouth before I even realized it. And the moment I uttered them, the expression on Ayase-san’s face—as she sat next to me—visibly changed.

Her mouth was slightly agape, in a look of sudden realization or shock, and she looked flustered.

*Oh...*

Was that something I shouldn't have said out loud?

Maru also looked somewhat panicked for the most part, and he turned toward Narasaka-san.

But as for her, she only looked blankly puzzled.

“We are, and?”



“G-gotcha.”

She confirmed it so casually. It was actually Maru who was on the more flustered side here.

“Dummy!” he almost blurted, as if blaming Narasaka-san. “It’s ‘cause you kept dropping so many hints!”

*No no, I actually thought your actions did more of that, Maru... I think.*

“Eh? I thought you already knew~. Or rather, more like, you’re just realizing this *now*, Asamura-kun? I mean, when you guys suggested this whole grad trip, I figured it was a double date from the start~”

Okay, I *had* thought they were oddly close—I did think that. But I hadn’t actually realized they were in that kind of relationship.

*Ah... I see now.*

“So the reason Maru’s been poking about Ayase-san and I for a while was because he’s been hearing about us from Narasaka-san, huh...?” I asked.

It was a realization that had never quite clicked for me before, yet now, it suddenly nestled itself into place in my chest. Maru, unusually flustered at my words, started fumbling over his words, going “Ah,” and “About that...” and the like.

“No, I mean, yeah... Sorry for acquiring intel through, uh, underhanded means, I guess,” he said, finally coming clean.

“I don’t think it was *that* underhanded. Not bothered at all.”

“Yeah. I’m not either.”

“Hm, gotcha. That’s... kinda a relief to hear,” Maru said with a sheepish look, and I couldn’t help but smile.

Here was the burly Maru, someone as imposing as he usually was, looking all embarrassed and awkward as he shrunk into himself. I’ve always thought of him as someone honest, sincere, and rational—a calm and unflappable guy. So seeing him this openly rattled and embarrassed was definitely something new.

*And there's also this part of me that finds this unexpected side of my friend pretty endearing.*

“What’s with the grin?”

“Nothing. Just thought it was unexpected. But, y’know, seeing a different side to a friend like that? It’s not so bad.”

“Don’t tease me.”

*That slightly sulky expression of his is also—*

“Right!?” Narasaka-san suddenly raised her voice, interrupting my thoughts as if she’d actually read them to a T. “That’s exactly what makes him so cute!”

“C-cute?! Y-you little—”

“C’mom, c’mom. Seeing a usually smart, all high and mighty guy be bashful like that? You score way too many charm points from that!”

From there, she launched into rapid-fire speech, listing all the “cuteness” she could think about Maru as if she were some machine gun. Maru ended sulky with a full-on grumpy face by the end of it.

*Honestly, that expression’s just making it worse, man.*

So, as Ayase-san and I continued to pick away at the rest of our station bento, we ended up hearing the story of how Maru and Narasaka-san got together.

To start with:

When the two first got to know each other, neither of them actually knew they were both students at Suisei High. They were apparently initially just friends that got to know each other through playing on the same server on some online game.

*Not really sure what they mean by that though; I don’t play online games.*

Things naturally went by as they got along so well that they decided to meet in person. An offline meetup, so to speak—even I knew that meant getting together face-to-face.

And the punchline? They turned out to be schoolmates.

“It all started when she asked me to help her buy some merch from this anime. Figured I couldn’t exactly ask the address from some girl I’d never even met, so I suggested having it sent to a convenience store’s package pickup center. But by then, we’d both kind of guessed we lived nearby, so she said she’d be down to meetup in person.”

*So he’d earned that level of trust, huh? How typical of him.*

“But... you guys really didn’t recognize each other before?” I asked, puzzled, and Maru explained why.

“We were using online handles,” he answered, “and Narasaka pretended to be some college-aged woman too. That’s fraud. Fraud, I tell you.”

“Don’t make me sound like some shady person! It was for self-protection. Self-protection. There’re creeps online who’ll start flirting with you just because you’re some JK<sup>[7]</sup>. And others just won’t take you seriously, y’know~? But if you say you’re an adult woman, then they’re less likely to look down on you as much.”

“That so?” Maru tilted his head, and though I found it a little questionable myself, I couldn’t outright deny it either.

“Going so far as to fake your gender means needing a voice changer to really pull it off. And I can’t talk like a guy either. I didn’t want people snooping into my school life too. It was the bare minimum for self-protection!” Narasaka-san reasoned.

“Well... if you say so,” Maru conceded.

And so, they met face to face and were left utterly shocked. They’d never been in the same class at the time, but they were at least aware of each other’s existence.

*Now that I think ‘bout it, I do remember Maru once telling me that Narasaka-san was something of a known figure.*

It was from back when Ayase-san and her mother had started living with us.

The Shinkansen continued to race down the tracks as we continued to listen to this backstory of theirs.

Mt. Fuji had been visible through the window from when Narasaka-san had first started talking, but by the time she was done, we'd already passed Shizuoka.

To recap their story: Maru and Narasaka-san had met through an offline meetup, and upon realizing that each of them was a friend of either mine or Ayase-san's, they grew even closer. And as they kept sharing info about their respective friends and poked about our relationship, they naturally hit it off. Even so, neither of them had actually thought it would lead to a romantic relationship at first.

Just then, the otherwise smooth Shinkansen gave a brief jolt.

The windows to our right-hand side of direction of travel trembled slightly, followed by a soft, rushing sound, almost like an inner-ear buzz.

The world outside the window darkened for a moment, startling yet fleeting.

By the time my brain had realized we'd just passed another Shinkansen going in the opposite direction, the oncoming train had already disappeared far behind us.

The peaceful spring scenery had returned to the world beyond the glass.

"Th—that surprised me," Narasaka-san, sitting by the window, pressed a hand to her chest and said.

"You're way too easily shaken. Like, you've passed other trains tons of times on the Yamanote Line, haven't you?"

"This is totally different~! I mean, it was over in a flash! I couldn't even see inside the train!"

"It was packed."

"You saw that?"

"Don't believe that. Just pulled it out of thin air."

“The heck? I was actually impressed. I thought, wow, maybe that’s actually something you could actually do, Tomo-kun. Like, as expected of the baseball team captain.”

“You’re overestimating me.”

“Gimme back my ignorant innocence~”

“Can’t do that without a price.”

“Ehhh~? But I’ve already finished my bento, y’know?”

“I wasn’t asking for your bento.”

“Oh god, Asamura-kun! Tomo-kun’s being lewd!”

“Dummy!” Maru almost shouted out loud. “The hell are you saying!?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at Maru, who was mostly composed up until now, completely losing it in a flustered panic.

“See? You made him laugh.”

“It’s all good *because* I wanted him to laugh. Right, Asamura-kun!?”

“Ah, yep, I guess. You really did make me laugh there. You two really are in sync,” I told them, prompting Maru to turn away in embarrassment, a rare sight.

Seeing that, Narasaka-san thrusted a peace sign toward me.

*Ah, yep; a clear victory for her here.*

Despite it not even being a full year since they started dating seriously—at least from what I’d heard—the way they synced so well with each other made it feel like they’ve been together for years. On the other hand, compared to how naturally they complimented one another, Ayase-san and I were really taking things slow.

An that moment, I then noticed Ayase-san, out of the corner of my vision, staring intently at Narasaka-san and Maru, glancing between their faces.

“Something wrong, Ayase-san?”

“Ah, no, mm. It’s nothing,” so she said, but her face was clearly flushed red.

She then suddenly averted her gaze from the two of them and began looking out the window.

Or rather, *pretending* to look out the window.

...*What was that about?* I wondered but didn’t press her further.

Ayase-san kept her gaze fixed firmly outside. It wasn’t until we passed Toyohashi did she finally turn her eyes back from the window, her expression having returned to her usual cool one by this point.

She then looked over at Narasaka-san and Maru as if nothing had happened.

And just like that, as I naturally got swept up in more lively conversation, I eventually forgot all about it.



Just as listed on our scheduled outline, our Shinkansen eventually slid into the platform at Shin-Osaka Station.

Our plan for the first day was sightseeing.

“So first, we drop off our luggage at the hotel. That’s right, ain’t it, Asamura?”

I nodded at Maru’s words. While we hadn’t gone as far as making a whole travel itinerary booklet, I had written down a detailed schedule on my phone. Given both Ayase-san and I had always been on the receiving end with these two, we didn’t want to stay passive. This grad trip was something *we* planned because we wanted to actively maintain our friendships with Maru and Narasaka-san.

“That’s how it’s meant to be. The hotel’s less than a five-minute walk from here.”

“Sorry for leaving even arranging that to you.”

“No, no. This trip’s something Ayase-san and I invited you guys to. We want to take charge this time around. So leave it to us. If that’s okay,” I threw light on, with Ayase-san nodding in agreement next to me.

“Alright then, let’s head straight to the hotel,” Maru remarked.

“If we can get there, that is~,” Narasaka-san immediately rebutted his words with a gentle shake of her head. “We’ve gotta escape Shin-Osaka Station first, amirite~?”

“What do you mean?” Ayase-san tilted her head as she asked, but I had a pretty good idea.

“I think she probably means that... unless we conquer the labyrinth that is Shin-Osaka Station, we probably won’t even make it to the hotel.”

“You mean it’s easy to get lost?”

“Right, right.”

Like the many stations across all the big cities of modern Japan, Shin-Osaka station was practically one tangled mess due to the sheer amount of lines that ran through it. It wasn’t rare to follow signs and still end up in some random unknown place.

“But *maaan~*, I’m glad we at least aren’t in Umeda station~. Heard that place’s a real dungeon!”

“That’s what I hear too. Still, Shibuya Station back home’s plenty confusing too. And we’re used to navigating that mess; this shouldn’t be too bad.”

“Digital maps exist too,” Ayase-san chimed in, and we all nodded in unison.

As veterans of Shibuya Dungeon ourselves, we logically didn’t have much to fear.

Despite this being all our first time venturing into the Kansai region, we smoothly got off the Shinkansen platform and headed toward our hotel in no time at all.

Or so we thought we would.

Turns out, the info you look up online and the real deal on-site are two completely different things. I had subconsciously been aware of that in my head, but I was really feeling it in my bones now.

We could immediately see the outside ahead of us the moment we exited from the central exit serving all the Shinkansen lines. But who would have thought that the roundabout on this floor was only accessible by cars, and not on foot?

We ended up backtracking through the station and going down a flight of stairs before finally reaching the level that was actually walkable. Once there, the hotel we were aiming for was in plain sight, and we all let out a collective sigh of relief.

About five minutes later, we finally arrived at the hotel we had reserved beforehand.

“I’m already exhausted~”

“We really shouldn’t be tired before the actual trip starts, though...”

We wrapped up all the check-in procedures at the hotel’s front desk and confirmed our room arrangements. Two twin rooms: one for the boys, and one for the girls.

I handed out the room key cards to everyone.

“So you’re not splitting the rooms by couple, hm?” Narasaka-san casually dropped that terrifying remark as she looked over her key card with squinted eyes.

“That’d just make for an awkward next day,” Maru shot back almost instantly.

Both Ayase-san and I nodded with meek expressions. He was absolutely right.

*Just imagine it.*

What's the first thing that would come to mind upon seeing the other couple the next day in the dining hall for breakfast if we did that? All it would take is for one person to make some suggestive comment, like some innkeeper from some old-school RPG, for it to be awkward. No matter what did or didn't happen, obviously.

Besides, the four of us weren't young enough anymore where "nothing happened" would be a plausible excuse.

More importantly, unlike me and Ayase-san, Maru and Narasaka-san didn't have that psychological consciousness of being siblings, even if only legally.

*Which means the two of them might've already...*

I hastily shook my head, forcing the indecent speculation out of my brain. I'd end up too emotionally exhausted at this rate if I let stray thoughts like that run loose during this grad trip of ours.

"Oh well, I guess it's also about making memories with Saki! A girls only room sounds fun too!" Narasaka-san completely switched gears with that follow-up, leaving me—who'd been lapsing into my own impure thoughts—completely in the dust.

We left our luggage in our rooms and regrouped in the lobby.

"So, where are we starting from?" Ayase-san asked as she checked a digital map on her phone.

I opened back up the schedule on my phone and confirmed our upcoming plans.

That said, the list was still pretty rough, with only the names of sightseeing spots like "Osaka Castle," "Dotonbori," and "Namba Grand Kagetsu" written down.

Of course, I'd already checked their locations and how we could get there beforehand, but I didn't want this to turn into some minute-by-minute type of tour.

*Though if there's one place I definitely want to see today, it'd probably be Osaka Castle.*

"I was thinking we'd just explore as long as time allows."

“No objections here.”

“Then, Osaka Castle first!”

“*Hmm*, in that case, we’ll have to take the Midosuji Line from Shin-Osaka to Honmachi Station, and from there switch to the Chuo Line to get to Tanimachi 4-chome Station. From there, we walk,” Ayase-san explained, her eyes still glossing her digital map.

Though we almost got lost again in Shin-Osaka Station, we managed to arrive at Tanimachi 4-chome Station around an hour later. From there, it was all walking.

About fifteen minutes on foot specifically, roughly a kilometer in other words.

There was also a brief moment where Ayase-san got completely captivated and drawn toward the Osaka Museum of History, which we had passed on the way, but we eventually made it to the Oute-mon gate, the main entrance for tourists checking out Osaka Castle.

Beyond it, a large park stretched out on our left.

“The central part of the castle is called the inner bailey,” Ayase-san began, sharing one of her signature historical know-hows. “Then from there, in order of importance, there are the second and third baileys. This area here’s part of the second bailey, but since it’s to the west of the main castle itself, it’s also called the Western bailey.”<sup>[8]</sup>

“Oh, so that’s why it’s called Nishinomaru Garden<sup>[9]</sup>, huh?”

“Probably,” Ayase-san nodded at my comment.

“Then, it’d be Eastern bailey<sup>[10]</sup> if it were on the east side, amirite?” Narasaka-san stared fixedly at Maru as she spoke.

“Why are you looking at me when you say that?”

“So in other words, since we’ve got ‘Eastern Maru-kun’ here currently at the Western bailey,” she continued as she pointed to Maru and the ground, “then this would combine to make the center! Alright, we’re calling this place the Perfectly Round Garden today!”<sup>[11]</sup>

“No we’re not!” dutifully snapped at Narasaka-san’s joke.

*Yeah this is a kind of exchange that would anger a local if they heard...*

Jokes aside, Nishinomaru Garden, where you can view Osaka Castle from its east side, was also known as a famous cherry blossom spot.

*“Woooah! They’re bloomiiiiing~!”*

And as if right on cue, the moment she saw the cherry blossoms, Naraska-san’s excitement shot through the roof.

Though they had just only started blooming—around maybe twenty or so percent—it was still a spectacular sight. According to a tourist guide we had picked up, around 300 cherry blossom trees flourish here when in full bloom, allowing for an even more enchanting view of Osaka Castle than the one we were experiencing now.

“It looks gorgeous from here!” Naraska-san cried out to us as she dashed under the cherry blossoms. “Wow!”

A few petals danced upward as she leaned her head back and gazed up at the vast blue sky, caught in the breeze.

Given that it was only the beginning of the bloom, only the first few blossoms had started to fall. But the way the petals shifted moment by moment against the blue canvas that was the sky above gave off the effect of a kaleidoscope.

The dancing petals changed position in dazzling ways with each passing instant, painting the sky anew. It wasn’t before long that my eyes were drawn upward too, my vision capturing the very same image Naraska-san was seeing.

“Ooooh!” Ayase-san let out a small exclamation from beside me. “Cherry blossoms really are nice, aren’t they?”

The two of us stood there looking up at the sky for a while.

It was only until I looked back down again did I notice that Naraska-san had already run off to the edge of the park, all the while Maru had thoroughly engrossed himself in reading the informational boards posted around the site.

*You really can see their difference in personalities even in places like this.*

“Can I take some photos too?”

“Yep. I’ll keep watching the cherry blossoms for a bit longer.”

As I waited for Ayase-san as she took shot after shot of Osaka Castle with her phone, I lazily gazed at the pink petals dancing in the blue sky.

Time passed slowly around us.

After that, we moved on to the Osaka Castle Main Tower.

Its exterior was that of a traditional Japanese castle, but the truth was its interior had been rebuilt to that of a modern museum.

Thanks to the tickets I had purchased online in advance, we were able to enter without waiting in line at the ticket window.

And though I wanted to take pride and say this was all because of careful planning in advance, it had actually been Maru’s suggestion.

*“You’re able to buy tickets online these days; makes things a bunch easier,”* so he’d told me, displaying his ever adequate smooth follow-up.

Smooth follow-ups like that weren’t something I was particularly good at, especially when compared to people like Maru and Narasaka-san, who were masters at social interaction.

But anyway, back to the present. The one who was the most engrossed and getting the most enjoyment out of our tour inside the castle was none other than Ayase-san. That said, she also wasn’t the type like Maru to read every single piece of explanation displayed on the information boards. Instead, she was more the type who intently honed her focus on displayed items and photographs, staring at things like letters, paintings, and artifacts from the era with great interest.

We eventually arrived on the second floor, where we found a corner where you could try on some samurai helmets and surcoats. Maru and Narasaka-san, in perfect sync as usual, tried on the outfits together and even went out of their way to record some videos on their phones.

*Honestly, wouldn't it go more viral if they posted videos of themselves?*

They were both strong communicators after all—a bright and extroverted duo.

“Hey Saki, you should try on a kosode<sup>[12]</sup> too—”

“No.”

“But it'd be so cute,” Narasaka-san pleaded.

“I'm good for now. I already have enough pictures for now.”

Narasaka-san tilted her head slightly at those words, clearly somewhat disappointed, yet she didn't push any further.

*She really has a knack for knowing when to back off.*

What Ayase-san meant when she said she already had enough pictures was probably in reference to the commemorative grad photos she'd taken in her graduation hakama. But still, saying “for now” didn't mean she was rejecting the idea forever, so I guess she wasn't opposed to having her picture taken as much as she used to.

We ended up spending about two full hours there thanks to how thoroughly we were at exploring all the exhibits.

Leaving Osaka Castle behind, we then made our way to our next destination—Dotonbori.



Transferring once again between train lines, we got off at Nipponbashi Station.

*By the way, and this is already kind of a well-known quirk, but Nipponbashi here's actually pronounced "Nipponbashi."*<sup>[13]</sup>

Given we're all from the Kanto region, where the pronunciation we're used to was different, it often creates confusion for people like us.

"So is 'Nihonbashi' not okay?" Narasaka-san asked in the pronunciation she was most familiar with.

"Nope," Maru gravely replied with a solemn face. "That's the Nihonbashi<sup>[14]</sup> we know, if you're referring to the one in Chuo, Tokyo, that is. But this is Osaka. Nipponbashi's the native pronunciation here."

"Yeah... Yeah? Yeah."

"When in Rome, do as the Romans do. That's why it's Nipponbashi here."

"Well, I mean, I feel like us Kanto folks using our Kanto slang rules out the idea of fitting in with the locals in the first place, though..."

As we continued to have that utterly trivial discussion, Ayase-san opened up her digital map to check where we currently were. We'd apparently arrive at the east side of Dotonbori if we continued walking forward from where we were, or at least according to her.

Amidst the crowd, the four of us headed together through a narrow, roofed shipping street before emerging onto a somewhat wider road.

That, it seemed, was Dotonbori, and right in front of us was a store with a giant mechanical crab hanging as its signboard. It was a famous restaurant, one that also had some locations back in the Kanto region.

But as I looked around more, I saw many stores I wasn't familiar with, and places I'd never even heard of before, let alone heard of.

And all around us was the Kansai dialect flying about from every direction, distinctively audible. The energy was intense, almost overwhelming. Mixed in were voices of foreign tourists also speaking various different languages.

“Is it just me or are there a ton of 3D signs around here?” Maru spoke up quietly as we walked.

Now that he mentioned it, it did look to be that way. Compared to the shopping districts back in Shibuya, which had almost entirely become filled with flat digital signboards, the vibe here felt... well, different. Somehow.

There were a bunch of restaurants, and probably because it was currently around lunchtime, the fragrance of good food wafted in from every direction, teasing our noses.

*We haven’t had lunch yet come to think of it.*

“Should we grab something to eat?” I suggested.

“I’m hungry.”

“It’s already almost two o’clock. Most places should be less crowded now, so maybe it’s a good time to get something.”

With no one objecting to Ayase-san’s follow-up, we started to wander through the shopping district in search of a place to eat.

As we were looking around, someone abruptly called out to us.

“If y’all are hungry, why don’t ya eat somethin’ here?” they said with gusto.

We turned around and saw a small takoyaki shop, where a round-face middle-aged woman was beckoning us over with a big smile. She was speaking with a full-on Kansai dialect, and her voice was loud with a booming energy.

Even Maru and I were slightly taken aback by the force of her voice.

But of course, there was always that one fearless soul who’d face down any situation like this. Needless to say, it was none other than Narsaka-san—Suisei High’s former strongest social butterfly.

“Wow, that looks super tasty, auntie! Wait, I mean, onee-san!” she ran up to the stand and said that with a beaming grin.

It was obvious flattery, but the takoyaki auntie responded with a wide smile as she handed over a skewer with a single takoyaki ball on it.

*That seems to be a nice thanks for a nice compliment alright.*

“Yay!”

Accepting it without hesitation, Narasaka-san then popped it straight into her mouth.

*S-so bold...*

“So good! *Mmm*, you can really taste the octopus! I feel like the flavor’s a bit different from the ones in Kanto, too! Yep, Osaka takoyaki’s delish!”

“Right?” the auntie beamed proudly and began to brag about her shop’s takoyaki.

But given none of us were that familiar with takoyaki to begin with, we had no idea how hers was different from others. Narasaka-san, too, probably had the foggiest idea as well, yet she still nodded along enthusiastically, occasionally tossing in a response to keep the conversation going.

*Look, they’re even bursting into laughter like every three seconds. What’s... exactly so funny about their exchange?*

We ended up buying four servings of takoyaki.

Narasaka-san, having won the auntie’s favor, got her toppings for free—just her though.

Oh well, the takoyaki is stuffed with huge chunks of octopus and really is good, so I’ve got no complaints.

They were piping hot too, which made sense since they’d been grilled right in front of us.

“So delicious,” Maru exclaimed before launching off into one of his trivia episodes. “Takoyaki back in the Kanto region’s often grilled until their surface gets real crispy. I think they hold back on that a li’l more over here. More like a soft crisp or crunch, y’know?”

*Gotcha.*

“And the insides are gooey,” he continued. “The soft batter overflows in your mouth when you bite into it, but it’s not hot enough to burn your tongue, and that just makes it all the more delicious. Plus, if you roll it around your mouth while breathing in and out—*huff, huff*—you’ll get that big chunk of octopus to roll out from the center. And when you bite into it, the flavor from it explodes and spreads through your entire mouth; it’s a full-on party from there. *Ahhh*, I now know what it means to *really* eat takoyaki! Man, so this is what happiness feels like.”

“You really went off there.”

“Some people dance when food tastes great. Some people talk.”

“Do people really dance over food?”

“We’ve got one right here,” Maru pointed to his side, and I followed his gaze.

There was none other than Narasaka-san, waving her bamboo skewer as she stabbed it into takoyaki ball after takoyaki ball, swinging them from side to side right in front of her face. Dancing.

*Uhhhh...*

“Narasaka-san...?”

“It’s the dance of deliciousness!”

I reflexively glanced to either side, but the crowd walking by didn’t even bother batting a single eye at the sight of a high school girl—soon to be uni student—dancing over her food.

*Kinda feels like we’re being left alone in a good way.*

“Huh...? There’s no way I’m just being overly conscious, right?”

“Asamura-kun! Expressing how good something tastes is important to the one who’s made it!”

*Reeeeally...?*

We were currently eating off to the side of the shop so we wouldn't be in the way, but as I happened to glance back at the takoyaki stand, there was the auntie running it watching us with a pleased expression. Her gaze was fixed on Narasaka-san's dance.

Before I realized it, Narasaka-san had already finished her food in no time, now smiling in deep satisfaction.

*I get it now...*

"The broth in the batter tastes different too, I think," Ayase-san murmured.

*Now that she mentions it...*

"Ah, you noticed it too, Saki? So actually," Narasaka-san began to explain, "back in Kanto, we tend to use bonito flakes to make the broth for the batter, whereas they use kombu for that here in Kansai. And when you mix things like miso or light soy sauce with that, you get this kinda flavor."

"Oooh? You sure do know your stuff, Narasaka," Maru chimed in.

"I mean, my parents are often busy, so I'm the one usually cooking for my li'l brothers. So I watch a lot of cooking videos and stuff. You kinda just start to remember all these things the more you watch enough of them!"

"I also watch videos when I want to learn new recipes or techniques, but... I don't think I actually retain any of it," Ayase-san said.

*That's because you probably just treat them like instruction manuals,* I quipped inwardly.

"This really is good. I think I like this flavor better," I then gave my honest opinion.

"I like it too. Maybe I'll try making it at home using the exact recipe Maaya mentioned. Should I give it a shot sometime?"

"Huh, you can? I'd love that if you could. I'd like to learn how too."

*“Mm. Next time.”*

“Looking forward to it. Hm...?”

Trailing off mid-sentence, I turned to see Narasaka-san and Maru both looking our way with faint, suspiciously know-it-all smiles on their faces.

“What?”

“Uh, what is it?”

“You guys sound exactly like some newlywed couple.”

“Don’t tease us,” Ayase-san turned her face away with a little pout in response to their big and massive grins, but it honestly only made things worse.



We ended up finding an okonomiyaki<sup>[15]</sup> place that happened to catch our eye for lunch. It was already past 3 p.m. by the time we'd left the restaurant, and we made our way to our next destination: Namba Grand Kagetsu.

Namba Grand Kagetsu, a theater that specialized in comedy and slapstick, was less than a ten-minute walk south from Dotonbori through the Sennichimae shopping street. We had barely made it in time for the 4 p.m. show that opened its doors at 3:30 p.m. We bought some last minute same-day tickets and slipped right in.

“This place was also on the original schedule you showed us back then, right, Asamura-kun?” Narasaka-san spoke up, bringing up the time we had that group video call to coordinate and plan everything. “Sure, Tomo-kun and I are pretty much into comedy, but it was kinda surprising that you had this spot down on from the start.”

"Ah, well, yeah, I guess."

I'd just filled in some spots I found while searching for fun places near Shin-Osaka at the time. Of course, I'd discussed it thoroughly with Ayase-san after the call, and it was true that neither of us had any real interest in comedy.

*Even so, we left it on the schedule since—*

"We're in Osaka, after all. This really is where it's at, isn't it?" Ayase-san chimed in, and I nodded beside her. "It's precisely because we don't have much interest and know about it that we want to try experiencing it more."

Travel is, in essence, an encounter with the extraordinary.

Living beings are inherently more conservative—they'd just keep repeating the same things over and over again if left alone. Their thoughts grow rigid, and growth comes to a halt. But at the same time, animals with brains and the capacity to think are also afraid of losing that sense of curiosity, so they also naturally tend to seek out the unfamiliar. Especially Homo sapiens. We consciously seek out different sights, to refresh our spirits.

Travel, as a form of leisure, serves as the opportunity to experience occurrences we'd usually put off in everyday normal life. If, as a result from it, your interest expands, great. And if they don't, and it just ends there, then at least you've found yourself the boundary of what you're into—and that's still something worthwhile.

*Though to be frank, more than any lofty ideas like that, I probably just genuinely wanted to experience some real comedy.*

Not long after we took our seats, the performance began.

As I had expected, Maru and Narasaka-san immediately recognized the comedians who'd walked out on stage. On the other hand, most of them were basically alien to me. Still, there were a few I vaguely remembered—faces I'd probably seen once or twice when my old man had the TV on.

Featuring a mix of double act duos and sketch comedy, the show was packed with immense laughter. Even beginners to the trope like me and Ayase-san were able to enjoy it as well. I found myself laughing naturally at the jokes thrown about, and when I glanced to my side, I saw Ayase-san covering her mouth, her body bent over like the letter “C” as she tried to stifle her laughter. It looked like she was too embarrassed to laugh out loud like Narasaka-san, but being unable to hold back, she trembled uncontrollably as she leaned onto my shoulder.

“Sorry, that really hit my funny bone,” she’d whisper as she tried to contain it.

*Honestly, I think it’s fine if you just laugh out loud like Narasaka-san.*

By the time the show ended and we stepped outside, night had already fallen. It was a little past six, and all the shops lining the street in front of the theater still had their bright lights on. The sky above was an utter pitch-black, no stars left in sight.

Starlight is faint to start with, after all, so it easily gets drowned out whenever there’s too much light.

It felt as if someone had stretched a black velvet curtain across the sky, and I couldn’t help but strangely anticipate what kind of play would begin once that curtain rose.



“It’s been a while since I’ve laughed this much,” Ayase-san murmured in a voice tinged with emotion as we strolled once more through Dotonbori for a final walk.

She ended up not being able to hold it in anymore toward the end, succumbing to full laughter out loud.

*This might've been the first time I'd ever seen her laugh like that,* I suddenly realized.

“Really?” Ayase-san asked as I formulated that thought into words.

“I’ve pretty much never seen Saki laugh with her mouth wide open either.”

“It wasn’t like I had my mouth open wide like that.”

“No no, laughter’s the key to good health, y’know? You should laugh more, Saki.”

“*Mm-hmm.* They say laughter actually strengthens the immune system and reduces stress.”

*These two really do love comedy, huh?* I subconsciously thought as Narasaka-san and Maru both energetically encouraged Ayase-san.

“Like, the skits and double act duos were pretty good, right?”

“Well, I mean... I guess I did think that.”

“And you’ve got the perfect partner and all for that too, yet here you are not takin’ advantage of it. What a waste~!” Narasaka-san teasingly commented.

*Wait... Is she talking 'bout me?*

“Living under the same roof too; you’ve got the best setup. You could easily slide in some skits as part of daily life!”

“No way, no way. Why do I have to perform comedy for daily life?”

“Tomo-kun and I are always like that when we’re together, y’know? Right?” Narasaka-san asked as she looked at Maru, who responded with a confirming nod.

*Seriously...?*

“Welp, Narasaka tends to make a ton of lame puns, so I just play along and laugh out of obligation.”

“Scuse me?”

“Oh, like jiguchi?” I asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ayase-san tilted her head in confusion, so Maru and I gave her a quick explanation.

“Jiguchi” is a form of word play, a game where you take a common phrase and replace part of it with a similar-sound word to make a little pun. Like turning “Shita-kiri Suzume”<sup>[16]</sup> into “Kitakiri Suzume” (which basically means wearing the same clothes all the time). That sorta thing.

The goal is to basically see how far you can stretch the original imagery that a phrase conveys using similar-sounding words.

“It actually uses a fair amount of brainpower if you take it seriously; Narasaka’s are basically just all cheap puns.”

“The road to comedy’s a harsh one! Amateurs must start with puns!”

“Where exactly are you even trying to go with this...”

“Let’s see... So basically, you’re both always talking like this when you’re together, Maru, Narasaka-san?” I asked, earning perfectly synced nods from the two of them in response.

*That’s a high bar to match...*

Now that I thought about it, back at Nishinomaru Garden, Narasaka-san had made that joke about Maru’s name and the Western bailey of the castle we were in. She’s made a lot of totally lame puns, sure, but Maru has made sure to quip in comeback every single time. Maybe that’s just how the two communicate with each other.

“Ah, Tomo-kun, look! There’s no line over there right now!”

“Oi, we’re already about to have dinner... Wait, hold it!”

Without even giving Maru a chance to stop her, Narasaka-san had dashed off, \*plip plap plip plap plip plap\*, toward a small shop.

*What kinda store even is that...? Egg tarts...?*

“Oh, egg tarts. They’re popular throughout all of Asia. They’re made with flour, butter, sugar, eggs, and milk... Wait, what’s with the surprised face?”

“No, it’s just... I didn’t really get the impression you were into sweets, Ayase-san.”

“Well... I cook for the sake of independence. It’s enough as long as I can eat three nutritious meals a day; what matters is keeping things simple. But things like that always catch my eye whenever I look up recipes. I’ve seen some for normal tarts before. Plus, when you look at something that’s already been made, you can kind of guess what’s in it, right?”

“Even if you say that, for someone like me—who’s basically never even made pancakes before—being able to just ‘guess’ ingredients just by looking feels like some kinda superpower.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Maybe.”

I looked up egg tarts on my phone as we chatted. Apparently, the story goes that an Englishman named Andrew had created his own spin on a known Portuguese tart dish, with it becoming insanely popular in Macau.

*Oh, so that explains the name of the shop...[\[17\]](#)*

Meanwhile, Narasaka-san was, as per usual, showing off her top-tier social and communication skills on display, chatting warmly and familiarly with the store clerk, being roped in with comments such as “How about one for you and your boyfriend?”

Maru was all bashful at being called her boyfriend, and it was kinda refreshing to see. They both ended up being talked into buying two tarts each in the end.

*Two egg tarts before dinner... How do they even manage that?*

“Skits or double act-style exchanges, huh?” Ayase-san murmured softly, and I turned to look at her. “That’s like the back-and-forth you have with Shiori-san at part-time, right, Asamura-kun?”

*I don’t particularly go out of my way to purposely make it like that, though.*

“I always thought your timing was in sync,” Ayase-san affirmed.

“No, I think that’s more on Yomiuri-senpai being really good at jumping on other people’s words.”

“You two look good together.”

“Hold on, hold on,” I stopped her there, turning to face Ayase-san properly as I spoke, somehow feeling like it was the right thing to do. “Being able to pull off a double act routine isn’t proof of a good match or anything. I think what Narasaka-san was getting at is that some couples use humor as a way to play around and be affectionate. And that, of course, depends on who’s involved; there’re a lot of couples out there who enjoy a comfortable silence more than anything.”

I smiled a bit before continuing.

“If being able to pull off a double act together makes you a couple, then all the comedic duos we just saw in that show would be dating, right?”

Ayase-san immediately fell silent at my words. She looked upward, clearly lost in her thoughts—probably trying to recall as many of the comedic duos from the show we’d just watched.

“All of them...?”

“Yep. All lovers, at least according to your theory. I mean, they were all totally in sync, weren’t they? Remember how they all came out for the curtain call in the end and made this huge heart shape together?”

“...Pfft,” Ayase-san let out a tiny snort before replying in an amused tone. “Hey, stop that.”

*Hey, even if you say that, all I was doing was applying your logic.*

“Why do you always come up with such weird things, Asamura-kun?”

“Oh, what a perfect straight man comeback to my funny man act. Honestly, just the fact you’re already willing to give me a proper retort is pretty great already.”

Ayase-san’s mouth froze agape in realization, before letting out a thoughtful humm.

“But that’s because you had set it up by playing the funny man here, right?” she reasoned.

*That’s true.*

“But don’t you also do that occasionally too, Ayase-san?”

“I do!?”

*So she isn’t even aware of it, huh?*

“Sorry to keep you *waitiiing~!*” Narasaka-san cried out as she and Maru returned.

“We’re about to have dinner—you sure your stomach’s gonna be all okay?”

“I’ll be fine, I’ll be fine!”

And with that, Narasaka-san went on to finish an entire bowl of noodles at the Chinese restaurant we went to, astonishing all of us.

And so, the first day of our graduation trip came to an end.

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[1]: The Shinkansen bullet trains each feature multiple different series, differing in speed and the amount of stops they make, in order to differentiate the ones that run on the same lines.

[2]: The boarding ticket is the basic fare everyone must buy, allowing you to travel by a train from one station to another, while the express ticket is the additional fare required when riding express trains such as the Shinkansen.

[3]: 駅弁 (Ekiben), literally railway (駅) and bento (弁, first syllable for bento), are boxed bento meals sold on trains and train stations in Japan, known for their compact packaging.

[4]: Originating from Korea but popular in Japan, kalbi is a type of grilled beef dish usually made with beef short ribs.

[5]: A regional Tokyo dish featuring rice cooked with clams.

[6]: Friend in Japanese can either be “友人” (yuujin) or “友達” (tomodachi). Maaya uses the former here, but it still has the “友” (tomo) character, despite it becoming “yuujin” when added with “人,” hence the pun. “友人” is more polite/formal compared to “友達.”

[7]: JK, standing for “女子高生” (joshi kousei), literally meaning “high school girl.”

[8]: Here’s a more detailed explanation of their original terms in place of their localized counterparts:

本丸 (honmaru, literally “base circle”), with 本 literally meaning “base/origin” and 丸 literally meaning “circle” or “enclosure,” refers to the central area around the castle, usually contains the lord or Emperor’s (or whoever mainly stays there) residence and is usually the most fortified. The English term being “inner bailey.”

二の丸 (ninomaru, literally “second circle”), with 二の meaning “second,” refers to the surrounding buildings/areas of the inner bailey, usually containing other residences and serves as an additional layer of defense. The English term being “second bailey.”

三の丸 (sannomaru, literally “third circle”), with 三の meaning “third,” refers to usually the most outer enclosure/bailey around a castle, adding another level of defense. It usually contains storage facilities or barracks. The English term being “third bailey.”

西の丸 (nishi no maru, literally “Western circle”), with 西の meaning “Western,” refers to part of a bailey located on the west side. The English term being “Western bailey.”

[9]: Literally “Western bailey garden” but foreignized because it’s an actual known place rather than some term.

[10]: 東の丸 (higashi no maru, literally “Eastern circle”), with 東の meaning “Eastern.” The English term being “Eastern bailey.”

[11]: The joke/pun here is that Maru’s last name is the same character as the “丸” used to refer to the levels of baileys (literally meaning circle). Here, she refers to Maru as the Eastern bailey (東の丸くん, “higashi no **Maru-kun**”) and combines it with the fact they’re currently in the Western bailey, thus making where they are the “center.” Hence changing the name of the garden to “Perfectly Round Garden” (真ん丸庭園, manmaru teien).

[\[12\]](#): A traditional piece of Japanese clothing for women, known as the predecessor of the kimono.

[\[13\]](#): “日本” (nihon, literally “Japan”) is pronounced as “nihon” in the eastern regions of Japan, while west Japan, like the Kansai region, tends to pronounce it as “nippon.”

[\[14\]](#): What makes it confusing is that Nihonbashi and Nipponbashi are two distinct places. They do have the same names in Japanese, “日本橋,” but luckily their standard English counterparts differentiate between the two in spelling.

[\[15\]](#): A savory Japanese grilled pancake dish.

[\[16\]](#): 舌切り雀: Literally meaning “Tongue-Cut Sparrow” and refers to the traditional Japanese fable that tells the story of a kind old man, his greedy wife, and an injured sparrow.

[\[17\]](#): A real shop in Dotonbori literally called “Andrew’s Egg Tart.”

## March 23nd (Wednesday) - Yuuta Asamura

A dragon made of steel sliced across the blue sky above.

The ladder-resembling rails twisted, writhed, and coiled, looping around in a full circle before returning to their origin. There was no need to ask what this was—anyone could tell it was a thrill ride.

“Eh, so *this* is how we’re starting...?” Ayase-san asked at the sight.

“That’s ‘cause you wanted to know what I’d recommend, didn’tcha?” Narasaka-san answered.

“I mean, yeah, I did say that, but...”

Today was the second day of our trip, dedicated to going to a theme park just as listed on our scheduled outline that Ayase-san and I had made. We’d gone with the theme park Narasaka-san had recommended.

The thing is, neither I nor Ayase-san were all that familiar with these types of entertainment spots, so even after settling on where to go, the both of us had the foggiest of ideas on how to actually navigate the place, let alone know how to make the most of it. That’s why we’d left the on-the-ground guidance for the day up to Narasaka-san.

“*Nu~fu~fu~!* I mean, *this* is it when it comes to USJ<sup>[1]</sup>, isn’t it!?” Narasaka-san puffed out her chest with confidence as she said.

I looked back up at the attraction again.

What I saw was a ride featuring an open-air roller coaster blazing along steel rails at unbelievable speeds, the piercing screams of the riders emanating from it. Just watching it rattle and clank violently as it shot across the tracks made my heart rate spike.

“It looks so fun!” Narasaka-san exclaimed. “Definitely my top rec!”

*Really...?*

Isn't there, I don't know... something else? I mean, I'm pretty sure theme parks like this probably have attractions that are more, well, calm too.

"Are we really doing this?" I asked.

"Asamura-kun—no. Yuuta-niichan!"

"I'm not your older brother, Narasaka-san..." I quipped in response to how Narasaka-san called me, with her immediately shaking her head from side to side in response.

"What are you saying?" she asked. "A friend's older brother's basically an older brother too! It's the way the world works, Asamura-kun. It's like how a friend of your li'l sister's basically like a li'l sister too! At least according to someone, somewhere!"

"No one's said that, no one."

"Geeeeez~, you're so nitpicky. C'mon, just be my older bro for a li'l bit."

*The heck d'you mean by "just be by older bro for a li'l bit"?*

"Anyway, Asamura-kun. This might not be well-known, but there're actually only around as many thrill rides here at USJ as the number of fingers you've got on one hand."

"H-huh..."

"And today's theme park day! In other words, we're supposed to go all out and enjoy USJ to its fullest today. So, what d'you conclude from that?"

"That... we should experience all the various attractions this place has to offer evenly...?"

"Non non non~!" Narasaka-san for some reason insisted on denying me in French. "We're obviously conquering the thrill rides first!"

*So that's already apparently been decided...* I mused as she flashed a brilliant smile, practically radiating with excitement.

As our planner for this grad trip, I really wanted to honor her enthusiasm. I truly, genuinely felt that way from the bottom of my heart.

But as *me*? I mean, I was the sorta person who'd hesitated with even just boarding the plane to Singapore for our school trip. Starting the day with a full-on thrill ride was a little too much for me.

I silently hoped someone else might object.

"Let's go, Tomo-kun!"

"Yeaah!"

*Maru... You too?*

I wonder if this is what Caesar must've felt like when Brutus betrayed him.

*No, but still... Starting the day off with a thrill ride, huh?*

It's not like I'm scared or anything. It's just, y'know, there's that whole aspect about mentally preparing myself.

"Don't push yourself if it's too much, Asamura-kun," Ayase-san said gently.

"What about you, Ayase-san?"

"It's been since I was a kid, so I'm really looking forward to it."

*Huh...*

I'd assumed she wasn't good with all things scary, given she's afraid of thunder and horror movies, but I guess she's able to handle roller coasters?

Now that I thought about it, she didn't seem uncomfortable at all on the plane during our school trip back then either.

"Well, it's not like I hate them or anything..." I meekly murmured as Narasaka-san, who'd gone on ahead, beckoned us over with an excited wave.

"C'mon, this way, this way!" she beamed.

*...Huh?* I couldn't help but halt the moment I looked up at the sign bearing the name of the attraction that Narasaka-san was urging us toward.

"It says 'Hollywood Dream - The Ride - Backdrop,' though..."

"That's the sellin' point!"

"Wait, hold on, hold on—"

But of course, there was no waiting.

Fortunately (or maybe unfortunately?) there wasn't much of a line, and the four of us found ourselves seated in the backwards-dropping thrill ride after only about fifteen minutes of waiting.

What surprised me the most was that we had to store everything from our pockets into a locker before we even got on the ride, meaning that the ride would shake us around enough for our things to go flying out.

Centrifugal force pins you to your seat if you flip upside down, after all, but anything not attached to your actual body is pulled downward by gravity. Keys, coins, and all the other small things in your pocket? Yep, they'd fall.

*Like seriously...?*

Once we got into our seats, I noticed that our upper bodies were all left completely exposed. And the ground? Just barely out of reach, so our feet were left dangling, giving us a sense that we were floating.

The ride attendant gave us a short briefing on safety precautions, and then, clunk, the roller coaster started to move along the rails.

It had begun.

*Wait, we're really gonna ride this facing backwards? No, I mean, it's literally written on its sign, so duh...*

\**Gulp*\*, I swallowed hard without thinking.

Why is it that thrill rides always insist on dragging out the moment before the drop?

*No... I get it. Of course I do.*

That prolonged moment exists to stoke imagination and stir up fear. The very essence of entertainment itself lies within the contrast between tension and release. Being held in suspense until the last possible second, before feeling that tension suddenly being let go, makes the brain get, well, excited.

*Yes, this is entertainment.*

Though it looked dangerous, the reality was that it's extremely safe. It couldn't serve as an entertainment attraction if it were actually dangerous in the first place, after all. It's probably even safer than flying on a plane. I mean, I don't know for sure, but it's got to be. Right?

*Still, how high have we gone now?*

The fact that I couldn't even see our destination was making me so much more anxious than I had expected. We had even entered a roofed section that completely blocked out the view too.

The buildings and people on the ground shrunk farther and farther away as our ride continued its ascent. I found my back pulled slightly from my seat as my weight shifted onto the safety bar pressing against my front.

We're still climbing... but just how far are we going?

*Ah, the people below are so tiny now...*

*\*Yank!\**

My body then suddenly tilted backward. A jolt—like going over some kind of ridge—reverberated throughout my entire body, from head to toe.

In the next instant, my field of vision became full of the blue sky.

The surrounding scenery then blurred.

It felt as if we were being ripped away from the sky, falling backwards at a terrifying angle that was only slightly more merciful than an actual free fall itself.

The wind howled past my ears.

Screams erupted all around us.

As for me, all I could manage was to grit my teeth, so I wouldn't accidentally bite my tongue.

\**RATTLE RATTLE RATTLE*,\* came the sound of the wheels tearing over the rails. Though the music coming through the speakers near my head helped a little, my body was still shaking uncontrollably.

*We're gonna be fine, right? They're not gonna launch us into the sky midway through or anything, right!?*

Though I knew that there was no way something like that could actually happen, my body was still completely conquered with fear.

I could make out Ayase-san screaming from beside me too, but even then I could tell that she was having immense fun.

The roller coaster tore down the track, racing through rise after fall as we traversed across the theme park.

Yet, I had no capacity to look around. My body was being flung left and right, as sharp bursts of acceleration pressed me hard against my seat.

*"Ugh... Waaaaah!"*

Just before my trembling voice could even fully escape from my throat, the speed began to drop. The shaking settled into rhythmic jolts.  
\**Clunk, clunk, clunk.*\*

The vehicle slowly came to a halt, and I could make out a faint hiss of static from the speakers just before the announcement to disembark echoed out.

*"That was so much fun!"* Narasaka-san gleamed in excitement.

*"Not bad at all,"* Maru's voice also came from nearby.

Even so, I had neither the energy nor the will to respond or agree.

*"It's been a while, but yep—still great as ever!"* Then came Ayase-san's cheerful voice which felt just a little distant to me.



By the time I got off, my legs were trembling like that of a newborn deer.

My heart was pounding hard, way too hard, and the world around me was swaying as if there was currently a 3 or 4 magnitude earthquake.

I ended up collapsing onto a nearby bench close to the attraction.

“I’ll go get something to drink for you guys, Saki,” Narasaka-san said.

“Ah, wait. I’ll come with,” Maru followed up, and the two headed off somewhere.

“Are you alright?” Ayase-san, who’d helped me onto the bench, sat down beside me and leaned in to peer at my downturned face as she asked.

*She’s close.* Close enough that my heart was now starting to race again but yet for a completely different reason.

“I-I’m okay, I’m okay.”

“Should I look for the infirmary?”

“It’s not *that* bad. Sorry, I’ve troubled you here.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing,” she told me before reaching out to press her hand to my forehead.

*Wait, it’s not like I’m running a fever...*

“My hand’s cold so I can’t really tell,” she then said, the reason probably being because she’d been gripping the cold metal safety bar the whole time.

“I don’t think I’ve got a fever.”

“Really?” she asked, lifting my bangs and gently pressing her own forehead to mine as she spoke. “*Hmm... Not really sure.*”

You could easily tell if someone had a fever when they felt warmer than you, or at least, supposedly. It was pretty much just folklore, and I think Ayase-san sure knew about it too. But with thermometers being so common now, you really never see people pressing their foreheads together anymore.

*More than that, though, having her face this close is really making my heart rate skyrocket here.*

This pounding in my chest, was it because of the lingering adrenaline from the roller coaster we just rode, or the sight of Ayase-san's face at a distance where I could practically count her eyelashes? It wasn't something I could really tell just from how fast my heart was racing.

Oh, so this is what they call the suspension bridge effect...

*No, that can't be it. Get it together, Yuuta Asamura*, I mentally reprimanded myself, lifting my head and taking a deep breath. *Phew.*

Ahead of me, I saw Maru and Narasaka-san walking back in our direction.

"You revived yet, Asamura?" Maru called out to me.

"Here! We bought you something to drink!" Narasaka-san said.

The two of them then handed me a drink.

"Thanks."

"You can rest here a bit longer if you want, Asamura; we're gonna knock the next one out real quick."

"Oh, about the next one! We'll get to fly like dinosaurs!"

"More like being dragged through the air by one," Maru followed up with a glance above.

I followed his gaze.

*Leading the way is... wait, is that a pterosaur?*

There, I saw a roller coaster with a winged dinosaur attached to its front. The terrifying part was that the ride didn't even use a box-style vehicle you sat in—it had passengers lying flat, parallel to the rail as they were suspended from underneath the roller coaster.

“You guys are... riding *that*? ”

“Well, we won’t finish them all before sunset if we don’t keep it movin’!” Narasaka-san reasoned. “We’ll wrap up all the thrill rides by lunchtime so we can take it easy with all the other attractions in the afternoon!”

*All thrill rides—an amount equal to the fingers you’ve got on one hand—by noon?*

The hell kinda monstrous resolve do these two have...?

“We’re off then!”

“We should be able to meet up here again without any trouble if you’re staying put here.”

“G-got it.”

“I’ll rest here for a bit too,” Ayase-san said, seeing Maru and Narasaka-san off deliberately so I wouldn’t be left alone.

*I’m making her all considerate again.*

“You probably want to enjoy yourself too, Ayase-san. Sorry about this,” I spoke up with that thought in mind.

“It’s fine. More importantly, here,” she replied as she handed me a drink bottle. “You should drink something if you’re able to now.”

I wasn’t completely dehydrated or anything, but not that she mentioned it, my mouth did feel completely parched. Just a small sip out of the drink she had handed me—iced oolong tea—was enough to make me feel a whole lot better.

*Still, this was completely unexpected,* I thought as I took a few more sips out of my drink.

I'd given my hand at a li'l bit of research before coming here, scrolling through social media posts and such. All I had come across were Insta posts from bubbly girls posting with colorful drinks and wearing character ears.

In hindsight, it certainly might've been just my own bias here, but I had assumed Narasaka-san would go about things in the same laid-back style.

*And yet, here we are with the very first thing we'd done being some insane thrill ride...*

Given we had entered USJ first thing in the morning, I was now seriously glad that I hadn't gone overboard at the hotel's breakfast buffet. I'd be seriously feeling queasy for real if I'd stuffed myself then and there.

"*Phew.* Feeling a lot better now."

"That's great," Ayase-san commented with visible relief as she shifted a little closer to me. "I was seriously getting a little worried, you know?"

"I was honestly just caught off guard, that's all. I'm fine now, though."

"No need to push yourself. I'll sit here with you until Maaya and Maru-kun get back."

"That'd be too much to ask, even for me."

Ayase-san didn't dislike theme parks from the look of things either.

And besides...

"Spring marks the start of uni. I don't wanna pass up chances to try new things."

That's exactly why I don't want to write something off without giving it a fair try—even if it happens to be something I struggle with.

"Let's go to the next one," I stood up, resolving myself.

*“Uhhh... you’re serious? You’re not pushing yourself too hard here, right?”*

“Of course not. In fact, this whole heart-pounding feeling’s actually kinda addictive...”

“Saying some pretty dangerous stuff now, huh? No, I mean, I get it since I like that sort of feeling too...” Ayase-san commented. “But still, if at any point it feels like too much, it’s fine to stop, okay?”

“I know,” I responded.

I knew for sure that getting on another thrill ride meant that I’d probably collapse again. And though I guess it might be kind of too cute of an analogy to use, I’d probably end up with legs trembling like some newborn deer again too.

This pitiful side of me was something I would’ve hated even the thought of showing to Ayase-san. It was why I’d pushed myself too hard back during that study camp I’d gone to during the summer of our third year.

But that was then; something inside of me had started to shift lately.

I could now accept showing her that side of me. Because with Ayase-san, I could believe she wouldn’t think any less of me for it.

More than shrinking back from the idea of trying to change, what I wanted more right now was to experience what she enjoyed—thrill rides.

Just as I wanted to be there to support her, I wanted to honor her desire to support me too.

*And besides, having her stick close to me like this is a perk too. Yeah, not saying that out loud though...*

“I’ll message the others about it,” I told her. “So, which one d’you wanna ride?”

“That one,” Ayase-san answered as she pointed up. “The one where it looks like you’re getting dragged around by that pterosaur!”

*Huh...?*

“It looks scary, but fun!” she continued to voice her excitement, and I instinctively opened my mouth to suggest something a bit gentler, managing to stop myself in the end,

“Gotcha,” I nodded at Ayase-san with a forced smile.



True to their word, Maru and Narasaka-san spent the whole morning conquering the thrill rides.

“*Phew!* I’m stuffed. I’m stuffed, I’ll tell you!”

“We haven’t eaten yet, though?”

“I meant stuffed on thrills! I think I’m good with thrill rides for a while now.”

“Yeah, knowing you, Narasaka, your idea of ‘a while’ means two months at most...”

“No way, Tomo-kun~. I can go a li’l longer than that,” Narasaka-san teased as she held up four fingers with a grin.

*Four months, huh...? Not sure if that qualifies as “a while” either, honestly...*

“I’m good for half a year,” Maru shook his head in exasperation.

*But that’s not so different from her, is it? You’re basically the same, Maru.*

As for me, I managed two more rides. That was my limit, and I had spent all my willpower on keeping the sour taste from my stomach from welling up any further.

Ayase-san had insisted on staying with me the whole time, but I felt bad for having to keep relying on her like that, so I ended up leaving her in Narasaka-san and Maru’s hands in the end.

Narasaka-san was a little disappointed that they weren't able to complete all the rides themselves, but I'd say she'd done more than enough in my opinion.

The restaurant we ended up choosing for lunch was designed like a shipyard. It had apparently appeared in a movie too, though I didn't know which so I ended up asking Maru, with him telling me it was the one revolving around shark attacks.

"Aren't there a ton of movies where people get attacked by sharks?" I asked.

"No, y'know, the original one," he replied, and that's when it finally clicked.

I hadn't seen it myself, but I knew it was definitely famous. He suggested we all watch it together sometime, but seeing Ayase-san grimace next to me, I turned him down with an awkward smile.

*Yeah, this girl just can't handle horror movies.*

With a sandwich plus drink combo being sold at a reasonably decent price, we each ordered slightly different types.

"Are they baguette sandwiches, maybe?" Ayase-san asked, tilting her head, earning a firm shake of the head from Narasaka-san.

"No," she firmly said. "Baguettes are French, aren't they? The ones here don't really look like they've got a hard crust, so I think they're koppepan<sup>[2]</sup> ones instead!"

"Ah, I see."

Despite it being lunchtime, we got up to the register without having to wait that much, likely thanks to it being a weekday before spring break actually started for most people.

We paid for and got our food which turned out to be, just as Narasaka-san had predicted, sandwiches made with soft koppepan, stuffed with fillings like meat and shrimp.

"See?" Narasaka-san said triumphantly with a smile.

The paper trays our sandwiches sat on had shark designs with bared fangs printed on them, making it look like the sandwich bread was about to be chomped on by a giant jaw.

*Oh, so that's the shark from that movie...*

"I'm definitely not watching it..." Ayase-san muttered as she reached for her sandwich with visible caution.

Looks like the teeth on the printed design were apparently enough to scare her.

We managed to grab an open table out on the terrace just as one became available. Once we sat down, we each showed off the filings of each of our sandwiches, before setting about shoveling them and our drinks into our increasingly demanding stomachs.

After a short break, we moved on to our afternoon wander of the theme park, taking our time to go around to some attractions Narasaka-san recommended.

In stark contrast to the intensity of the rides we took this morning, the attractions we now visited were mostly calm and laid-back.

*Well, apart from that one waterslide that was pretty intense, though.*

By the way, the idea that USJ is all about Hollywood-themed attractions was, apparently, a pretty outdated one. It was a realization I had come to after scouring social media and doing some research beforehand.

"They've been going beyond just the Hollywood stuff lately and have been collabing with globally popular anime and video games!" Narasaka-san explained on my behalf, full of enthusiasm.

"Wait, even if they haven't been adapted into Hollywood movies?" Ayase-san tilted her head slightly.

"Yup!"

"Oh, really?"

"Well I mean, that's why you see all these signs around here with art styles you definitely feel like you've seen somewhere before," Maru added, gesturing around as he gave further explanation.

And he was right—Maru and I had definitely spotted some very familiar titles as we initially looked around the park after entering. There had been many attractions based on games and manga, though they were so popular that we unfortunately had to skip them this time around.

Besides, Ayase-san didn't know much about any of them anyway.

Narasaka-san's recommended trail, though avoiding all the overcrowded areas, still hit all the must-see classics and offered plenty of fun too.

With laughter and surprise, the voices of the four of us echoed under the sky of Osaka.

By the time the red setting sun had disappeared beyond the edge of the park's horizon, our legs were stiff like sticks, with us all completely out of it.

*But it was really fun*, I thought.

"Theme parks are awesome, right!?" Narasaka-san asked, with everyone else nodding to that closing remark.

She really had been a fantastic guide, and thanks to all the excitement, we ended up more drained by than the end of yesterday

"Your guidance was really great, Maaya. And thanks for all the trivia too, Maru-kun," Ayase-san couldn't help but comment.

"Yup. Praise me, praise me~" Narasaka-san responded.

"I was just saying stuff I already knew," Maru remarked. "I could've been wrong, so make sure to double-check the facts."

"No, no. Yours was more like real, practical knowledge, Maru. You can't beat that with just some quick last-minute cramming," I reflected, bowing my head to the humble Maru.

“Ah, we’ll be able to catch the train at a good time if we move now,” Ayase-san then spoke up, checking the time on her watch.

I also looked over our schedule. Urging everyone along, we made our way to the station.

Given we didn’t have much time to sit down and eat dinner at a restaurant, we all bought some bento from a convenience store. By the time we had returned to our hotel, everyone was so worn out that we couldn’t even carry a proper conversation.

*And we’ve still got one more day left.*

“Oh man, this ain’t looking good. I’m definitely crashing early tonight,” Maru said.

Everyone managed to nod in agreement—barely. Even nodding felt like too much effort.

After eating our dinner from the convenience store, we each quickly took turns in the bath and then laid down to sleep.

And so ended the tumultuous second day of our grad trip.

Just before falling asleep, a brief twinge of guilt passed through me.

*Ah, crap. I’d told myself I’d be more proactive today so that Maru and Narasaka-san could enjoy themselves, but... what did I even do today?*

I had screamed the life out of me, then spent half the day trying to recover—that was basically all I had managed.

*Tomorrow for sure, I told myself.*

With that lingering thought, I soon surrendered to the sleep that wrapped around me like mud, dragging me into unconsciousness.

It was a feeling that really felt just like the ride we’d gone on earlier today—like I was being pulled into a backwards fall or deep plunge. Rather than peacefully drifting off, it was more as if my consciousness was being forcibly yanked away.

And it also gave off the impression of the perfect metaphor for the uncertainty I felt as I prepared to step into the known terrain of uni life.

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[1]: Yeah no, Ghost changed the way everyone refers to Universal Studios Japan, from how it was previously, in this chapter. Not my choice.

[2]: コッペパン: An oblong-shaped bread comparable to that of a hot dog bun. “Koppe” (コッペ) is just the katakana loanword for the French word coupé, literally meaning to cut, with “pan” (パン) just meaning bread.

## March 24th (Thursday) - Yuuta Asamura

The morning of the third day of our grad trip was dedicated entirely to none other than Tomokazu Maru. In other words, it was a morning dedicated to his anime pilgrimage.

Following the pattern from the previous day, it made perfect sense for Maru to be our guide for today. The guy knows his way around Kandai-mae Station, after all.

“Feel free to ask me about anything,” he had told us, brimming with enthusiasm before we had even left the hotel.

Though it was something I appreciated, given this trip had originally been planned by me and Ayase-san out of the desire to be more proactive in nurturing our friendships with the two, I felt that relying too much on him wouldn’t be right. It felt wrong to keep being on the receiving end all the time.

“I think I can at least guide us there. I’ve looked it up and everything,” I therefore said as we left the hotel, at least trying to be of some use.

“Aye. I’ll leave it to you, Asamura.”

With Maru entrusting that responsibility entirely to me, I took the lead and guided everyone to our destination.

*I’ll try stepping up with Ayase-san in being the mood-maker today. Can’t keep depending on Maru and Narasaka-san forever.*

“You’re really fired up today, huh, Asamura-kun?” Ayase-san came up beside me and leaned in to whisper in my ear as we walked.

“Of course.”

I had sent a message to Ayase-san earlier in the morning to convey my intent, after all. As I've mentioned already, it was originally the two of us who suggested we planned this grad trip ourselves, precisely because we were always being led along by both Maru and Narasaka-san. We wanted them to relax and enjoy things by letting us take the initiative for once.

With how things had been going so far, if we kept on with how we currently were, then we'd really be going against the whole "give more than you take" spirit that the both of us try to live by.

*It's kind of a little late at this point, but we've gotta step up our game from here on out.*

"I'll do my best too," Ayase-san declared.

"Yup. Well, just remember that enjoying ourselves is important here too."

Prioritizing with having fun before anything else was something Maru and Narasaka-san had always done. It was an example I wanted to follow.

"That's right," Ayase-san reciprocated my feelings as she lightly balled both her hands into little fists.



I checked the places we were planning to go to today on my phone and mentally mapped out a travel route.

According to Maru, the anime pilgrimage site he was interested in was around Kandai-mae Station. It was where we'd be heading to first today, and there were multiple ways to get there too.

As for the route I chose...

"First, we'll walk from our hotel to around where the entrance to Shin-Osaka Station is. Once we're there, we'll then walk along the train tracks toward Minamikata Station."

“We’re not taking a train from the station?” Ayase-san asked.

“I considered a few different options,” I explained, nodding to her question, “But I figured we’d try with only using the Hankyu Kyoto Main Line for today.”

We’d get on a train at Minamikata Station, located about a ten minute walk south along the tracks from where Shin-Osaka Station was. Incidentally, as its characters implied, the station’s name was just read straightforwardly as “south side station.”<sup>[1]</sup>

“What made you choose that route?”

“I mean, we *can* get there by taking the Midosuji Line and then transferring to the Hankyu Kyoto Main Line, but—like it sounds—that still involves a transfer.”

The other three responded with diligent nods, something I couldn’t help but appreciate as it made things easier to talk through.

Oh, by the way, I was only able to rattle off the names of all these train lines because I was looking at the schedule I had on my phone. It wasn’t because I memorized them.

“Plus, one reason I wanted to avoid having a transfer is ’cause you’d have to get off at Nishinakajima-Minamigata Station if you take the Midosuji Line,” I added.

“Huh? Isn’t that a different one from the station we need to get to?”

“Yep, it is. From what I checked, my digital map’s saying you’re supposed to get off there and then walk for around three minutes to Minamikata Station, apparently.”

Everyone looked visibly drained at the thought.

*I guess they’re recalling how that hell of a trap Shin-Osaka Station was from two days ago.*

I thought that keeping things simple would be better, especially when we're unfamiliar with the area. Just one experience as a real life dungeon seeker was more than enough. Of course, it could also maybe actually be a piece of cake, but we wouldn't know if that were the case until the whole thing was over.

"And, well... we all kinda went overboard at the breakfast buffet," I added, giving another reason to avoid trying to navigate another complex station at all costs.

Narasaka-san rubbed her stomach with both hands in response, with Maru then telling her off that she'd eaten too much after.

"It was just too good not to, Tomo-kun! Everything in Osaka's just so tasty, y'know?"

"Ain't gonna argue with that," Maru resigned.

"And that's why I felt a *leisurely* walk wouldn't be all that bad," I added, giving him a wry smile from beside him. "Though it pretty much looks like we'd still be walking a ton today. Pretty scary to think about, amirite?"

After all, once we were done with the whole anime pilgrimage, we still had an aquarium visit ahead. I could already tell that my muscles would be screaming by nightfall.

"We're young; don't worry so much!" Narasaka-san exclaimed, energetic as ever.

"I've been doing nothing but sitting around all through that exam prep though," Ayase-san sighed on the other hand. "I think I'm really out of shape..."

"Well, let's take it easy," I suggested. "One of our reasons for this trip is to enjoy the difference in lifestyle and culture too, after all."

Strolling around outside was definitely more fun than wandering around the inside of some station, especially when you think about all the scenery you'd take in.

Our walk was only about an estimated ten minutes anyway, and since it would be along the train tracks, I figured that there was no way we'd get lost. So when we finally saw a station entrance with a sign that read "Nishinakajima-Minamikata Station," I couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief, glad that the digital map had directed us correctly.

*So this is where you'd get off if you took the Midosuji Line instead, huh?*

It made sense—it was super close. Just only about a minute by train according to the digital map. That meant Minamikata Station, the actual station we were aiming for, should be around a three minute walk from here on out.

*So if we turn left here just like the map says... Ah, there it is.*

Being our guide, I felt the weight lift from my shoulders the moment I spotted the station. Our stomachs, stuffed from this morning's breakfast, had just started to settle enough to feel comfortable again by this point too.

We then hopped on the Hankyu Kyoto Main Line from Minamikata Station. After switching over to a private railway line, we then rode for another fifteen minutes to Kandai-mae Station. In total, we spent roughly forty minutes to reach our destination from the time we'd initially left our hotel.

*Now then...*

Though things had gone relatively smoothly up to this point, the real problem still lay ahead. I had never seen the actual anime we were here for—the one Maru had described as an utter soul touching masterpiece. In other words, we'd have to rely on him from here on out.

That went not just for me, but for Ayase-san and Narasaka-san as well.

"Oh, I did manage to watch the first three episodes in my free time, though!" Narasaka-san stated.

"Wait, about that show, *uhhh...* it's an anime, isn't it?" Ayase-san turned to her and asked, to which she nodded enthusiastically.

“That’s right~. There’s apparently something it’s based on from before it, though.”

“Before it?”

“Like, a game or something? Right, Tomo-kun?”

“Yeah. It was originally a visual novel released quite a while ago.”<sup>[2]</sup>

“V-visual... what?” Ayase-san voiced her confusion, titling her head at the unfamiliar term, being the type to have only ever played family-friendly games before.

“Mm-hmm, well you see,” Maru started, ready to launch into a full explanation before I stopped him.

*Yeah no, doing that lets him launch into some passionate lecture on the entire history of video games.*

It’s not that it would’ve been boring. I mean, Ayase-san does love her history. Knowing her, she’d probably end up asking a ton of follow-up questions and listening attentively all the way through. She’s just not the kind of person who can leave things she doesn’t understand as is.

The thing is though, aside from that one time when the three of us—that is, her, Narasaka-san, and me—played that party game on the living room TV, Ayase-san had basically almost no experience with computer games. So odds were, most of Maru’s yapping would’ve just flown over her head.

*And what would happen then, you ask?*

Well, I could already picture it: Maru, not just explaining the history of visual novels, but starting from the very origins of computer games themselves. He was the type of person to, if asked, “What’s an RPG?”, not just start with Dungeons & Dragons—the world’s first RPG—but instead go even further back to the 19th century origins of miniature games. The prime definition of an absurdly excessive explanation.

But sure, the idea that an explanation is good *precisely* because it's long and verbose is something that I, as someone who loves reading, can relate to and understand. In that sense, it made Maru and I kindred spirits.

Plus, with how serious Ayase-san was, she'd probably just resort to asking questions every single time she hit a word she wasn't familiar with. Maru would probably then try to explain it all with an increasingly eloquent and rapid-fire pace, passionately diving more into the niche knowledge of how modern day storytelling and games came to merge, all while referencing the hardships that those from previous generations had to deal with...

*Yeah, the sun would probably already be set by the time he'd be done.*

Sure, that intellectual curiosity of Ayase-san's might be fully satisfied, but we would've completely veered off course from the original intent of this trip.

So, it was why I had felt that strange sense of duty inside of me at that moment—if anyone was gonna stop this from happening, it had to be me.

“Anyway, I think it’s fine just knowing it’s based on some original source material for now,” I said.

“Mm. Well, that’s true.”

“So, you got what I meant?”

“My friend?” Narasaka-san tacked onto my words the moment they left my mouth.

...Uhhh?

Ah, I get it, she means *that*—like, finishing my sentence to, “So you got what I meant, my friend?” And at the same time, it’s probably a pun on Maru’s name being Tomokazu<sup>[3]</sup> too.

*Wait, hol’ on a sec, am I being told to inject some humor into the convo right now?*

“Uh, do I really have to do that?”

“Mm-hmm~,” Narasaka-san affirmed, making a peace sign with that smug look of hers.

“The hell are you expecting from Asamura of all people, Narasaka?” Maru jested.

*Yeah, exactly.*

The standard she’s setting is that of a professional comedian...

“It’s just so we can all enjoy the day more, y’know~?”

“There’re different strokes for different folks, y’know?”

“That’s why I’m settin’ him up. After all, a friend of Tomo-kun’s a friend of mine too, isn’t he~?”

“Y’know what? Just ’cause you’re a friend of a friend doesn’t automatically make you a friend. You’re still some stranger. And wait, didn’t you make a similar joke yesterday too?”

“You’re so cold, Tomo-kun.”

“And you’re the one who’s jumping the gun.”

“Now, now,” I interjected, breaking them up.

Leaving them left unchecked would just mean they’d endlessly continue with their married couple banter. Like seriously, their back-and-forth flowed so fluently perfect like water out of a faucet.

So I forcibly yanked the conversation back on track.

“Uhhh, anyway, this place here’s the anime pilgrimage spot Maru wanted to check out, right?” I asked, looking around my surroundings.

We were currently at a roundabout in front of Kandai-mae Station, and planned on allocating an estimated two hours to Maru’s anime pilgrimage.

First, we’d spend around an hour walking around the places he wanted to visit, before heading back to the station area to eat lunch. Then, in the afternoon, we’d head to today’s other main event—Kaiyukan, the aquarium.

*At least, that’s the rough plan I’d worked out...*

“But an anime pilgrimage, was it? How do you even go about something like that?” Ayase-san asked with her head tilted, seemingly not understanding exactly what Maru wanted to do despite agreeing to the itinerary. “Anime’s just fiction, isn’t it?”

“The stories are, sure, entirely fictional. But a lot of anime have been using a bunch of real life locations as models for their backgrounds for scenes in the more recent years,” Maru explained.

“Even though the story’s made up?”

“If anything, it’s *because* it’s made up.”

Ayase-san tilted her head even further at his words, still not seeming to get it.

“But the characters don’t actually exist, right...?” she reasoned. “Is that really acceptable?”

It was a perfectly reasonable question. I also thought that taking it too far could mean completely killing the whole concept of an anime in the first place too.

And surprisingly, Maru nodded earnestly at Ayase-san’s words.

“Good question,” he reciprocated what I had thought. “I can see why someone would think that. But, couldn’t you also look at it this way? Look, we went to see Osaka Castle the day before yesterday, didn’t we?”

“We did, yeah.”

“What did you think when we looked up at the castle from beneath the cherry blossoms, Ayase?”

“Eh? Hmm... Right. Well, that castle was built during the Azuchi-Momoyama period, and given that’s the latter half of the 16th century, that makes it roughly 400 years old, doesn’t it? So I was thinking about how the scenery from back then probably hasn’t remained completely intact. Even Osaka Castle had been rebuilt during the Edo period, and I doubt those cherry blossom trees in the parks were the exact same from then either. But... maybe the people who lived 400 years ago also looked up at that massive castle during spring, surrounded by all those cherry blossoms, and felt the same way I did. Like, ‘What a huge castle, so impressive,’ and so on. Something along those lines.”

“Exactly,” Maru nodded with a look as if he’d fully expected that type of answer from her. “I think your thoughts are perfectly normal for someone who goes around visiting historical sites.”

“Well, I... guess so.”

“Thing is, though, about the people who were alive back then and living in that castle—they don’t exist anymore, do they?”

“...Humans don’t live to 400, so they don’t, yeah.”

“Right. Sanada Yukimura’s escape tunnel still exists, sure, but he’s not there himself. And you’re never gonna run into Taikou-sama...<sup>[4]</sup> Toyotomi Hideyoshi, that is... What remains in that castle now’s just the mere traces of dreams left behind by those old warriors.”

“If only their ghosts were still there for us to listen to...”

*Wait, you’re seriously okay with that, Ayase-san?*

Or maybe she’s just caught up with the flow of the conversation and hasn’t realized its subtle horror theme.

“But even then, just being in the same place where they once lived, taking in the same scenery and breathing the same air, somehow makes us feel connected to them,” Maru continued. “That’s where the value lies. I think that’s how it is, dontchu think?”

“Ah, I see,” Ayase-san nodded. “So you’re basically saying the emotions we feel from taking in the scenery that served as models in anime are comparable to those that the fictional characters might’ve felt? Something like that?”

Maru nodded.

*Oh, I get it now,* I couldn’t help but think too.

Ayase-san had phrased it in a pretty complex way, but in essence, this was what she meant: Say, for example, there’s an anime or movie with a steep hill or staircase.

The feelings of exhaustion and struggle of the characters, regardless of what gender they were. The sensation of sweat pouring down their foreheads, contrasted with the feeling of finally reaching the top and being able to look out at the miniature-like townscape below.

Those feelings and experiences were ones we could relive by simply being in the same landscape. It lets us imagine that maybe *this* was what the characters in that scene had felt when they were in this very place.

Just like how you’d look at the traces of some historical figure’s life, feeling a connection to them that transcends time, it was also possible to simply relive the emotions of fictional characters by visiting places that served as locations in their media.

That, as Maru was essentially saying, was the real thrill of anime pilgrimages. A pilgrimage to the Holy Land, if you will.

“I see. I think I kind of get how that might feel when you put it like that,” Ayase-san followed up.

“Right, now that you understand, let’s go over just one quick reminder before we start. This might just be me preaching to the choir for you, Ayase, but just like when visiting historical buildings, there’re rules of etiquette, amirite? No touching things that are off-limits, vandalism’s absolutely out of the question, of course, and if in a museum, no making noise, no runnin’ around, and no taking photos where it’s not allowed.”

“Of course,” Ayase-san nodded, as if it were only natural.

“The same goes for anime pilgrimages. In most cases, the places used as locations in anime are just regular parts of daily life for the people who actually live there. Like today, the roads we’re ‘bout to walk are basically just normal streets to the locals. There’s no reason why we should be disturbing their everyday lives.”

“Ah, so it’s not like they’re set up as tourist or sightseeing spots or anything?”

“There *are* places that actively promote themselves like that for the sake of regional revitalization, but not all of them do. And even then, proper manners are still important in places like that. It’s not like every local’s happy ’cause their town’s the setting for some anime.”

“Like, Shibuya’s been the setting for all kinds of fiction, but we don’t go around acting all different because of that, do *weee~?*” Narasaka-san chimed in, cutting right into Maru’s words.

“Even Shibuya?”

“Totally, totally. There’s a ton of them. Shibuya’s seriously crawling with anime pilgrimage spots; I see people doing it there all the time. Same with Ikebukuro and Akihabara. Saitama too, like hey, even places around Kasukabe and Washinomiya Shrine have some, y’know?”

“There are that many... all over the place?”

“We just don’t know ’bout it. For all we know, our high school might’ve even been used as a model in some anime somewhere!”

“Yeah, no way,” Maru shot that down without hesitation.

Oh well, Suisei High didn’t exactly have any distinctive features besides being some prestigious academic school. It was just like any other ordinary one if you ignored that fact.

Putting all that aside, I couldn’t help but realize how strange the feeling is to realize how often real places were used as locations in anime. We’ll say things like how they’re like Holy Lands—sacred grounds—but at the end of the day, these were just normal towns like the ones we lived in. Towns with houses, schools, shopping streets, and what not...

And yet, to someone who loves a certain anime, those same streets become places they'd go out of their way just to visit, treating it like some tourist or sightseeing spot.

*It's pretty surreal when you really stop to think about it.*

"But you sure know a lot, huh, Narasaka-san?" I mentioned.

Maybe it was because she's always taking care of her younger brothers, but I'd always gotten the impression that Narasaka-san never went out much.

"It's actually the opposite, Asamura-kun. Because I can't go out much, the list of places I wanna visit is totally overflowing—that's why I know so much. Once my li'l brothers are more grown up and need less lookin' after, I'll be going on a huge anime pilgrimage tour all over Japan!"

"And what's scary 'bout Naraska is that she doesn't even plan on stopping at just Japan," Maru chimed in.

"Oh c'mon. Y'know, even I get that there're places you can't go to no matter how much I wanna. Like a place farther than the universe, or the Moon, or Mars, or Mercury."

Ayase-san widened her eyes in surprise, but Maru, who apparently recognized the anime she was referencing<sup>[5]</sup>, gave a solemn nod.

*They'd really go if they could, would they? These two... They're terrifying.*

Anyway, so began our sightseeing tour with Maru as our personal guide.

"Ooooh....! So this is the sacred ground of the masterpiece that touched my soul," Maru exclaimed emotionally with a heartfelt sigh.

"Hey hey, Tomo-kun. Don't just stand there gettin' all emotional by yourself—give us an explanation already," Narasaka-san immediately cut in with a sharp retort nonetheless.

To anyone unfamiliar with the series, the scene in front of us was just some neat, but ordinary, buildings on the side of a regular street in Osaka.

“True enough. Sorry ’bout that, Asamura, Ayase.”

“I’m just happy enough with strolling around in an unfamiliar town, to be honest,” Ayase-san reassured Maru.

Still, just walking the streets wasn’t necessarily enough to get a feel for a real difference in culture in modern urban Japan. At most, all there was to it was maybe hearing a local dialect—like hearing the Kansai one from people passing by.

But when it came to things like road markings, building styles, hell, even the shape of guardrails—they all didn’t seem too different to me. And even if they *were*, I had no idea *how*.

*To say our lifestyles and cultures are different felt like a bit of an overstatement.*

“Not necessarily,” Ayase-san refuted after I put those thoughts into words. “Look, Asamura-kun.”

She pointed at a signboard hanging above a local shop.

“Huh?”

“The area code’s 06.”

“Ah.”

It wasn’t something I had noticed, maybe because we live in an era where dialing whole phone numbers on landlines wasn’t commonplace, but that’s right, Tokyo’s area code is 03. Osaka’s is 06.

*So that’s why I’ve had this odd sense of unfamiliarity whenever I glanced at a sign.*

I was struck by how unobservant I was. For someone who claims they “want to experience other cultures,” I sure was pretty laughable. Even going overseas would all be meaningless if I didn’t have the sensitivity to notice all these differences.

“And also the scent of the flowers,” Ayase-san added.

“The scent?”

“Do you know this year’s cherry blossom forecast?”

“Ahhh... They’ve already started to bloom, haven’t they?”

“In Tokyo, yes, it was on the 20th. But it was the 23rd here in Osaka. Just yesterday.”

“Huh, Osaka’s is later?”

I had vaguely assumed Tokyo would be later.

“That’s actually right. Like look, remember Osaka Castle on the first day?” Ayase-san reasoned.

Come to think, the cherry blossoms there had only just started to bloom.

“You can pick up the scent of flowers from here—back then over there too—as we’re walking around like this, but it still feels a little bit more subdued than back in Tokyo,” she continued. “Though it’s only a difference of just a few days, you can really still feel the little traces of winter still lingering all over.”

“Gotcha...”

“Oh well, it ain’t like Asamura spacin’ out’s anything new,” Maru interjected.

A brutally honest remark from my best friend that made me reflect hard on myself.

“My bad.”

“I mean, people have their strengths and weaknesses,” Maru followed up. “I think it’s precisely because you don’t get all caught up with the little details that you’re always able to see the big picture, Asamura.”

“I guess that’s a way to put it.”

“Strengths and weaknesses are two sides of the same coin. Like Ayase, for example, notices every little thing, but that probably means she’s often getting caught up with what’s right in front of her. Maybe. I actually don’t really know if that’s the case...”

“You’ve totally ruined it with that last part, Tomo-kun!”

“That’s because it’s best to take in around half of what people say about others at most. Not even half when it’s you, actually—ten percent’s more right. And with a grain of salt.

“Tomo-kun you’re such a worrywart, aren’tchu?” Narasaka-san shot back with precision, and Maru grimaced.

The fact that he didn’t immediately snap back told me she’d hit a nerve.

*But Maru, a worrywart?*

In other words, he’s someone so sensitive to his surroundings where he’s overly anxious or conscious about what others think?

I mean, to me, Maru had always felt like someone who stood tall—someone who never sweated the small stuff, but... But now that I think about it, maybe he wasn’t.

*Maybe he couldn’t have become the captain of the baseball team if he weren’t such a worrywart, huh?*

After all, we’re talking about a guy who was entrusted with the weight of leading a team of at least twenty members. There was just no way you could manage all that without playing close attention to each and every one of them.

He’s definitely not like me then, the type to never chase after those who leave, nor reject those who come around me. But more than that, it was starting to really feel like Narasaka-san might actually know Maru more than I do, even though we’ve been friends for three years now.

*I have to admit, that thought makes me feel a little down.*

“Well anyway, now’s the time to focus on the masterpiece that touched my soul,” Maru declared firmly, as if to change the mood.

“Looking forward to the commentary~,” Narasaka-san chimed.

“Leave it to me,” Maru replied with a confident pound on his chest, before then going on to give us a lecture about how that anime had moved him so deeply.

He first started with the story, then explained which scene the scenery before us right now had appeared in. According to him, the real life locations used as models in the story weren’t limited to just Osaka. They were apparently spread across all of Japan.

Tokyo even had some, apparently.

In other words, they had basically used various real world locations and stitched them together to create a fictional town.

“The whole idea of an anime pilgrimage wasn’t as popular back then as it is now,” Maru explained.

“So it’s a pretty old series?”

“The original visual novel, which the anime is based on, yeah. It was released just after I was born. You could say I’ve basically lived through its history. Can’t help but feel like it’s destiny!”

*I mean, if you put it like that, then weren’t all of us born in the same year, though?*

“And the anime first aired three years later, which means I was only three years old at the time of the first episode.”

“Three-year-old Maru...” I couldn’t help but mull over the thought.

“Goo-goo-gaga Tomo-kun! I wanna see that! Show me your baby album!” Narasaka-san pleaded with a mischievous grin, earning Maru’s incredibly displeased expression as a response.

“Why on God’s green Earth would I throw a bone to the enemy? Show yours first if you’re *that* desperate. Equal exchange.”

“Wanting to see your lover in her purest form, hm? You’re such a perv, Tomo-kun.”

“...Are you stupid or what?”

*“Ufufu~. Don’t be shy, don’t be shy. Maaya-sama here sees right through everything!”*

“I’m not being shy.”

*You guys are going off track, you guys are going off track here.*

“So, when did you encounter this ‘fated’ series of yours, anyway?” I asked.

*Like, there’s no way he started watching it at three years old.*

“Hm? Ah, yeah, sorry ’bout that,” Maru answered, seemingly realizing that they’d gone off tangent. “I naturally didn’t watch it in real time. Saw it during my high school entrance exam year.”

“You were watching anime during exam season...?”

“It was to escape from all the stress. And I fell for it, completely. I was moved. It’s a really good story, this anime.”

“All the girls in it were super cute too~” Narasaka-san added.

*Oh, right. She said she’s seen a bit of it.*

“C’mon, Tomo-kun, show them!”

*That’s a pretty unreasonable request,* I thought, but to my surprise, despite the anime having aired over fifteen years ago, its official website was still up. In fact, it was apparently even regularly updated, which meant it was pretty much still an active franchise.

Maru tilted his smartphone screen toward us to show it off, with it currently showing the character introductions page.

Ayase-san and I leaned in to take a look. We probably must’ve looked like a bunch of tourists checking some map mid-walk through a sightseeing spot to an outsider.

*Even though what we’re actually staring at is an illustration of 2D anime girls...*

“Look, look, isn’t this character cute!? Saki, Asamura-kun, which one’s your favorite?” Narasaka-san put us on the spot, as energetic as ever.

“Even if you ask me that...”

Yes, I was someone who read a ton of books, but I was also never the type who approached stories by judging characters based on their appearances. Even when Maru dragged me along to all these anime shops and bought figurines, I’d never once bought anything for myself.

“Wow, that’s unexpected,” Narasaka-san remarked. “I totally thought your desk would’ve had like three full rows of anime girl figurines lined up, Asamura-kun.”

*Wait...*

“What kinda thought process led you to that conclusion, Narasaka-san?”

“Birds of a feather flock together?”

Ayase-san and I silently stared at Maru.

“Hol’ up! That’s not it! The only things lined up on my desk are nothing but robot models, I swear!”

“C’mom, Tomo-kun. No need to be shy.”

“I am not! *Ugh!* This is exactly why I didn’t want to let anyone into my room!”

“So you’ve let her in...” Ayase-san murmured under her breath.

It really was rare to see Maru looking all flustered—he’s usually good at keeping a poker face. Now, though it was a precious moment, it didn’t change the fact that we’d run out of time to explore the aquarium at this rate if we kept going off topic.

“Continue, Maru,” I promoted Maru, and he resumed his tour guide duties.

“This spot here’s the background from the cover of the first edition limited volume 6 DVD,” he explained with rapid pronunciation.

*Wait, wait, wait. What did he say here, some kinda spell?* I thought, not hearing him properly.

“What did you say?”

“This,” he answered, pulling something out of his backpack—a cover from a DVD.

The characters were drawn against a carefully rendered, realistic background. He’d even gone so far out of his way to remove the cover and slip it into a larger clear file.

*So this is the magic book for that utter spell of a phrase from earlier, huh?*

And the scenery shown on it was...

“It’s the same...”

The view I saw through the clear file and the one rendered on the DVD cover were almost identical, even in terms of perspective. But that made sense, this was clearly the model used for the background art, after all.

“Lemme see, lemme see. *Ooooh!*”

Even Narasaka-san, peeking in from beside me, was surprised by how exact it was.

“It really doesn’t feel strange to think about how the characters from the story were walking around here once you see it like that, huh?” Ayase-san murmured, looking away into our surroundings after taking a glance at it.

“Right?” Maru claimed happily, and Ayase-san nodded.

“I’ve always been interested in buildings or ruins that have been preserved, but I don’t think I’ve really given much thought to the fact that people actually lived there from when they were built.”

“So you’re more interested in the architecture itself, huh, Ayase?”

“I just like the idea of something staying exactly the same for hundreds of years...”

It was for that exact reason that Ayase-san liked visiting historic sites—because of the very idea that they’ve remained unchanged from how they were back then.

And maybe this was something she'd already realized herself, but the reason people longed for things that never change is because they've experienced pain caused by change in the past. Ayase-san's family broke down partway through her childhood. Her biological father's business ran into trouble, and from there, things at home deteriorated, spiraling downward until it all ended in a divorce. The once joyful scenery from those earlier days had completely disappeared.

That's why Ayase-san longed for things that didn't change.

"But... this way of looking at things is nice too. Those characters don't exist in real life, and yet..." Ayase-san spoke, pausing to slowly look around as she swept her gaze across the surroundings that stood before us—a landscape containing a two-story apartment with an outdoors staircase, accompanied by a waterway in the foreground, a rusty guardrail, as well as a vending machine placed across the narrow road on the opposite side. "If they lived here, you could imagine them crossing this narrow street to buy some juice from that vending machine, or think about how those outdoor metal stairs could make surprisingly loud clangs as they climbed up and down."

"Yep," Maru nodded. "It's not something you can show explicitly, as in showing every aspect of everyday life in a story. Cramming all of that too much means losing sight of what the story's actually about. So, while those kinds of details that get left out might be obvious to the creators, to us viewers, there's no clue to imagine them. We're not as imaginative as those who make anime or movies, after all."

*I think I understand what he's trying to say here.*

Someone with enough imagination and observation skills would be able to picture how people lived in the past by just reading a textbook, without even visiting an actual place like Osaka Castle. Exactly like how Ayase-san was the first to spot the small differences between the streets of Tokyo and those here.

On the other hand, *I* didn't notice a thing.

And yet, even someone like me was able to find myself with the thought, "Huh, so *this* is how it felt to people back then," when I actually went to Osaka Castle and looked up at it from beneath the cherry blossoms.

Seeing really is believing.

“Well, in my case, it’s more like I wanted to know more ’bout the characters I’ve come to like,” Maru admitted with a slightly embarrassed look. “I feel like I can enjoy the series on a deeper level by thinking about them more deeply. Could also just be something I’ve convinced myself though, I guess?”

“Reading too much into it is fine. It’s a hobby, after all,” Narasaka-san said, smiling cheerfully.

“That kind of attitude is actually refreshing to me. I guess you’re the type who’s interested in understanding others, right, Maru-kun? Regardless of whether they exist or not,” Ayase-san explained, with Maru opening his mouth in shock as if he’d just heard something unexpected.

“Hm? *Ohhh*, gotcha...” he then murmured.

“I’ve never looked at things that way before, so it felt really fresh,” Ayase-san continued. “*Mm*, I think I’m having a good experience here. Thanks.”

“No big deal,” Maru mumbled, facing the front of Ayase-san’s gratitude.

“He’s blushin’, he’s blushin’~!” Narasaka-san chimed in.

“Quit teasing me already.”

And so, once again following the guidance of Maru-sensei, we wandered through the streets of Osaka.





By the time we returned to the area around the station for lunch, we somehow felt like we'd vicariously experienced the series that had touched Maru's soul, despite not having actually seen it.

After lunch, we headed for our afternoon destination, Kaiyukan.

The trip took around forty-five minutes to reach Osakako Station from Kandai-mae Station, and we had to take one transfer. I led the group again this time, and we eventually reached without much trouble.

"I was thinking we should leave our bags in a locker."

"Agreed. It's always better to walk around a museum or aquarium without carrying all that extra weight."

We'd already checked out of the hotel given it was the last day of our grad trip, having come all the way here carrying our bags for the entire three-day, two-night trip. Walking around slowly in the morning had been fine, but the fatigue had started to catch up with us by the time afternoon rolled around. Plus, aquariums were usually dimly lit, so we didn't want to walk around a place like that carrying large and bulky bags.

"The aquarium probably has lockers too, but... how far do we still have to walk from here?" Ayase-san asked.

"Not that long. Looks like it's only around a six minute walk. I'd rather just leave our bags in the lockers here though, in case the ones at the aquarium are full."

Ayase-san seemed satisfied with my answer.

Finding some lockers a little ways after exiting the ticket gate, we decided to leave our travel luggage there for now. Of course, we kept our valuables with us.

"The aquarium's north of the station; I think it's this way."

With that, I took the lead while checking the digital map. There was a passage leading north after we passed through the ticket gates, and when I spotted a sign for the aquarium on the station walls, I let out a small sigh of relief.

*Looks like we're on the right path.*

"You sure don't get lost huh, Asamura-kun~?" Narasaka-san stated.

"It's because I've been looking at the map. That's why..."

"Didn't you know? There're a ton of people in this world who'd still get lost while looking at one," Narasaka-san told me with a reflective tone

*Sounds like she knows someone with no sense of direction.*

"And they're always walking as if they know exactly where they're headin', pulling everyone else along at full speed," she continued. "Like, it makes you assume they know the way, so all you do is follow them. But then after walking around for ages, they'd turn around and ask, 'So, where were we going again?' Talkin' about my dad, by the way!"

It was apparently her family's weak point too, not just her father's.

No, well, I wouldn't really call it a weakness or anything though. Families are made of people, after all, not divine beings or anything.

"It's a straight walk with just one left turn according to this," I explained while motioning to the digital map on my phone. "I don't think it's something we'd easily get lost on; we should be fine."

I kept an eye on the surroundings as I walked in the lead.

It felt like the sky was more open here than in the streets of Shibuya. The sidewalks on both sides of the two lane road we were currently on (apparently called Minato Ward Route 287) were pretty wide too. It was probably reclaimed land, just like in Tokyo Bay, judging from its grid-like layout on the map

Given it was almost 2 p.m. now, there weren't that many people walking along the sidewalks. I heard that schools in Osaka usually start spring break on the 25th, so it'd only probably get more crowded by tomorrow and onward.

Oh well, we'd planned our schedule specifically to avoid the crowds, so we were counting on it being less packed.

"Oh, look!" Narasaka-san pointed ahead along the street. "A Ferris wheel! It's huge!"

I had thought I had seen something looming out from behind a building, and as we got closer, I realized we'd been looking at a Ferris wheel from its side. It looked as though a thin pole was stretching straight up, reaching into the sky. With a slight change in our perspectives now, I could finally recognize its distinctive circular structure.

"That's the Tempozan Ferris Wheel according to the map," I told the others.

"Mm-hmm," Maru agreed. "With a diameter of 100 meters and height of 112.5, it's apparently one of the largest Ferris wheels in the world."

"Wooow, one of the largest in the world!"

"No," Maru shut Narasaka-san down without hesitation.

"Gah! I haven't even said anything yet!?"

"You want to ride it, don't you?"

Narasaka-san gave an enthusiastic series of nods in response, like a small animal, bobbing her head at high speed.

"We won't have time to go through the aquarium if we do."

"Uuuuuu..."

"Endure it."

"Ugh, okay..."

“I get where Maaya’s coming from though, the words ‘one of the largest in the world’ are tempting. I kind of wanted to ride it too, if we had the time,” Ayase-san spoke up.

“I heard some cabins have transparent floors,” Maru said, with my heart clenching tightly the moment he did.

*What the hell? That’s terrifying.*

Meanwhile, Narasaka-san and Ayase-san’s eyes lit up, their faces breaking into radiant smiles as if they were bathed in a holy light.

*Thrill ride fanatics are something else...*

“But we endure it this time,” Maru said, glancing my way.

*Uhhh, in other words they’re holding back because I recommended the aquarium, huh...?*

Narasaka-san and Ayase-san both nodded, albeit not without a lingering look of regret on their faces.

We approached closer to the point where we had to now crane our necks at painful angles just to look at the top of the Ferris wheel, reaching a wide intersection at which two roads crossed. The map labeled it as Ichijou Street.

From here, crossing the crosswalk and taking a left should let us see Kaiyukan right away.

“There’s a giraffe.”

I lifted my head from the digital map on my phone at Ayase-san’s words.

*Huh? A giraffe? In this sorta place?*

I looked ahead, and what I saw wasn’t a real giraffe, but rather a massive statue—three times the height of a person. It was constructed from what looked like LEGO, and stood right at the corner from where we were about to turn.

*Wait, why’s there a toy giraffe in a place like this?*

I quickly glanced back at my phone.

“Ah, I see. Looks like there’s a LEGOLAND Discovery Center here.”

“Eh, really!?”

“Narasaka,” Maru interjected once again.

“Ah, yeah, I know. We’ve already done *our* interests plenty this whole trip. We’re definitely going to the aquarium.”

*No, putting it that way makes the pressure on the aquarium to be a hit even heavier, you know...?*

“I was just thinking that my li’l brothers would probably love this place,” Narasaka-san explained, with Maru telling her that she should just bring them next time.

Letting out a sigh, she then explained that she couldn’t possibly manage all of them on her own.

*Come to think of it, I still don’t know exactly how many brothers she’s got.*

She’d once mentioned she had “a ton,” but I had always assumed three or four from common sense.

She really is a good sister regardless—she’s always thinking of them.

After walking for around five more minutes, our destination finally came into view.

“I think that’s the aquarium we’re headed for,” I turned to everyone and spoke, closing the digital map on my phone.



We got in line at the ticket booth.

I thought it would’ve been relatively empty, but we walked up to a decently sized queue in front of the counter.

“They say the highlight here’s this permanent exhibit that spans multiple tanks,” I shared the info I had previously jotted down in my phone.

The concept behind this permanent exhibit was apparently “recreating the ecosystem of the Pacific.” Each tank served to recreate the environment of a different region within the Pacific, showing what kind of creatures lived in each area.

“Different parts of the Pacific?” Ayase-san asked.

“*Uhhh*, it’s written in the pamphlet too. Places like the area of the Pacific next to Japan, the Aleutian Islands, Monterey Bay, Panama Bay... It’s basically a whole tour around the Pacific.”

“Aleutian?” Narasaka-san pronounced the name like it was her first time ever hearing it

*Hol’ on, isn’t she supposed to be someone who got into one of Japan’s competitive national universities straight out of high school...?*

“I know it!” she exclaimed, as if reading my mind. “I really know where that is. *Uhhh*... between Alaska and the Kamchatka Peninsula!”

“Yep, yep,” I confirmed her answer.

“And Panama Bay...? That’s gotta be somewhere near the Panama Canal judging by its name, right?” Maru asked.

“It’s the entrance to the Pacific facing side of the canal, yeah.”

“So that places it right around the equator,” Maru said, looking it up to confirm his guess. “*Mm-hmm*, somewhere right between eight and nine degrees north latitude.”

He pulled up a map of the Pacific he found online and showed it to us. While he was at it, he also looked up the location of Monterey Bay, which was apparently on the Pacific coast of western America, specifically in California.

“Looks like they recreate environments from all these regions and keep actual sea creatures from each place.”

“Ah, look, there’s an Antarctic section too! Penguins and polar bears!” Narasaka-san exclaimed in delight.

*Ah, that’s actually a common mistake.*

“That’s something people actually get wrong, but polar bears don’t live in Antarctica.

“Eh?” Narasaka-san blinked in confusion.

*Ah, so it wasn’t just a slip up; she really didn’t know.*

“Polar bears actually only live in the Arctic. Like, the northern part of the planet—they don’t exist in Antarctica. On the other hand, penguins are native to the Southern Hemisphere, so they’re not found in the north at all. They actually don’t live together in nature. There’re all sorts of penguins too. Some of them live in places that aren’t even cold at all.”

“Ohhhh.”

“I didn’t know that. You’re really knowledgeable, Asamura-kun.”

“Not really,” I bashfully replied as Ayase-san complemented me so straightforwardly. “Alright then, wanna go in?”

We finally reached the ticket booth and bought four entry tickets, then made our way inside.



In a word, this place was a blue world.

The inside of Kaiyukan was, just as I expected, dim. Everything was tinted in shades of blue—not just the walls, but panels of the actual tanks themselves looked to be colored that way as well.

“I wonder why everything’s so blue~?” Narasaka-san asked the question we were all thinking.

“Don’t trip, alright?” Maru said as he walked right beside her, worried because the floor sloped gently downward in some places.

“I’m *fiiiiine~*. Might be a li’l excited, but it’s not like I’m being reckless, m’kay~?”

Though she was probably telling the truth, Maru gave her a doubtful glance regardless.

Given that disliking loud noises was an innate instinct for most animals, whether they lived in zoos or aquariums like this one or not, banging or even tapping on the tanks was strictly not allowed and completely out of the question. It was also annoying for other guests.

Naturally, it also meant we all were speaking with more hushed tones. It was something that Narasaka-san, who was busy chatting with Maru, seemed to understand as well. Though her tone was the same as always, she had lowered her volume; she was restraining herself in other words.

*So why’s she all giddy and excited, you ask?*

“She’s being spoiled,” Ayase-san murmured in a whisper.

With “she,” being Narasaka-san here. Essentially, since she was usually the one taking care of and looking out for others, she lets herself lean on someone else the moment they’re willing to take on the same role for her.

*Or something like that, I guess?*

“Hey, Asamura-kun,” Ayase-san called to me.

“What’s up?”

“Like Maaya mentioned, why’s it so blue in here? Is it because it’s meant to be the ocean?”

*Uhhh, where should I start...*

“The biggest tank in this aquarium here is the one in the center. It’s called the Pacific Ocean tank,” I started. “Let’s see, *uhhh...* it’s apparently about nine meters deep and thirty-four meters wide, as well as being thirty-two meters on its other side.”

“Nine meters... That’s pretty deep.”

“Exactly. So, actually, sunlight—or more accurately, visible light—penetrates water to different extents depending on its color. That means the transmittance differs. Red light gets absorbed pretty quickly—just a quick little dive means you no longer see it. To be specific, it gets significantly absorbed within ten meters of depth.”

Ayase-san looked at me in surprise.

“Eh? But you said the big tank here’s nine meters deep, right?” she asked.

“Yep. So that means *almost* no light of red wavelength reaches the bottom of the tank. On the other hand, blue light’s able to travel much farther. It apparently reaches depths of over a hundred meters. In other words, a part of an ocean around ten meters deep or more should completely be blue.”

“Ohhh.”

“So *this* is probably how the world looks to fishes and other creatures that live deeper than the ocean’s surface...” I pointed out, casually gesturing toward our surroundings.

“So the bottom of the ocean’s a blue world...” Ayase-san murmured.

“I mean, we’re calling this depth the bottom of the ocean here, but it’s still incredibly shallow compared to the full depth of the actual thing. Marine biologists call it the ‘deep sea’ once you go below 200 meters. Light doesn’t reach that deep anymore, so it’s not even blue there—just pitch black. Like in the Mariana Trench. I think that’s about 10,000 meters deep, or something like that.”

“You sure know a lot. You remember things well.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“It doesn’t sound like it’s from all that exam cramming either. Oh right, come to think of it, didn’t you say once that you used to keep a tropical fish. Maybe you learned about it back then?”

“Wonder if that’s it?”

Sure, I had done some research beforehand, but most of what I'd just said had come from stuff that was already floating around somewhere in my head.

"Ah, no... I actually remember now that you've mentioned it," I told her. "I really liked looking at children's encyclopedias when I was a lot younger."

And not just ones about animals either, but ones about space, vehicles, and all kinds of stuff. From when I was still in kindergarten.

My old man's bookshelf had a good bunch of these kinds of books, and I'd even sometimes get them as presents. I was definitely more of the indoor type even back then, so I'd spend a lot of time just flipping through those pages.

"How do I put it? It's like, when you're a kid, you wanna show off all the stuff you've learnt, don't you?"

"Is that how it is?"

"So you were different, huh, Ayase-san? Well, I guess it does depend on the person, but I was definitely that type. I was the kinda kid who'd go around telling people all the random trivia I'd learned from all those books."

I don't know if it was right for me to say it myself, but I felt like I was definitely one of the more precocious children. Plus, my parents never had anything against that kind of curiosity and knowledge for hunger their son had. It was why I had always gotten carried away back then with showing off my random knowledge, smugly saying things like, "Whales are actually mammals even though they look like fish," or "A light year's actually a unit of distance, not time," and so on.

*I kinda wanna crawl into a hole and disappear looking back on it.*

The secondhand embarrassment hits so hard whenever I see a kid doing the same today, to the point where I'd want to just run away.

“It’s just, you know, talking to someone else about what you’ve learned actually helps you with remembering it. It’s probably why all the random trivia I’d learned from back then still seems to be stuck in my head.”

Things stick better for you if you explain them to others. My parents must have known that, which is why they listened patiently with interested faces whenever I started rattling off whatever I’d learned.

“So then you remembered the stuff you were *just* talking about in the same way?”

“*Hmm.* No, not really. I mean, the knowledge you get from books and encyclopedias meant for kids in their earlier years of elementary isn’t that advanced.”

Though if it were things on the level of “polar bears live in the Arctic,” or “penguins live in the Southern Hemisphere,” then sure.

“But anyway, it’s not like I’ve been chasing after facts ‘bout fish ever since,” I clarified. “If I really were into fish *that* much, then I’d probably be yapping off with random trivia whenever you cooked them. Like, I don’t know, ‘This fish is actually called saury, you see...’ or whatever. Yet now, I can barely even tell what kind of fish it is whenever I eat them.”

Ayase-san gave a small chuckle and smiled softly at my words.

“That does sound about right, doesn’t it?” she agreed.

“Right?”

And maybe because I’d opened the lid on those early childhood memories of flipping through the pages of children’s encyclopedias, from a time when I was only barely aware of the world, a lot more came flooding back. About the people I’d show my knowledge off to—my old man and... my mother.

“Wow, Yuuta. You sure know a lot, don’t you? Tell mommy more,” she’d say with a big smile while listening to me proudly spout off my clever-sound bits of trivia.

It was from when I was probably four or five, just before I had started elementary. The atmosphere at home wasn't too bad yet back then...

"You're amazing, Yuuta," my smiling mother would always say, and it had always genuinely made me happy. Looking back now though, I can't help but think that my precocious behavior from when I was younger must've played a big part in making her want me to do extremely well in my elementary and junior high exams.

And when I failed said exams, that desire to learn new things just sort of, well, withered away.

With the mood at home also turning sour, ending in my mother eventually leaving, I simply stopped showing any interest in learning. There was simply no one there to praise me anymore. All I'd do on weekends was just hole up at home, zoning out and doing nothing in particular.

But seeing that, my old man then started taking me to zoos, science museums, and all sorts of other places. I started to read again bit by bit after that, and got back liking exhibitions too.

So slowly, like water soaking into dry sand, I began to like learning new things again...

"So yeah, stuff like 'the pressure of water increases by one atmosphere every ten meters you do deeper,' or 'light travels 9.46 trillion kilometers in a single year'—the kind of facts detailed with numbers—were ones I'd probably picked up only later, once I started reading books again. Honestly don't even remember where I've learned all of them anymore."

"Is that so?"

As Ayase-san and I continued to talk, Narasaka-san and Maru came back from up ahead on the path.

"*Oiiii,*" Maru called out to us excitedly, "There's a big one in that huge tank over there!"

"It's *amaziiing~!*" Narasaka-san added, clearly a little exhilarated too.

*Hey, hey, you two aren't gettin' nothing across like that. All you guys said was that it's "huge" and "cool," y'know?* I mentally jested, but even so, I could already imagine what they had meant.

"Shall we go then, Ayase-san? I think they're talking about the main attraction here. The one Narasaka-san said she wanted to see originally."

"Ah," Ayase-san let out a sound of realization as if she'd just remembered. "Some sort of shark, right? A whale shark, was it?"

"Yep, that's it. Heard they're huge, but this'll be my first time seeing one too."

*That being said, just how big was it supposed to be?*



The huge tank that Maru and Narasaka-san were talking about was none other than the Pacific Ocean tank, the supposed highlight of Kaiyukan.

It was located at the center of the building, and visitors descended a spiral path surrounding it. In other words, that meant you were able to peer at the massive tank at multiple angles as you walked downward. The size of the tank itself was nine meters deep, or about as tall as a three-story tall school building, and thirty-four meters wide, making it about the size of four or five classrooms. It was practically half the size of a school wing.

"So this is the 'big one' you were talking about earlier?" I asked.

"That one," Maru said, immediately pointing toward the upper right, beyond the acrylic glass. "It's heading this way now."

"Heading this way?"

Flicking my gaze in that direction, I let out an involuntary "Whoa."

“Is that... a whale shark?” Ayase-san murmured her question in a dazed voice.

A massive fish slowly swam toward us from above. It was big—easily four or five meters long from the tip of its nose to the end of its tail.

Whale sharks were technically a type of shark, and they had an overall shark-like shape to them. But even so, people usually imagine a sleek, streamlined body with a pointed snout when you ask them to picture one—exactly like the sharks on those paper trays we ate lunch out of yesterday at USJ. They definitely had sharp and pointy noses back then. But a whale shark’s head, as we could see now in front of us, was clearly not pointed at all. It had a wide, flattened face. Its mouth was also wide and horizontal too.

“As I’d expected... It really does live up to being the largest fish in the world,” I couldn’t help but utter in awe.

“It feels like we’re going to get our heads bitten off...” Ayase-san followed-up, her words making me judge that this was the perfect moment to show off what I’d learned from my prior research.

*This is the perfect moment to share some trivia.*

“D’you know what whale sharks eat?”

“Eh...?” Ayase-san stared at the massive fish, deep in thought.  
“Uhhh... It’s really big, so other big fish, maybe?”

“Plankton,” I told her.

“Eh...? Plankton? Um... like, those tiny little things?”

“Yep. Like water fleas or *Euglena*. ‘Plankton’ basically refers to those small aquatic organisms that can’t swim against ocean currents. So yeah, they basically eat those tiny things as their main food source.”

“...Is that even enough?”

“They apparently eat like eight kilos of them a day.”

“Eight...!?” Ayase-san asked in shock, faced with my knowledge that had come as a result of my prior research.

“They open those huge mouths of theirs and suck in the surrounding seawater, and then filter out everything and send only the leftover plankton down to their stomachs. They’re apparently really gentle by nature and don’t attack humans despite how big they are.”

They had this sort of dopey, spaced-out look on their faces too. Big and seemingly powerful, yet gentle-tempered. Their movements were calm and hurried, with the one right in front of us slowly swimming down to the bottom of the tank, before letting itself drift slowly back up again.

“So they’re that huge... but gentle...”

“Whale sharks are ovoviviparous—their eggs hatch inside the mother and they’re born after reaching a certain size, so they’re already somewhat developed when they come out of the mother’s womb. An estimated 300 are born at a time, but since the mother doesn’t raise them, only a few are said to survive.”

“They’re not raised?”

“Yep. It’s what they call r-selection<sup>[6]</sup>: high-birth, high-mortality. It’s something you also often see in fish, amphibians, and insects, I think.”

“Are all fish like that?”

“I wondered the same thing when I looked into it too, actually.”

And the reason why both Ayase-san and I were curious about something like that? Well, it all boiled down to us both experiencing the feeling of being abandoned by one of our parents.

That said, there’s no point in criticizing the survival strategies of a species that never operated under the assumption of parental care in the first place.

And besides...

“I found a site that explained that it also depends on how broadly or narrowly you define ‘parenting’ when researching.”

“Parenting...? As in the definition of it?”

“In a broad sense, ‘parenting’ can just mean ‘increasing an offspring’s chances of survival.’ Sound good so far?” I asked, continuing only once I saw Ayase-san nod in understanding. “So, most fish that live in the ocean lay their eggs by scattering them into the water, right? Since said eggs get carried away by the currents, they end up drifting far away from their parents before they’ve even got the chance to be raised. A lot of them often get destroyed or get eaten before they can hatch too.”

“Y-yeah...”

“But that doesn’t happen with ovoviparous species. The eggs hatch and the offspring grow to a certain size inside the mother. So, with that broader definition, the period in which the eggs are being nurtured inside the womb can technically be seen as parenting. It raises the chances of survival from egg to fry,” I continued to explain, all the while Ayase-san continued to nod in understanding. “In that sense, whether giving birth to around 300 at once is a lot or not is pretty hard to say. They could maybe produce even more offspring if they were just scattering eggs freely, after all.”

“*Ohhh*, I see. So it’s 300 that have been properly raised to survive better.

“Exactly. It still counts as r-selection when you give birth to 300, though...”

“So only a few survive...”

“But maybe that’s only natural when you think of it.”

“Eh?”

“I mean, if a daddy fish and mommy fish have babies, then the population doesn’t decrease so long as two of those babies survive and go on to reproduce, amirite? But the oceans of our planet aren’t overflowing with whale sharks, are they? So you can actually flip the whole perspective and say that, *unless* they give birth to 300 at a time, whale sharks as a species won’t survive.”

“*Uhhh*, so... you’re saying it’s hard for them to survive to start with?”

“They probably don’t get eaten by other fish once they grow big enough, but that also means their only real survival strat’s to grow big. They don’t have what it takes to fight against their predators, they’re not poisonous like pufferfish, nor do they have any claws like shrimp or crabs. They can’t spray ink to make smoke screens, and they’re not really fast swimmers either. I mean, they aren’t even naturally aggressive to begin with.”

“So they have no way to protect themselves apart from getting big...”

“That’s how it is.”

“Even though they’re sharks?”

*I mean, there’re all kinds of sharks.*

Not all of them were the man-eating type that attacked even humans with razor-sharp teeth.

“That’s why I think growing to this size must’ve been a huge feat,” I explained, having verbalized my thoughts to Ayase-san, watching the whale shark swim closer again after it dove down as I continued. “Makes you really appreciate how much they’ve survived. But then again, they must be able to live for a long time once they’ve grown *this* big, right?”

Now I didn’t know whether or not a whale shark in some aquarium would live longer or shorter than one in the wild, but it’s said their life lifespan was around a hundred years based on what I’d previously looked up. Not so different from a human’s.

Telling Ayase-san just that, she appeared to grow even more fond of them.

“In that sense, that means parenting starts even before birth for humans too since we develop for a bit in the womb before being born, huh?” she said, her words catching me off guard.

*I’d never thought of it like that.*

But thinking of it that way, human parenting really does come in multiple stages.

“Wait. Do you think that whale sharks could give birth to fewer offspring with better chances of survival if they extended their parenting period?” Ayase-san posed the thought.

“Uhhh, you mean if the babies grew even more inside the mother’s body before being born?”

“Yeah. Like, if they grew ten times bigger, then maybe they’d only need to give birth to a tenth as many, or something.”

“I don’t think it’s really that simple... But yeah, in the grand scheme of things, maybe, huh?”

“Still, even a tenth of 300’s still thirty... That sounds rough. That’s like having triplets ten times over, Asamura-kun...”

*Are you spacing out again or something here, Ayase-san?*

“No, wait, we’re talking about the number of births per delivery in this case. Splitting it ten times doesn’t make sense, does it?” I refuted.

*Wait, why am I seriously analyzing this here?*

“Thirty babies! That’s impossible!”

“Huh?”

“Kids. No way I can have that many at once. At least split them into triplets, please! In installments! I’ll somehow be able to manage it for you if it’s that.”

“You’ll... somehow manage it for me?”

“Eh?”

“Huh?”

“Ah, uhhh... I was hoping you’d respond to the ‘in installments’ part, not that one...”

*Ah, she was waiting for some straight man comeback.*

“Wait, was that... you imitating Narasaka-san from yesterday?”

“Ah, um... yeah.”

I instinctively glanced around.

*Good, no one's nearby.*

Maru and Narasaka-san were currently a little farther off, chatting as they looked at some giant stingray that had sunk to the bottom of the tank.

*Alright, looks like I was the only one who'd heard her attempt at being the funny man.*

"H-Huh? Was that... actually a pretty embarrassing joke?" Ayase-san asked, her cheeks seemingly reddening in the bluish scenery, or at least I thought so.

Given the color red was pretty muted in this lighting, she actually looked more pale, and started to get a little worried.

"Um... Oh, what the hell: It's not 'bout paying off a loan, y'know?" I gave my late response.

*Shit, my voice was so flat.*

"Forget it..." I told her.

"...Got it."

No like, seriously, is there anyone out there whose heart wouldn't clench up—with their breath all caught in their throat—after being told something along the lines of, "I'll somehow manage if we have triplets" by their girlfriend...?

*I seriously doubt it...*

Alas, Ayase-san's first ever all out funny man act, inspired by Narasaka-san, had sadly crashed and burned partly due to my own inexperience as her comedy partner.

*Can't even complain if they take all my zabutons<sup>[7]</sup> now—I deserve it.*

I'd gone and done something inexcusable.

*There really are different strokes for different folks...*



Dusk had faded by the time we'd boarded the Shinkansen, and the sky had gone completely dark.

As if reluctant to let go of a trip that had ended far too quickly, we all reminisced about the memories we'd made. No one slept. I'd assumed we'd all doze off the moment we hit our seats, given how packed our schedule had been today, but none of us—like really, no one at all—stopped chatting for the entire ride.

"Your guiding at Kaiyukan was great, Asamura-kun," Narasaka-san said out of the blue, specifically just as the announcement saying we'd be arriving at Shinagawa had played out. "Why d'you look so surprised to hear that?"

"Ah, no... Just felt like I didn't do a good enough job to deserve that kinda praise."

"Well, that's true? I mean, Asamura-kun, all you did was flirt with Saki in the first half, didn'tcha?"

"We were not," Ayase-san immediately shot back, with me humbly accepting her criticism.

*Not the flirting part. The part where I didn't really guide much.*

There was a café at Kaiyukan where we had taken a short break. It was the kind of in-house café or restaurant you'd find at museums or aquariums that served food that matched the theme of the place it was a part of, with dishes having names ranging from "Garden Eel Dog" and "Whale Shark Soft Serve."

The former was this ridiculously long sausage with an equally long bun, while the latter was soft serve colored like a whale shark. Though blue foods usually tend to look unappetizing (probably because blue was a color that didn't naturally show up much in edible things) the actual soft serve itself, colored in shades that made me recall the bluish-gray back and pale white belly of the whale shark we'd just seen, was easy to associate with that big, massive fish. I was able to eat it easily when I recalled its charming face. It was actually really good too.

*No, remembering how it tasted isn't important here...*

We had each ordered something based on how hungry we were, and as we licked on our soft serves and sipped down our coffees, finally being able to relax after all the walking, I was only then able to reflect.

We'd chosen to go to Kaiyukan based on *my* interests, but at the same time, that also meant that the aquarium might not have been all that interesting to the other three. I should've been way more mindful in keeping them from not getting bored. Especially when you consider that this whole grad trip of ours was also Ayase-san's and my way of showing our appreciation to Maru and Narasaka-san for always looking out for us.

With that finally in mind, I had done my best to sprinkle in whatever trivia I had memorized beforehand (while, of course, watching my tone to make sure it didn't make us all too noisy) as we walked through the remaining exhibits during the second half of our visit.

*But I'm honestly not sure how well I'd pulled it off.*

"It felt like going around a museum while listening to an audio guide; it was fun," Narasaka-san chimed up, dispelling my anxiety and the weight off my shoulders.

"So that's how it came across. Thank God," I finally let out a sigh of relief.

*Oh well, as long as my hastily-learned trivia was enough to entertain them.*

"We're almost there," Maru said.

Tokyo's lights shone beneath the pitch-black sky from outside the window, giving me an odd sense of comfort, despite the fact we'd only been away for three days.

The words “hometown” and “city” were usually generally considered as being pretty far apart. Scenes depicting characters returning home overwhelmingly tend to involve heading to the countryside in novels and such, after all. You often never see a character say that they were going home, only to show them heading back to Tokyo. It just showed how disconnected the idea of “returning home” was from the concept of a city.

Yet, I genuinely felt like I was really going back as I saw the lights emanating from Tokyo’s skyline.

*Guess I really am just a city kid through and through.*

I glanced at Ayase-san’s face faintly reflected in the window at that moment. Her eyes, honed on the city lights, somehow looked moist.

“You crying, Saki?” Narasaka-san, who sat in front of her, asked.

“I’m not crying.”

“Ah. There, there,” she then pulled Ayase-san into her arms and gently patted her head.

“I told you, I’m not crying...”

“It’s okay, it’s okay~”

“Well, it *was* a good trip,” Maru, looking out the window past Narasaka-san, then murmured.

I nodded in agreement.

“It’s not like this is our final goodbye or anything,” Narasaka-san, still holding Ayase-san’s head against her chest, said.

“I said I’m not crying.”

“I hear ya, I hear ya.”

“Geez...! You and Maru-kun are just lucky, Maaya. You’re both going to the same uni,” Ayase-san complained with a hint of sulkiness in her voice.

Though the world worked in a way where every meeting comes with an inevitable parting, there were simply connections people didn't want to lose. But even so, in life, crossing paths was more a matter of chance and fate—the end of the times we share like this would always come someday.

And there was also the feeling that our uni lives were going to be undeniably busier, especially when compared to our high school days.

Ayase-san slowly pulled away from Narasaka-san.

You may call it a strange twist of fate, or you may say that fate works in mysterious ways, but the fact that these two have become this close makes me believe that life was truly mysterious.

*Okay, maybe that's a li'l overdramatic.*

"The four of us getting together like this and doing something... isn't going to happen anymore, is it?" Ayase-san asked softly.

"I wonder~"

"It's probably the case..." she continued. "The time we'll be able to spend on ourselves will only keep on shrinking once we're adults. I wish I'd spent more time hanging out with you guys, Maaya..."

Her words made me think back to when we were in the classroom, just before graduation. Specifically, the way Ayase-san had looked slowly around the nearly empty room as we all self studied, taking in the space we'd spent so much time in.

"It's not like I really regret it all," Ayase-san continued, clarifying her stance. "It just... kind of feels like a waste, somehow."

"You can make up for it right away! We're still young, after all. Oh! Then, how 'bout the four of us do something together?" Narasaka-san suggested.

"What the heck are you even talking about?" Ayase-san's usual look she gave to her practically asked. "Do something... like what?"

"*Hmm~.* Oh, I know! How about we post some videos together? The four of us. It's apparently a trendy thing right now," Narasaka-san explained, now earning the same look from even Maru.

“Entertainment’s not something you can just jump into like that,” he jested.

“You don’t gotta be so stiff and serious ’bout stuff like this all the time!”

“You really don’t get it, huh, Narasaka?” Maru shot back.

“Broadcasting anything out to the world comes with a certain degree of responsibility, even if it’s just for fun. It ain’t something you can just go along with the vibe of some friend group—”

“Oh! How ’bout we make a channel called ‘Maru-kun’s Treasure Showcase,’ or something like that?”

“I don’t have any ‘treasure’ worth showcasing. The greatest thing I have’s probably...”

*They’ve gone off track. Way off track.*

Just then, the Shinkansen slid into the platform.

“C’mom, we gotta get off,” I prompted the rest of the three, and just like that, the conversation fell apart.

We scrambled off the train in a flurry.

Narasaka-san and Maru continued to bicker at each other as they dragged along their suitcases.

“My God, you’re always like this—”

“Oh! How ’bout, like, a couple-themed YouTube channel that just livestreams Saki and Asamura-kun’s lovey-dovey life, or something like that? That oughta get some views, don’tcha think?” Narasaka-san suggested that terrifying thought, and I felt a chill down my spine as I heard snippets of their conversation.

*Wait, wasn’t this supposed to be an idea for all four of us? When did it turn to something just about me and Ayase-san?*

“It’s all over now, huh?” a voice came from behind me.

I turned around. Ayase-san, who’d been trailing at the back leisurely, wore a slightly tired expression, yet her face still showed signs of fulfillment.

Exiting the Shinkansen gate, we split up toward our respective train lines, with Ayase-san and me heading home together, back to our place in Shibuya.

Following our usual way home from Shibuya Station, we found ourselves endlessly talking about nothing but the three-day trip.

*“Well, it was a good trip,”* Maru’s words echoed in the back of my mind.

*I think so too, Maru.*

And just like that, our graduation trip had ended, marking the close of our high school days together as a group of four.

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[1]: Unlike with a lot of kanji characters used for names, the characters to Minamikata Station are read straightforwardly as “Minamikata”: 南 (meaning south), and 方 (meaning side), hence the localization “south side station.”

[2]: It's Clannad for those who haven't caught on.

[3]: Same deal as with TN6 in Chapter 1: Friend in Japanese can either be “友人” (yuujin) or “友達” (tomodachi). Yuuta uses the former here, but it still has the “友” (tomo) character, despite it becoming “yuujin” when added with “人,” hence the pun. “友人” is more polite/formal compared to “友達.”

[4]: Taikou (太閤) is a title given to a retired Kampaku, a chief advisor to the emperor. Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a Kampaku, is regarded as the second, quote-on-quote, “Great Unifier” of Japan, and was often referred to Taikou-sama (太閤様) after he retired.

[5]: Literally just “A Place Further than the Universe,” an anime about high school girls going to Antarctica.

[6]: Okay Yuuta doesn't say this, he literally just says “high-birth, high-mortality”; my biochemist ass just couldn't resist (we're not just chemists but life scientists too!!! 😂👉).

Like c'mon Ghost, if you're gonna go with the whole nerd-ass Yuuta yap then at least do it right 😊

[7]: Reference to Shouten (笑点, literally “laughing point”), a Japanese comedy show that has been running since 1966, in which comedians sit on zabutons (Japanese sitting cushions). Specifically, comedians are rewarded with zabutons with every good joke they make, but if they make a bad or shitty one, then they have one taken away.

## March 27th (Sunday) - Yuuta Asamura

I stood up from the living room sofa, tearing my gaze away from the university schedule I had left on the glass table to look out the window.

Late afternoon at the end of March. The blue sky bore a thin white haze that hung overhead, accompanied by a couple of clouds that drifted around here and there, their fluffy appearances bearing a resemblance to koppepan. The scenery that spanned before my eyes was entirely spring. It was tranquil. So tranquil and easygoing that just gazing at it threatened a yawn to slip from within my throat.

The temperature was said to rise to 16°C today. We had even stored o' kotatsu-sama away a few days ago.

Spring, a time when everything awakens. Birds sing, butterflies take wing, and even those within the animal kingdom that hibernate underground resurface. It felt as though all things in nature, everything in total existence itself, breathed to enjoy this season.

...And yet, here sat someone unable to fully savor the bliss of spring.

“Guess not having a night shift’s basically impossible after all, huh...?” I murmured to myself, a sigh escaping from my lips.

*Too bad; can’t be helped.*

Reaching for my phone on the glass table, I dialed a familiar number.

“Yes. That’s right,” I affirmed the voice over the call. “Night shifts, basically. As for my schedule... let’s leave that for my next shift.”

I hung up the call and stretched once.

*Should I get something to drink?* The thought passed through my mind as I heard the sound of a door opening at that moment, Ayase-san stepping into the living room.

“Are you feeling a bit tired?” she asked in English.

*Ahh, here we go,* I thought, switching my brain right into English mode.

“I’m fine. I’m not tired,” I reciprocated her English, assuring her that I was fine.

This too was part of prepping for uni. The two of us carried on with our conversation in English for a while.

“I just called our part-time job,” I tried my best to continue in English. “I think an evening shift is impossible for me, as expected. My classes end late, you see... What about you, Ayase-san?”

“A seventy minute trip one way is really far after all, is it not? I called them too, just in case, but,” Ayase-san broke off there, switching back to her native Japanese. “But I’m still not sure if I’ll keep working part-time, I think.”

*Guess that means she’s found something else she wants to do, huh?*

“Will you wait until I can say so?” she asked.

“Of course,” I replied.

*Something she wants to do, huh?*

It feels like Ayase-san’s finding her goals before I do all the time.

“Ah, it’s about snack time, right? I’ll go make something, okay?”

*Right, how ‘bout I get the tea ready then?* I thought as I followed her in tow.

Beyond the window stood carefree white clouds that drifted away, hurried along by the spring breeze.

## March 28th (Monday) - Saki Ayase

“Lucca<sup>[1]</sup> Design. Studio”

A logo drawn with a decorative font—the sort you’d expect from a design studio.

Having needed to get off Nakano-sakaue Station for the first time, I had come to the third floor of a five-story office building. Unlike the bookstore I worked at, the place had a very corporate, office sort of vibe to it, and I couldn’t help but stiffen at the entrance.

“Pardon my intrusion,” I softly called out, nervously opening the door to enter a reception about the size of two eight-tatami mats put together.

Its front was closed off by a partition that resembled a folding screen (I don’t actually know what it’s actually called). Though it featured a gap at the top, sparing those inside from feeling suffocated, you still couldn’t see through it.

“Welcome,” an elderly looking man popped his head out from behind the partition, greeting me.

“Ah, um. I’m Saki Aya—Asamura.”

*Can’t do that*, I thought as I corrected myself.

It was our first meeting, after all; I couldn’t go using a different name from what I’d written on my résumé. I wasn’t a student at Suisei High anymore.

I then thought back a little nostalgically to the name I had on my diploma: Saki Ayase. It was probably the last time I would ever use that surname officially. Despite that being the case, I still couldn’t deny that I had the urge to use my mother’s maiden name as my workplace name. I was attached to it.

*Plus, he still calls me that, you know?*

Storing that thought away, I pulled my attention back to the man in front of me.

“Ummm, I should have an appointment with Akihiro-san,” I told him.

“Ah, yes yes,” he chirped. “So I’ve heard. This way.”

Saying that much, the elderly man went ahead to guide me. We passed down a corridor that featured more spaces closed off with partitions that stood a little taller than me, before soon arriving at a meeting space featuring chairs that faced each other, separated by a table in between.

“Would you mind waiting here? I’ll go call Akihiro now.”

“Ah, yes,” I answered, and the man disappeared beyond the partition while I sank into the chair I’d been offered.

*So this is it: Lucca Design Studio. The design studio run by Ruka Akihiro-san.*

A shiver ran down my spine at that moment. Not from the cold, but from my nerves. It was natural; everyone would feel this way when trying something new.

It wasn’t before long that I made out the sound of light but quick footsteps approaching, followed by a lively voice from behind the partition as a young woman appeared.

“Heeey. Sorry, sorry. Kept you waiting?” she asked in a punchy tone.

It was none other than Ruka Akihiro-san herself, Melissa’s longtime friend. She was the one who designed the venue and posters from when Melissa held her live performance in Japan. She had dashed into the space, her wolf cut, blue streaked hair swaying with her movements, just like when we first met. She was a cool beauty, yet also featured a boyish energy—a really stylish woman.

I hurriedly stood and bowed, with Ruka-san casually plopping down onto the chair across from me.

*Eh?*

“You’re here for an interview, right? Let’s get started,” she chimed, paying no attention to my visible confusion.

“Ruka-sa—no, Akihiro-san. *Ummm*, uh, you’re the company president, aren’t you?” I clarified, thinking that someone else would be interviewing me.

“Yeah, that’s right?” she stated in a tone as if she were declaring the obvious. “Ah, just Ruka’s fine. We’re a small company, you know? Everyone else calls me that too.”

*So you say, but calling the company president by her first name’s a bit too high of a hurdle for me...*

“At our company, it’s usually *me* who handles the rest after looking at the résumés,” she cleared the air. “Well, feel free to just take it easy. But still, I’m surprised you’ve come to a place like ours; we’re pretty far from your field. Tsukinomiya, was it? Surely bigger companies would’ve taken you on as an intern.”

And just like that, the interview began as if it were just a continuation of our small talk. It was most likely because Ruka-san was trying to ease some of my tension, but in truth, I was still more nervous from when I’d applied to the bookstore. As she had mentioned, I was well aware that my university and major were both poles apart from working at a design studio.

The things we ended up discussing were definitely strange for an interview, and for some reason, my exchange with Ruka-san had somehow even turned into more of a career counseling session.

*It feels like she’s steering the conversation that way; is this really how interviews go?*

“I’m not exactly attending an art university, and honestly, I’m not even really sure if this is the path I want to take...” I confessed truthfully. “*Ummm*, it’s iffy, isn’t it? I don’t have the skills nor the vision; I’m just here in this kind of drifting state.”

“Nah, you don’t need to worry ‘bout that. Ten years ago, sure, the industry had this atmosphere where it was ideal for designers to graduate from an arts or fine arts uni, but that’s not necessarily the case anymore.”

“Is that really so?”

“Yeah. Unlike before, equipment and apps are cheap to use thanks to subscriptions, and there’re lots of people who teach easy-to-follow tutorials online. As long as you’ve got the drive, the environment’s set up enough for you to learn on your own. There’s kids who’re becoming immediately capable without ever going to school.”

“*Ohhh?*”

“Oh, then there’s the range of design requirements that just keeps expanding with each year. It’s less about drawing technique and more about sensibility, I guess, or knowledge? Something like that. Like, how diverse someone’s toolkit is, or how solid their own background is—that’s pretty important too, amirite? We’re in an era where people with lots of interests—and are proactive in learning it on their own—are strong,” she reasoned. “That’s the sorta kid I’d want to hire. Of course, it goes without saying that I want them to have at least some basic knowledge and skills when it comes to drawing, though.”

Ruka-san then went on to say that she didn’t expect interns to be immediately effective, but that she wanted them to start by handling the various and miscellaneous tasks around her. Like a secretary, I guess? It’s the reason why she insisted it’d be fine even if I didn’t go to, or come from, an art university.

“I’ll give the OK right here if you’re motivated, but what do *you* think? I’ll need about a month to get things ready, so you’d start in May,” Ruka-san then told me.

I couldn’t help but gasp. I wasn’t expecting to be forced into a decision on the spot, and for a moment, all I could do was shut my eyes, overwhelmed by the sheer bewilderment and anxiety.

Choices were things that seem to always arrive out of the blue, just like this.

*What do I do?* I thought, albeit with a hesitation that only lasted for an instant.

Remembering that I had already come this far, I opened my eyes.

“Please, I’d like to.”

On the way home, I stopped by the bookstore to declare that I would be quitting by the end of April.



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[1]: This was written specifically like this (in English) in the JP raws. My guess is it's one of those phonetic alterations often used in organizations with personal name branding, given her name is supposed to be spelled as "Ruka" (the official colored illustrations from V11 even have it spelt like this).

## April 1st (Friday) - Yuuta Asamura

Seasons, often quiet when approaching on tiptoe, rush past in a flash the moment they catch up to and overtake you.

Before I had realized, March had ended. The Yoshino cherry blossoms were just about at their peak, with the forecast on the TV claiming that they'd be in full bloom today. However, as for me, I didn't possess the liberty to enjoy such a cherry-colored scene. Instead, I had made my way to campus to take an English exam along with the other incoming freshmen.

A placement exam.

An exam aimed at measuring a student's ability. At Ichise University, exams were held to assess an incoming class' English proficiency. From there, students were streamed into different lectures based on their measured ability. What was covered ranged from grammar and reading comprehension to listening.

With the exam having concluded, I casually slid my pencil onto the desk before letting out a stretch. I had done what I could.

Either way, given the nature of what the exam was for, showing your true level here was better, rather than scoring well with some last-minute cramming. Feeling a natural sense of achievement without overexerting yourself by learning at an appropriate level was important to students, after all.

*That's the whole point summed up.*

It was why students were to be streamed into different lectures based on the exam.

Besides, the whole reason why Ayase-san and I had been diligently slipping English into our daily convos, challenging each of our proficiencies, was because we believed that mastering languages was important for our future selves; it wasn't because we wanted temporary results.

Therefore, to keep our incentive with practicing English, we had set some short-term goals. There's apparently a quote from some great figure that conveys this too. "One does not travel in order to arrive, but in order to travel,"<sup>[1]</sup> or so it goes. Since the placement exams had given us a purpose, we had used it as a chance to practice our English.

*Welp, that's why I did what I could, and I plan to continue from here on out too.*

I left my university and headed home.

The Month of the Deutzia Flower<sup>[2]</sup> commanded a sky from beyond the swaying train window, still tinted in a pale blue. On the other hand, the red of the evening chased across its western edge, trailing behind the still-blue hemisphere. It wasn't long before the intercom announced that we would be reaching Shibuya. I stepped through the ticket gates before the surroundings could be dyed in twilight.

"I'm home," I called out, opening the living room door and prompting Ayase-san to pop her head out from the kitchen, an apron tied around her waist, looking to be in the middle of making dinner.

"Welcome home," she called back. "How did the exam go?"

"So-so, I guess. Not confident I did as well as you would've. Yours is tomorrow, right?"

"Yep. Well, I figured it'd be pointless to just cram for a good score, so I've been just going through with my normal prep. I'll be testing cold."

"I thought the same, but..."

"But?"

"I still want to learn English for a li'l more after all, y'know? I'm... takin' a break for today though," I told her with a sigh.

It's human nature to naturally feel nervous when it comes to exams, after all. Even if you had intended on taking it cold.

"You've worked hard. Congratulations! Lucky you today, you get to be comforted a lot me!"<sup>[3]</sup> Ayase-san smiled as she spoke in complete English.

I couldn't immediately grasp the meaning of the "to be comforted part" in English, so I ended up reluctantly translating it slowly in my head.

*Huh..., uh? Being comforted... by Ayase-san...? How?*

"We're having fancy hand-rolled sushi for dinner tonight!" she gave the answer to the question I had been thinking of.

Now that's certainly quite the treat.

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[1]: RIP to those who haven't read Another Days. It's specifically a paraphrase of what Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had once said, and is a theme explored in Another Days. It's a good read; I really can't recommend it enough.

[2]: The localization yui and I agreed upon for “卯月,” the Japanese name for the fourth month of the lunar calendar. It comes from “卯の花” (“unohana,” JP for deutzia), with “月” being month, of which deutzia’s bloom around April.

Originally went with “The Month of the Rabbit” but decided against it since that’s from the Chinese version of the lunar calendar.

[3]: No, I didn’t type this; it’s exactly what is written in the JP raws. I don’t know if it was written this way on purpose to convey that Saki is ESL, or if it’s just a bad translation. I’m hoping it’s the former but I’m pretty sure Saki isn’t portrayed as someone *this* bad at speaking in English.

Oh well, they did provide the Japanese in the furigana, so here’s a translation of that: “You’ve worked hard. Congratulations! You’re a lucky one, aren’t you? You’ll be getting a lot of comfort from me today!”

## April 3rd (Sunday) - Yuuta Asamura

Sunday morning.

During a time I'd usually be chilling about, I found myself standing in front of the bathroom mirror, battling in frustration as I messed with my hair and tightened my necktie several times... I desperately fought on as I glared at the minute hand on my wristwatch, but alas, I eventually ran out of time. Giving up, I decided that this would have to do.

*I really don't know how to wear a suit...*

Still, fussing with it for any longer would mean I'd end up late for the entrance ceremony.

The problem was that I hadn't thought ahead in the first place. "What will you be wearing to the ceremony?" my old man had asked just two days ago on Friday, the very day spring break had ended, causing me to panic.

I had somehow vaguely assumed that I'd just wear my uniform like for any other formal event.

*Habits really are scary.*

But even so, I then remembered thinking that eighteen was the age you'd start preparing to be an adult. So then, why not just take this opportunity to buy a suit; it'd be a good chance, wouldn't it? That's basically what I'd thought. But now that I was actually in it, I couldn't shake the feeling that it was wearing *me* instead.

Feeling gloomy, I headed to the dining room.

"Good morning," I said as I walked in, with Ayase-san looking up at me as she set out breakfast on the table.

"Mm. It's alright; it suits you," she replied.

“Not really,” I almost blurted out loud, unable to hide my embarrassment at her words before reconsidering.

*My opinion doesn’t mean a thing here if Ayase-san’s telling me it suits.*



Having finished with the entrance ceremony, I returned to Shibuya and headed straight for my part-time, something I hadn’t done in five months.

Today’s shift marked my first day back. Sure, I had stopped by the bookstore here and there to buy some books, but it’d been far too long since I last showed my face at the office; it felt like it’d been ages.

*It’s possible the staff roster might’ve changed a li’l*, I thought nervously, greeting everyone as I entered.

“Asamura-kun,” the manager called out to me as he sat at the back of the office, lifting his head with a smile. “I’ll be counting on you again from now on, okay?”

“Yes,” I eagerly answered, with the door flying right open just as I was about to head to the lockers to change.

“Manager, don’t tell me!” my part-time junior burst into the office at full speed.

It was none other than Erina Kozono-san, someone I hadn’t seen in a long while.

“Hello, Kozono-san.”

“Ah, yes. Hel—woah, Yuuta-senpai!” she exclaimed in a bright voice, cutting her own greeting off. “That suit’s amazing! You look so cool!” she then said, going as far as to clap her hands together in applause.

Her hair, with its inner dyed highlights, swayed along each time her body shook. It was my first time I had seen her in basically half a year, and I felt like her face looked a little bit more grown-up. I couldn't help but feel this weird sense of parental pride in response.

"No, no," I denied her compliments. "It's nothing like that."

"It is! You look so cool! Like an adult! Or something. How nice," she continued with emotion in her voice.

After that, other familiar part-timers parroted her lines, continuing to repeat on just how much it suited me.

*Maybe formal suits are designed to look at least somewhat decent on just about anyone, huh?* I couldn't help but flirt with the thought.

Apart from hitting the wrong buttons two or three times at the register, I was able to get through the shift surprisingly smoothly in the end.

*Skills you've picked up don't fade so easily, after all.*

Being surrounded by nothing but books for the first time in half a year has made me realize once again that I'd probably continue to read books forever, even if I do end up quitting here. I just love books.

That being said, a whole two new volumes had come out for the series I'd been following, and on top of that, I had also found around six other new titles that looked interesting to me—some even being guidebooks.

*Like, I'm all alone here; what's with all these authors ganging up on me?* I mused over the thought dramatically. *Maybe all that time I'll be spending commuting by train from here on out's actually a blessing.*

I'll be sure to have a ton of reading time there.

## April 4th (Monday) - Saki Ayase

His seemingly insignificant words never fail to leave an impact on me.

The suit I had gotten for my entrance ceremony felt a bit too focused on the TPO, an outfit that seemed too lacking in “combat power” for my tastes. “It really suits you,” Asamura-kun had said regardless, complimenting me the moment he saw me at breakfast. It made me happy. There I was, carried away with joy by just that one phrase, something I was left shockingly exasperated at my own heart for. Even keeping my cheeks from softening on the train to the ceremony was hard thanks to him.

I slipped in among a group of girls—most likely freshmen—under a shower of cherry blossoms, entering a lecture hall on campus.

Feeling a sense of unease wash over me the moment I sat down, I thought about it for a moment before realizing why: there were only girls around me.

*That's right; it's obvious.*

This was a women’s university, after all. Though I had never really paid much attention to boys and their existence normally, spending twelve years in co-ed schools had come to make me feel that it was just the norm. Yet it was all girls now—to my front, behind me, to my right, and to my left.

And after a while, *another* wave of unease washed over me.

Though the crowd was mostly well ordered, there had been a few girls among us leaning toward others beside them, whispering in cheerful voices. They weren’t widespread, sure, but I still thought it was a pretty normal sight to see at boring ceremonies. Or so I thought at first.

*Wait a second,* I reconsidered.

We were all incoming freshmen, and what's more, this was a university. That can only lead to one obvious conclusion: the ones chatting so familiarly to each other had to have only just met.

*Eh? Wait, is that sort of thing even possible?*

Uni students come from all different backgrounds and ages after all; how are they already managing to communicate so smoothly? Watching Maaya and Maru-kun during our grad trip had me thinking that I oughta learn a little more about being proactive in communication, and yet...

*Does this mean I've already fallen behind?*

...The road ahead sure looks tough. By any chance, could Maaya and Maru-kun not have been communication monsters all this while, and I was rather simply just bad at it?

*Is my future going to be so difficult that I'm already shipwrecked?* I chewed over the thought. *Ughhh...*

The university's entrance ceremony ran from only 10:30 to 11:00 itself, just half an hour. Compared to Suisei High's own entrance ceremony, it felt awfully simple.

Classes wouldn't start for another three days either, so there was a little leeway from here. After receiving a general explanation about the initial procedures for enrollment, we were dismissed.

I had an evening shift at my part-time today, so I headed back to Shibuya after the ceremony was over. Since it was still a bit too early, I even had time to go home.

*Should I head home right away, or should I maybe stop by a few shops before heading in?* I thus found myself at a crossroads of decisions.

I had my work uniform on me just in case, so I didn't necessarily need to go home.

Starting this bookstore job had simply been an ulterior motive of wanting to spend more time with Asamura-kun. Now that I was quitting by the end of the month, I couldn't help but feel a wave of regret... The opportunities I'd gained to experience so many new things because of it were precious too.

But even so, I had already made my choice.

My internship at Ruka-san's design company was scheduled to start in May. I had no idea how long it'd last or how frequently I'd be working, but I couldn't help but feel excited at the idea of starting a new challenge with each passing day nonetheless.

I ended up deciding to stroll around the area surrounding Shibuya Station.

Wandering through the small shops on Center Gai and doing some casual window shopping, I grabbed some lunch at a fast-food place that caught my eye. My shift rolled around sometime after, so I headed to the bookstore.

My first bookstore shift in five months had left me forgetting a few things I had learned prior, but despite losing my bearings a couple of times, I had managed to get through it without any serious trouble. Asamura-kun had helped me out as well.

*Oh, right, right. Shiori Yomiuri-san showed her face in the evening for the first time in a while too.*

The manager had told her she could hang around, so she relaxed for a bit in the office. They're probably still holding onto the lingering hope that Shiori-san might become a full-time employee.

Asamura-kun and I also happened to be on break at that time too, so we chatted with her in the office for a bit. He seemed curious as to where Shiori-san had ended up working.

"So, where did you end up?" he asked.

The company name that Shiori-san then ended up mentioning was one I didn't know, yet Asamura-kun seemed to have recognized it immediately.

"You know that company, Asamura-kun?" I asked.

“You don’t read much on your phone, don’t you, Ayase-san? It’s an e-book *platform* company; one of the bigger ones, I think.”

*An e-book... platform<sup>[1]</sup>? Oh, uhhh, I do know the word if it’s English. “Platform,” meaning a foundation—a base or groundwork.*

“So then they’re a publishing company?” I then asked, with both Asamura-kun and Shiori-san shaking their heads in response.

*Apparently not... Even Shiori-san’s sorta seems like she’s smiling wryly.*

“E-books and manga have been boozing these days, haven’t they?” Asamura-kun explained. “It means a lot of companies besides traditional publishers have been breaking into the market. To be precise, this company’s one that makes an app for reading e-books on electronic devices, as well as distributing electronic versions of books, y’know?”

“Yep yep. And y’know what?” Shiori-san added. “The place I joined originally got big by makin’ money off distributing *adult* content.”

*Adult?<sup>[2]</sup>*

“Uhhh?” I sat there confused, not understanding the word she was referring to.

“But that’s how companies are, right, Saki-chan? The bigger they get, the more they start to resemble public works<sup>[3]</sup>. In other words, they start to care ’bout appearances and what the general public thinks in order to be accepted by the masses.”

“I won’t deny that aspect to it,” Asamura-kun spoke up, “but you’re being really blunt and harsh here, Yomiuri-senpai.”

“But that’s ’cause it’s the *truuuuth!* They’ve got this incentive to continue their old work under a separate brand while having the main company be recognized as a clean, ethical service provider to the public,” Shiori-san ranted. “I just can’t get on board with treating an instinctive desire, passed down since ancient times, as something impure.”

“Is what’s inside your head all grand or just plain vulgar, Senpai...?”

“Wastefully grand *and* vulgar, you see.”

“She’s gone and said it’s wasteful herself. This girl...” Asamura-kun muttered under his breath.

Listening to their exchange reminded me a bit about how Maru-kun and Maaya talk to each other, and I couldn’t help but feel like I was being left out. I really envy how some people can just trade quick, witty remarks on the fly like that.

“So it’s not a bookstore nor a publisher, but a similar kind of company? That’s my understanding from all that; am I right?” I asked.

“You could say that, but you could also say otherwise, I guess,” Shiori-san explained. “Reading’s *just* a hobby now! I’ve felt the limits of paperbacks. The publishing recession’s *scaryyy*. We gotta then make money with ero!”

“I think it’s gonna be like the relationship between streaming and movies for me,” Asamura-kun interjected. “I don’t think it’s strange to believe we’re entering an era where physical books sell alongside digital ones, you know?”

“Not sure ‘bout that. Books physically take up space,” Shiori-san argued. “Your pile of backlogs falling over could bury you alive one day, and you’d end up being isekai’d.”

*Is she being serious or joking...? Or is she seriously joking?*

Figuring that out was a matter beyond me. A pile of books big enough to fall on you? Is that even possible?

“Welp, I wasn’t assigned to the erotic department, just so we’re clear!”

“My condolences,” Asamura-kun commented flatly.

“You’re so cold, Junior-kun...”

“It’s ’cause you sounded like you wanted to be tormented there.”

*“Sniff sniff.* Saki-chan, Junior-kun’s bullying *meee~*. You gotta be a li’l better with disciplining your husband.”

“Ethics, when you really get down to it, are personal to an individual person’s heart. I can’t meddle with other people’s sense of it,” I rationalized.

*And it’s not like he’s doing anything illegal.*

“You’re already soundin’ like Professor Kudou even though you’ve just enrolled, Saki-chan,” Shiori-san shot back.

“Ugh.”

*Th-that’s not the case; not at all...*

Could it be she’s already influenced me *that* much?

“Heh... Glad Junior-chan here’s succeeding me without issue. Please continue walking the path I’ve blazed just like this,” she continued with her teasing, this time turning to Asamura-kun and chumming up to him for agreement, probably in response to the pretty displeased face I made.

*I see, so she goes there when I shake her off, huh?*

Well, that figures. This sure is tough.

“Fine, fine,” I ended up giving in in the end. “I’ll take it to heart as your junior, so please start being a little more composed as a senior, Shiori-san.”

“I will, I will. Well then, I’d really love for you to come over to my company in four years. I want Junior-chan to stay as Junior-chan. I’ll even put in a word with HR for you!”

*Put in a word with HR? You’ve only just joined yourself, you know, Shiori-san?*

Oh well, it *is* her. It’s scary, but I can totally imagine that she’s already buddy-buddy with some in HR.

“I’ll think about it,” I left it off with that, earning a wry smile from Asamura-kun for some reason.

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[1]: Yuuta doesn't say the JP word for it (indicated by the italics in his dialogue), and rather pronounces it with katakana プラットホーム. Saki also says it here in katakana pronunciation, repeating it in confusion.

[2]: Similar case here. Except that Saki says it (or rather thinks of it) in hiragana, あだると, which conveys her confusion more clearly if you're reading in JP. Shiori says with katakana spelling: アダルト.

[3]: Yes, Ghost uses this word here (公共事業), yes, this is stupid: private companies have incentives to have good public images for reasons completely different to public works/projects, and only lose that incentive when they get big (usually by unnatural, non fair/free market means).

Most sectors of the economy are naturally competitive when minimally regulated, because of low barriers to entry and low marginal costs. This creates an incentive for private entities to be efficient, have good public perception, serve consumer interests, and compete on price, quality, and innovation. However, when a company gets larger, (especially when it gets unnaturally larger due to increased barriers to entry from regulation, or regulatory capture—whether intentional or not), it loses these incentives. This is because it means they become less prone to competition, and the problem is only exacerbated when competition is killed off (which doesn't really happen naturally but unnaturally due to the reasons I already listed).

Public works, on the other hand, don't share the same incentives for good public perception. Public works exist to serve the minority of industries/sectors of the economy that aren't naturally competitive, due to high marginal costs, high natural barriers to entry, and the efficiency of having multiple competitors vs one provider. For example, the clothing industry is super saturated because there are many people with different priorities (price vs quality) and taste. It's therefore a naturally competitive sector of the economy, of which it is more efficient to reach everyone's needs with more competition and providers. However, when it comes to energy or public infrastructure, it is more efficient to have one provider since you're really buying the same thing (electricity). It's also naturally uncompetitive due to high marginal costs and barriers to entry (not easy for multiple companies to break into the market). Hence, the need for public works. The thing is, however, since these public works/services are funded by the government, they do not have the same incentives as companies to have good public perception, as they do not have competition (they're consumers' only choice). They are instead incentivized in making governments more electable, and keeping government approval high (which is I guess why undemocratic countries with unaccountable governments are shit: they don't have this incentive).

So no, companies don't start to resemble public works when they get larger. They don't share the same incentives in terms of public perception, and they start to lose said incentives when they get unnaturally large (i.e through anti-free market means such as regulatory capture, or governments increasing regulation which inadvertently stifles smaller, less established competitors and increases barriers to entry).

## April 7th (Thursday) - Yuuta Asamura

Using tablets for classes is an experience I've dabbled with before.

But even so, this was only the first time I'd been recommended to buy my own personal laptop, going so far as to being told that I would be using it for writing and submitting all my reports. Although it was something only "recommended," I couldn't help but feel like it was practically a "requirement."

So, I had gone ahead and bought one sometime back in March.

I've used computers at home before, but given this was my first time with a laptop, the experience felt fresh and new. The touch of the keys was light, and its screen was small. And yet, it was so lightweight that I could carry it just about anywhere. That was its biggest advantage.

April 7th: the beginning of my uni life at last.

They had told us to bring in our laptops, despite it being only the first day, so I did.

*How do I choose a seat?* I thought, with that immediate question catching me off guard the moment I entered the lecture hall.

The only time I'd ever sat in a university lecture hall up until now had been during all those exams, and the seats were assigned back then too. It was for that reason that I hadn't realized it before, but it looked like you were able to sit wherever you wanted at university.

*So it's basically like cram school. In that case...* I thought, looking toward the front.

As expected, or rather inevitably, all the seats at the front—by the lectern where it'd be easier to hear the lecturer—were all already taken.

*Damn it, too late,* I thought with a small panic.

With no other choice left, I reluctantly picked a seat somewhere around the center without much thought. There was no special reason for choosing it specifically; it just happened to be open. That was all.

To the left of it sat a guy with golden hair.

“Is this seat open?” I asked.

“Yup; seat’s open, alright,” he replied, or at least that’s what it sounded like.

I could tell that he was speaking with some type of Kansai dialect, but I couldn’t go any further than thinking it sounded only *somewhat* like the one spoken in Osaka.

*Could just be because I’d just gone there; can’t help but feel nostalgic now.*

“What’s the deal?” he asked, his tone still sounding somewhat Kansai-esque as he noticed me lost in my thoughts.

“Ah, no. You’re from Kansai?” I casually kept the conversation going, sitting down and taking my laptop out of my bag.

“*Ahhh*, curious, aren’t ya? Been tryna match how folks talk here, ya know, but I end up soundin’ kinda weird.”

*So that’s why his Kansai dialect sounded a little off.*

“I don’t think it sounds strange. I was actually in Osaka recently, so it made me feel pretty nostalgic,” I explained.

At my words, the blond-haired guy—whose hair I now also noticed actually had some black highlights—broke into a smile. He was well built and tall too, someone who gave off a rather tough vibe up until that smile of his melted it all away. His face, which I thought had looked a little older than mine just seconds ago, now appeared slightly younger than mine.

“*Ohhh*, I hear ya, I hear ya,” he beamed, speaking in full-on Kansai dialect now. “The grub there’s great, ain’t it?”

“Yeah, it was delicious.”

“Tokyo’s gotta step its game up, man. The grub here sucks! Ain’t tasty at all!”

“Is it really *that* bad?”

“I’ve been here for like a week now, ya know? And everyday it’s just me yellin’, ‘Man, I’ve gone and eaten’ somethin’ nasty again!”

“No way, no way, no way.”

“I coulda gone for three refills back home, ya know? But here, two’s all I can handle. Shoot, y’all really oughta try a bit harder—”

“Is here okay?” a voice overlapped from my right, completely cutting the blond guy’s words off in an instant.

Turning toward the voice, I saw a skinny-looking guy with sleepy eyes standing there absentmindedly.

His skin was so white that it almost looked unhealthy, to the point where it felt like it even had this sickly pale tinge to it, and his long black hair was tied half-up with a thin string.

“It’s open; I think it’s fine,” I told him.

“Right... Thanks,” he muttered and sat down noiselessly.

At almost the same time, he pulled his smartphone out of his pocket and started to fiddle with it.

*Huh. Uhhh?*

“What?” he asked, noticing my gaze.

“Ah, no. *Uhhh*, um... It’s just that class is about to start.”

“The lecturer isn’t here yet,” he answered in a direct, almost blunt tone. “Don’t want to waste this time. I haven’t finished my dailies yet.”

“Dailies...?”

“Right. There’re three enemies I haven’t cleared yet...” he continued, and I happened to catch a glimpse of his phone screen as he did.

He had a game up.

*Ahhh, so as in daily quests or daily missions.*

The little tasks games had to get players into the habit of playing every day. I don't really play many games myself, but I've played some computer ones with Maru a few times before, so I knew how they worked.

"The heck, yer a pretty gloomy one, aren't ya?" the blond-haired guy to my left then spoke up.

"So that's the kind of thing you say to someone you just met? How rude."

"What'd ya say?"

"I wonder?"

*Wait, wait, wait. What's with the two of them suddenly bickering over me from both sides?* I chewed over the situation, glancing back and forth between the two as I thought about how I should try to somehow calm them down.

But in the end, before I could, the door at the front of the lecture hall swung open, and a man who looked to be our lecturer walked right in.



That said, since we hadn't actually chosen which courses to register for yet, it wasn't like an actual lecture was about to begin right away. And sure enough, the man who had just entered was there to go over the procedure for how we'd register for our courses, handing out printouts with steps while giving us a brief explanation.

What impressed me was that we were encouraged to use our laptops to register for our courses. Basically, instead of filling out a physical form, we were told to register for them online.

*So we're being asked to use our laptops right from the start, huh?*

Oh well, you can't graduate if you don't earn your credits. That's just how uni works. Even the two on either side of me—who'd been snapping at each other just moments ago—were now listening attentively, having settled down.

After a while, we all went ahead to register for our courses with the laptops we'd all brought. Having now finished everything, I took another look around the lecture hall.

*What kinda divine arrangement is this?* I begged the question in my head.

It was as if the two people sitting on either side of me looked to be the most eye-catching individuals in the entire hall.

And it would be a coincidence that I couldn't help but wonder about it later on too, when we ended up meeting again after being invited to the same freshman welcome party.

Sure, I had thought it'd be nice to have some new encounters at uni, like how I initially did in high school with Maru or Narasaka-san, but I never imagined that it would turn out to be *this* kind of encounter.

## April 7th (Thursday) - Saki Ayase

“Wow, a Mac!” a voice called out from behind me while I waited for the lecture to start by a window seat.

Turning around at it, what first caught my attention was the color of the speaker’s eyes. They were red, despite her obvious Japanese features. She was wearing colored contact lenses in other words.

*Come to think of it, I’d never once considered them as an option as part of my “armament.”*

Her long hair, spilled past her shoulders, was dyed in ashy orange. The sunlight streaming in through the window served to turn the edges of her hair faintly translucent. It looked beautiful.

Although spring had only just begun, she wore a one-shoulder top, paired with long nails and a short skirt to go with it. And to top it all off, she wore a necklace that featured a chunky glass pendant. It was a little bulky-looking, but that made it all the more good.

*Yeah. She looks cool.*

“What?” she asked, noticing my gaze.

“Ah, mm. I just thought you looked cool,” I replied.

Though I had only told her my honest impression, her eyes widened in instant surprise at my words, before she then plopped down into her seat. She stared at me intently.

“You’re... kinda weird, hm?” she commented.

“I... wonder.”

“Cause you’re pretty much the same, aren’t you? Like, what’s with the surprised face? With your hair dyed all bright and flashy like that. You play around often, right?”

“I... don’t know. I’m not really sure about that...”

*Playing around? I thought as I ended up seriously chewing over those words. Well, I was probably seen that way back in high school too, huh?*

But it wasn't like I'd dyed my hair with that sort of intention, so I don't really think I've ever been looking to play around or anything.

"Oh well, whatever," the girl said, brushing it off. "So, that's a Mac, right?" she asked, pointing at my laptop.

"Yes, but—"

"Macs are expensive, aren't they?"

Well, that *is* true. If we're solely talking about price here, then many of the so-called Windows machines were cheaper. I had mentioned this to Ruka-san too.

*"It'd be a good idea to maybe get used to Macs if you're gonna work at our company, y'know?"* yet she had suggested.

"It's a slightly older model, so it wasn't all *that* expensive..." I clarified to the girl.

*Though if I'm being honest, I also ended up getting a tablet and painting software along with it too.*

"Still expensive. For me, I'm just using my brother's old hand-me-down; totally free."

Saying that, the girl pulled out a laptop from her pink bag and showed it off to me, completely taking me aback.

It was black, huge, and bulky.

"Whoa..." I couldn't help but trail off in shock.

"No compromises allowed, use this! Real men shut up and go for carbon black!" was what he told me as he literally shoved it onto me, *y'knoow~?*" she then dove into a rant. "I'm a woman, I tell you! My God, don't go dumpin' something this heavy onto a girl, geez! That gorilla of a brother of mine's just so barbaric!"

*So she's got an onii-san, huh...?*

It really does look heavy, though. Or rather, wouldn't buying hers new be way more expensive than *my* laptop?

"Wanna hold it?" she asked, casually handing me her laptop.

"Eh?" I fumbled, managing to reach and grab it just in time.

*That was close, nearly missed it there.*

"So heavy!" I then instantly exclaimed the moment I held it.

*What the heck...?*

"That's 'cause it's three kilos, y'know?"

"That's like... one and a half bags of rice..."

"What's with that? That's funny," she burst out laughing at me.

Ever since we became a family of four, we started to buy five-kilo bags of rice. But when I'm out buying by myself, I always go for just the two-kilo ones because of their lighter weight. It's what I've been doing ever since I started helping with grocery shopping in junior high. It's for that reason that my standard of weights are separated into two: two-kilos or less, or more. If it's the former, then I can carry it by myself.

In this case, the laptop I bought was 1.24 kilos; within about the limit for something I'd carry around.

"Thanks. Yeah, it's definitely a bit heavy, isn't it?" I said as I handed it back.

"It's really *that* heavy~?" a voice chimed in the moment after.

I turned to the voice. There, sitting beside the orange-haired girl, was someone with a soft, laid-back expression, watching us with curious eyes, her cheek propped up on one hand. Her bright brown hair looked more natural than dyed, and though it was loosely tied at her neck, I could tell that it'd spread softly if she let it down, like delicate, fine strands.

She had such a beautiful, well-proportioned face that just looking at her made you want to sigh. The only little thing marring that perfection was a tiny beauty mark under her left eye, yet at the same time, it made for the perfect accent.

“Ah, sorry for interrupting your conversation, *m’kaaay~*? I just thought that that’s quite the impressive-looking laptop,” she said.

Her voice was amazing. There’s that saying that describes voices as a jingling of bells<sup>[1]</sup>, then there’s this—a soft alto that flowed into my ears, making my eardrums quiver and my brain melt.

“Impressive-lookin’? You’re just saying that ’cause of the sticker,” the orange-haired girl said, showing off the big sticker of a cute anime girl on the lid of her complete, pitch-black laptop.

Given it was a hand-me-down from her brother, it probably represented his tastes. I wasn’t all familiar with anime and manga like Maaya or Maru-kun, so I had no idea who it was, but she definitely looked to be a popular character. She was really cute.

“It is impressive~,” the other girl asserted. “It looks like they’re making a second season too. Ah~, but I feel they should maybe go with a little more mainstream appeal. The animation quality was really high, and the directing was well done~. Plus, it was insanely *eroootic~*”

*...Wait. Did a word I wasn’t supposed to hear come out of this beauty’s mouth just now?*

“Nope, didn’t know,” the orange-haired girl replied.

“Whaaat? You haven’t watched *iiit~*?”

“How would *I* know, they’re my brother’s tastes! I’m more into...” she then rattled off, stringing a bunch of K-pop idols and Japanese celebrities.

I didn’t even know half of them.

“I’d stick *them* on if *I* were pasting stickers here,” she continued. “But whenever I try to peel her off, he gets mad. Like, *I* own it now, so it’s fine, right?”

“Yet you still keep it on for him, you *seeee~*? How kind~,” the brown-haired beauty then commented with a sweet smile, prompting the orange-haired girl to freeze with a gulp.

*Bull’s-eye, huh?*



“Oh well~, maybe the sticker being an all-ages one was a considerate choice in his end~,” she added.

I tilted my head at her words, not understanding what she’d meant. The orange-haired girl looked to be just as confused, tilting her head right at the same angle.

“*Fufu*,” the gentle girl, let’s call her beauty-san, let out a refined chuckle as she placed her hand near her mouth.

Her smile was so incredibly adorable, yet I couldn’t help but feel a faint pressure exuding from behind it. “What, you don’t even know what that means?” it seemed to silently ask.

*Beauty-san here doesn’t seem to be what she appears to be*, I thought at the back of my mind.

Just then, a ripple of noise stirred throughout the hall as the lecturer entered from the bottom, walking right over to the lectern. That being said, there were no classes for today; we were just here to receive an explanation about courses offered and how we’d register for them on our laptops.

There wasn’t anything else to do once that all ended, so I just went straight home.

Stopping by the supermarket on the way back to shop for a few groceries, I ended up picking up a two-kilo bag of rice randomly, as if to check its weight with no intention of buying it.

*Yeah, it was way heavier than this, right...?*

Asamura-kun happened to return at the same moment I got home, so the both of us ended up having dinner alone together.

As we talked about our first impressions of each of our respective universities, I brought up the two girls who’d been sitting right behind me, and in turn, Asamura-kun told me about some classmates he had ended up chatting with too.

“I was really on edge for a sec there,” he confessed. “I thought they were about to start fighting out of nowhere.”

“*Ohhhh...?*”

He then went on to explain that he's got this inkling feeling that it'd be all a rollercoaster from here on out, but if I were to say that, then I felt like I'd met some truly unique people right on my first day too.

I couldn't help but think that maybe universities really do gather a more diverse range of individuals from all corners of the country than high schools.

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[1]: “鈴を転がすような,” literally “like rolling a bell” (with “rolling” being the standard verb in Japanese to describe jingling a bell; something that isn’t idiomatic in English).

I usually localize expressions/proverbs to their known English equivalents, but there really isn’t a perfect one for one match here. It reads pretty idiomatically in English too, but it’s basically an expression used to describe a woman’s clear, high-pitched, and beautiful voice. Soothing like the jingling of bells essentially.

## April 12th (Tuesday) - Yuuta Asamura

With the third-period lecture having concluded, a few students—who looked to be upperclassmen—showed up in the lecture hall.

“Juniors of the Department of Social Data Science!” one of them, a tall guy, addressed us with a booming voice. “We’re here to announce a freshman welcome party! Please grab a flyer if you’re interested!” he declared, already beginning to hand out some flyers by the door as he did.

*A freshman welcome party? I thought. Ohhh, that sorta thing, huh...?*

Watching over them, I noticed that about one in every few students leaving the lecture hall took a flyer, seemingly showing interest. Surprisingly fewer than expected, but it made sense on second thought. The Department of Social Data Science had a small student body to begin with, and unlike the class-based system from high school, universities run on credits. In other words, not everyone taking this course was a freshman belonging to the Department of Social Data Science.

“You don’t need to take one if you’ve already got one from this morning!” one of the students distributing the flyers, a girl who was seemingly also an upperclassman, announced. “The info’s the same!”

Her brisk voice carried her words well; she was probably one of the organizers.

*I get it; they’re targeting to hand these out at the end of lectures full of freshmen.*

“The time, place, and entry fee are all written there,” she continued, waving the flyers cheerfully as she spoke. “If it looks like you’ll be joining, then feel free to register in the LINE group chat to let us know you’ll be participating, okay!? It’s not like we’re some shady solicitors or anythin’~. Nice meeting you all!”

By now, those who had already stayed behind after lecture had mostly cleared out, and even the upperclassmen were getting their flyers in order to leave as well.

*What should I do?* I asked myself, yet my feet were already moving forward before I even had the chance to hesitate.

“Can I get one?” I asked.

“*Ohhh~, of course!*” the same upperclasswoman chimed with excitement. “Here you go,” she handed me a flyer with a voice that still continued to carry her words well. “It’s just a casual get-together; by all means, by all means~”

“I’ll think about it,” I replied, with the girl and the other upperclassmen beside her smiling with amusement at my response.

“What a textbook-perfect response to being recruited!” she exclaimed.

“He’s actually pretty honest for not saying something like, ‘I’ll try to.’ How nice!”

*...Are they complimenting me?*

“Do give it plenty of thought. That’s what it means to be a true member of the academic world,” a big, bear-resembling upperclassman then said with a grin. “But we’d be thrilled if you came!”

*He kinda reminds me of Maru, I think.*

I skimmed through the flier as I walked down the hallway. The venue looked to be an izakaya<sup>[1]</sup> near the station (of course, students under 20 weren’t allowed to drink). It sounded like the gathering wouldn’t last for long too, probably because the place was pretty far from the city center, so it seemed like we’d be able to head home before it got too late. The entry fee looked fairly reasonable as well.

*I know I said I'd think about it, but I was honestly already leaning toward going from the moment I took that flyer.*

Universities run on a credit system; they aren't class-based. That is to say, if you aren't actively trying to connect with others, then they're essentially places where making even a single friend becomes difficult.

I stepped out from the lecture building and into the courtyard. My fourth-period lecture was in the building next door. Walking across the paving stones, I looked around at a scenery that already no longer possessed the bright colors typical to cherry blossoms. With the rain having scattered them away, the scenery had completely shifted into that of a full, lush green. I had already thought that it felt warm from the moment I woke up this morning, but I hadn't been expecting today's high to surpass 25°C too.

Walking under the sun was warm enough to make me sweat.

The seasons come and go swiftly. Golden Week would be hitting us before we know it at this rate, and by then, the atmosphere on campus would most likely already be entirely set in stone. It was something I'd only realized on our grad trip, but I now knew that I often rely far too much on chance encounters.

Like on the day of Suisei High's entrance ceremony.

What if Maru hadn't noticed the book I was reading?

What if the mood hadn't been right for him to call out to me?

What if our taste in genres hadn't lined up?

The sole reason why Maru and I became friends was because we happened to ride along the rails of countless strange coincidences—an unexpected set of connections that were far too fragile.

I lowered my gaze to the flyer I'd been given.

*Seeking out connections like this on my own is important, I guess, huh?*

It was something I'd thought about back during our grad trip, after all.

I folded the flyer and slipped it right into my pocket, all the while a small part of me dabbled in excitement.



After my fifth-period lecture ended, I sent a message to Ayase-san. I needed to let her know that I wouldn't be eating dinner.

**Yuuta:** I'm going to a welcome party, will probably be home late.

Sending just that, I received her reply almost immediately. She was apparently also planning to attend a welcome party tonight too.

*Coincidences really do stack up, don't they?*

But if that's the case, it meant my old man would be eating dinner alone tonight...

*Do we have something prepared for him, maybe?* I thought, taking my phone out again to continue messaging with Ayase-san. *Oh I see, Stepmom's apparently bought some canned mackerel in miso...*

I then sent a message to my old man as well, letting him know that we'd both be home late, adding a note about his already prepared dinner.

With that, all my worries were gone.

There were already some people gathered near the entrance by the time I arrived at the izakaya marked on the digital map, most likely students from my university. Around a dozen or few people, maybe? Just going off from that might make you think that this was thus a pretty small freshman welcome party, but the Department of Social Data Science at Ichise university was actually a newly established department, only having a capacity of around sixty students. Considering that, this was actually quite the turnout.

*Hm? A newly established department?* I thought, my own line of reasoning catching me off guard. *Come to think of it, that is right.*

Then who exactly are these seemingly upperclassmen organizers?

“Oh, welcome! You made it!” someone suddenly called out to me.

Looking up at the sound of the voice, I saw the same brisk upperclasswomen who’d been handing out flyers earlier.

“Ah, yes. Um...” I trailed off.

*...Who are you?* I couldn’t exactly ask. *What do I do?*

“What’s up? Do you have a question or something, *uhhh...*?” she trailed off herself, stuck with not knowing my name.

“Ah, I’m Asamura,” I said, with the upperclasswoman’s eyes widening in amused surprise the instant I gave her my name.

“*Ohhh*, you’re him!” she exclaimed in excitement.

“Huh?”

*Wait, what?*

“What’s wrong?” I asked, curious as the bear-resembling upperclassman came over.

“Oh, Asamura-kun,” he said, recognizing me. “You know, the one who messed about with Kudou-san along with Professor Mori.”

*I feel like I’m being told something outrageous here.*

“*Ohhh*. So you’ve successfully got into our school. Prof sure was talking happily about you, you *knooow~?*” the upperclasswoman then explained. “I’ve once again succeeded in recruiting a promising young person into social data science,’ he was saying. Ah, he kept your name anonymous, of course. Unfortunately for you though, a troubling friend of mine happened to be sitting next to you guys while enjoying a cup of coffee back then.”

“The walls have ears and the doors have eyes,’ was it?”

“Exactly! Forgive us. And welcome to the newly established department. It’s a shame we can’t have a promising newcomer as a junior, but as fellow sociology students, here’s to getting along.”

“Could it be... you’re all Professor Mori’s...? I asked, trailing off as Bear-senpai nodded.

*That made sense.*

Given our department was newly established, we didn't have any upperclassmen ourselves. But Professor Mori had mentioned transferring from a previous one when this new one had gotten set up. In other words, that naturally meant he had students from his former department.

*Guess this means these were students from Professor Mori's seminar, aren't they? I reflected. Maybe even grad students, huh?*

They had no obligation to do any of this, and yet here they were, looking out for me and all the other clueless freshmen, despite us basically not knowing our right from left. If anything, it just made it clear how fondly Mori-sensei<sup>[2]</sup> was still regarded, despite having transferred.

When our reservation came about, we all nestled into a corner of the izakaya. The total headcount? Twenty-five; a big group in the end. The corner we ended up occupying was a partitioned one, all the way at the back of the place and packed with only members of the freshman welcome party.

Given it was my first ever time in an izakaya, my curiosity about all the little things surpassed everything else. It started with the very first line spoken by one of the upperclassmen organizers.

“First up, who wants it on tap!?” they had said, with it oddly enough honestly moving me.

*So this is the famous “On tap to start with!”<sup>[3]</sup> line I've heard about.*

And what surprised me even more was that there was actually a freshman raising his hand at it.

*Huh?* I turned to look, startled, and there he was—a man with a full on beard, looking like some plain old ronin<sup>[4]</sup>. *A freshman...?*

“Just to be sure, but you're clearly over twenty, right?”

“23 this year!” he grinned broadly and declared.

In other words, he was basically confessing to having taken five gap years before anyone could even ask if he'd failed his university entrance exams five times.

"Okaaaay, then, a beer for you. The rest of the freshmen can pick whatever from the menu since it's all-you-can-drink, but I'd like if everyone got the same thing for the first round. We can order oolong tea by the pitcher which makes things easy. That okay?"

With no one raising any objections, the upperclassmen, who'd volunteered to organize the whole get-together—along with soon-to-be 23-year-old ronin-san—all went with beer while everyone else had oolong tea.

Toasting when the beer and oolong tea arrived, the welcome party began. Still, that being said, we didn't go over anything like self-introductions, and once the food came out, everyone was too busy with eating.

*Isn't this just a drinking party at this point...?*

"Well well, it's edible. Yeah, ain't all that bad. Just so-so though, I reckon," a voice then caught my attention.

*Huh? I thought. That way of speaking—kinda like Kansai-sounding, kinda not—sounds familiar.*

Drawn by the voice, I turned to my left. At the same time, the speaker in question turned toward me, and our eyes met.

"Oh," he uttered.

"Ah."

Blond hair streaked with black highlights. Tall and well-built, the kinda physique that clearly belonged to someone who played some sort of sport.

*I think we ended up sitting next to each other on the first day...*

"Done met ya again, huh?" he started talking first as I was still digging through my memory. "Uhhh, I think yer..."

"Ah, I'm—"

“Hol’ on! Wait a sec. *Uhhh*, that’s it, yer name was surely...”

*No, I don’t think I told you my name; there’s no way you’d know.*

“Got it! Takashimaya!”

“I think that’s the name of the department store in Nihonbashi, isn’t it?”

“Hah? Takashimaya’s main store ain’t in Nipponbashi; it’s in Namba, ain’t it?”

“Huh?”

“Hah?”

“*Ohhh*,” I realized our mix-up. “*Uhhh*, I meant Nihonbashi, not Nipponbashi<sup>[5]</sup>. Or rather, the main store’s in Osaka? Anyway, my name’s Asamura. Nice to meet you.”

“*Ohhh*, I see, I see now. Didn’t reckon you’d answer so serious-like to my jokin’ and all. Well now, *uhhh*, you reckon I can call ya Asamura then?”

“Yeah. Yuuta Asamura.”

“Yuuta, huh? The name’s Nakamura. Hironobu Nakamura. Last name, first name, whatever suits ya, call me whatcha like. As for writin’ Nakamura, it’s “naka,” and “mura.”<sup>[6]</sup> Got it? ’Course you do! Well then, Hironobu’s written as part of ‘to advertise widely!’<sup>[7]</sup> Seems like my folks wanted me to be the kinda kid who leaves a good mark on folks ’round me, ya know~? But dang, before I knew it, I done went and turned into a kid who just made folks laugh all over the place!” he rattled off, bombarding me with his words all at once like that.

His lung capacity was astounding.

*He’s definitely done some kinda sport, right?* I thought, not even having a chance to butt in; all I could do was listen.

“You’ll end up losing the chance to talk forever if you just sit there all surprised,” a voice from the seat on my other side then spoke up. “It’s better to just cut him off and start talking yourself if it’s Hiro you’re speaking to.”

Startled, I turned my head to the right this time.

There, I saw a guy with long black hair, carelessly tied back with just a piece of string. He sipped on a glass topped to the brim with oolong tea, bringing it up to his lips with a certain tenderness as if he was outright welcoming it with open arms. He also had an almost worryingly pale complexion too.

“What?” his eyes seemed to ask, flicking a drowsy look toward me. “Don’t talk to me if you’ve got no reason,” though they also seemed to convey at the same time.

“Yuuma’s always havin’ that grumpy look, so don’t go worryin’ ‘bout it—just talk to him normally,” Nakamura-kun clarified. “He’s probably just short on sleep, ya know?”

*Short on sleep...? Really?*

“I’m *not* not sleeping. I just don’t pointlessly waste energy unlike Hiro,” the long black-haired guy clarified. “...What?” he then asked, noticing my gaze.

*U-uhhhh...*

“Ah, no, just thought you two have gotten pretty close, I guess.”

““Hah!?””

*They didn’t have to shout in perfect sync like that... I thought with exasperation. No like, I literally thought they were about to get into a fight the other day, and yet now they’re already calling each other by name.*

Conveying that line of thought to them, the drowsy-eyed guy—apparently Yuuma—clammed up with a sullen expression.

“Hiro just introduced himself on his own one day. Like earlier,” he then muttered after a brief moment.

*Like earlier...? Ah, that. The whole ‘Hironobu’s written as part of ‘to advertise widely!’ part.*

But in that case, wouldn't just "Hironobu-kun" or "Nakamura-kun" be fine? And yet, here he is calling him by the nickname "Hiro"? Nakamura-kun's been calling him *just* "Yuuma" too, without the honorifics.

"A lot of my courses ended up being the same as Hiro's."

"It's like we're kindred spirits, ya know?" Nakamura-kun added.

"Well, guess you could call it fate too, right?" I chimed in, prompting the two—who couldn't have had any more different vibes to them—to look at me with near identical expressions.

*Huh?*

"Huh? Did I say something weird?"

"Not really."

"You sure are an honest feller, aren't ya now, Yuuta?"

*Is that... so?*

I'd always thought of myself as more of the sarcastic type, so hearing that actually surprised me.

"If anything, I figured people would think of me as more of an introvert," I argued.

"An introvert's more someone y'all would call Yuuma right 'ere."

"Won't deny that."

"I wonder. Compared to me—someone who's not even had a proper convo with any of my lecture mates for the entire past week—you've already made a friend, *uhhh...*" I instinctively tried to address him, only to trail off.

"Yuuma Kikuchi."

"Thanks. I'm Yuuta Asamura. Anyway, I think you're way better at making friends than I do, Kikuchi-kun. You're more sociable," I told him, with Kikuchi-kun forcefully averting the gaze he'd been directing at me in response, turning back toward his glass of oolong tea.

Tilting the glass slightly, he sipped it little by little as he was drinking alcohol.

“That’s not true,” he muttered quietly.

“Well, from where I’m sittin’, y’all ain’t that much different,” Nakamura-kun cut in before I could even muster a response. “Yer names’re similar too. Well ain’t it the Yuu-Yuu duo!”

*He’s even referring to us like some comedic duo...*

“Everyone looks like an introvert from your perspective, Hiro,” Kikuchi-kun snapped back. “*Anyone* sinks to the shadow world if they’re compared to you. Don’t come near me; your radiance hurts.”

“Oh I get it, so that’s why you’ve been sitting at just the right distance where it wouldn’t hurt,” I commented in just a casual tone.

Yet despite so, the moment I did, Kikuchi-kun suddenly whipped his head around toward me with startling intensity. His expression was almost fearful, and he quickly dropped his eyes back to the glass of oolong tea in his hand after.

“Do you always look at people like *that*, Asamura?” he asked.

“Not really sure what you mean by ‘*that*,’ but... oh well. Probably?”

“Haaah? You’re a mighty strange one, aren’t ya?” Nakamura-kun interjected, before then turning to Kikuchi-kun to address him. “I was always wonderin’ why yer always sittin’ one seat away like that, ya know? Welp, guess some folks just ain’t good with closin’ up to others. So, it actually hurts too, huh? I done messed that up then.”

“I don’t think that part of you is bad,” I offered some consoling words. “I wouldn’t be sitting near you at all if I thought so.”

It was only after that I wondered if I’d overstepped with something unnecessary, but neither of them spoke up against it, leaving me relieved.

“Aw, whatever goes,” Nakamura-kun commented. “It don’t matter if it’s by chance or not, I reckon the fact we ended up sittin’ next to each other means we got us a bit of a bond, ya know? So, Yuuma, Yuuta, I’m countin’ on both of y’all. Or I guess it’d be ‘I’m counting on the both of you’ ’round here, ain’t it?”

“Don’t force yourself to use standard Japanese. It’s gross,” Kikuchi-kun suddenly snapped.

“What’d ya say!?”

“Now, now, now,” I spoke up yet again in an attempt to diffuse the situation.

*Why’s it that these two always seem to get along fine, yet get so combative whenever I’m between them?*

“Likewise; nice meeting you two,” I gave my belated reply in the end.

*I think my hunch was right,* I then thought, musing about the inkling feeling I’d mentioned to Ayase-san—that it’d be a rollercoaster from here on out.

And yet, at the same time, I also felt this vague yet certain feeling that the dawn of a new day had finally begun.

“Oh, speaking of which, I remember hearing that Nakamura-kun’s family is from Osaka, but where’s home for you, Kikuchi-kun?” I asked. “By the way, I was born and raised in Tokyo; around the Shibuya area.”

“Sendai,” he answered.

*Sendai; isn’t that the capital of the Miyagi Prefecture?*

That meant that there was someone from Osaka, someone from Tokyo, and someone from Miyagi sitting here right now. It struck me once again that universities really were places which gathered people from all over the country.

“So you’re from Shibuya, huh, Yuuta? Shibuya’s got *that*, don’t it? Like, it’s where that pup is, ain’t it?” Nakamura-kun asked.

“You mean the faithful dog Hachikou, right? Yup, that’s there.”

*“Haaah? Ain’t that a long way to be gettin’?”*

*Well, it’s over two hours for a round trip, so I guess you could say it’s far.*

It’s only been about a week since I started taking this commute, and while I appreciate the perk of getting some reading time in, I was also beginning to wish I had a little more free time.

“Oh well, I’m managing somehow. At least I get to read,” I initially left it at that, only for Kikuchi-kun to ask for the kinds of books I was into, leading the conversion to spread from there a little more...

By the time the welcome party had ended, I’d somehow reach the point where I could chat with the both of them casually.



My thoughts had circled back to the long commute on the way back. Opening the front door as I chimed an “I’m home,” I found myself face-to-face with Ayase-san, who was just putting away her shoes. Her eyes went wide in surprise as she looked up at me.

“You startled me,” she told me. “We ended up getting home at almost the same time, didn’t we?”

“Welcome back, *uhhhh...* Saki,” I said, calling her by her first name just to be safe, despite my old man probably already being fast asleep.

*I’d definitely end up calling her Ayase-san reflexively if I don’t consciously remind myself.*

But then, it all suddenly hit me. Maybe the reason I could never stop calling her Ayase-san was because I kept coming home like this. If I were to move out, I’d first of all wouldn’t have to be constantly conscious about being watched by our parents, and my chances to see Ayase-san would naturally decrease too. In that case, I’d probably be able to start calling her by her name, Saki, as if it were completely normal.

“Ah, I’m home. Yuuta... -niisan,” she replied, hastily tacking the “nni-san” on afterward, probably because she was more used to calling others by just their actual names than I was.

“You feeling kinda tired?” I asked. *Come to think of it, she did have her own freshman welcome party, didn’t she?*

She definitely wouldn’t have been drinking, yet she still gave off an unusually worn-out vibe.

“No, I’ll be fine once I sleep. *Mm*,” Ayase-san left it at that, quickly withdrawing to her room.

*...Did something happen, I wonder?*

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[1]: 居酒屋, literally meaning a “stay-drink-place,” is an casual/informal Japanese bar, similar to a pub or tapas bar.

[2]: Nope, not a mistranslation. Same shit like in V11 where Ghost makes Yuuta inconsistent in how he addresses Professor Mori.

[3]: “ナマ” (namu) is short for “生ビール” (namabiiru, literally “draft beer”). Given a colloquial way of referring to draft beer isn’t just shortening it to “draft” in English, I’ve gone with the localization “on tap.” Since, y’know, what makes draft beer “draft beer” is it being served from a keg through a tap at the bar, making this idiomatic and actually something you’d hear in some pub in English speaking countries.

The nuance here is that the phrase Yuuta uses, “とりあえずナマ” is the standard/most commonly heard phrase you’d hear in Japan, and is thus objectified here by him. On the other hand, his upperclassman had used “まずはナマってひとー！”, which idk see my translation for its meaning lol.

[4]: 浪人 (rōnin), meaning a student who’s graduated but failed to receive admission from any of the schools they’ve applied to (applies to both graduating junior high schoolers and high schoolers). 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.

[5]: Repeat of TNs 13 and 14 in Chapter 1. “日本” (Japan) is pronounced as “nihon” in eastern parts of Japan, while western parts (mainly the Kansai region), pronounce it as “nippon.” And then there’s Nihonbashi and Nipponbashi being two different places (the former being in Tokyo, the latter being in Osaka).

The confusion here is that the guy from the Kansai region doesn’t realize Yuuta is referring to Nihonbashi (given he’s passing it off as just part of Yuuta’s pronunciation) and thus thinks he’s instead referring to Nipponbashi. Hence why he tries to correct Yuuta (Takashimaya has stores in both Namba and Nihonbashi, but not Nipponbashi). Yuuta gets confused, but vice versa—he thinks the guy from Kansai is saying that there isn’t a Takashimaya in Nihonbashi, when he is instead saying there isn’t a Takashimaya in Nipponbashi.

[6]: Here, Hironobu breaks his name down (with the characters “なか” and “むら”) to prevent any misdivisions of his last name, “Nakamura.” This lets Yuuta know that “nara” (なか) equates to one character, while “mura” (むら) equates to another, giving him the idea of how to write his name with the proper kanji characters (or at least narrow down the possible kanji characters), in this case 中村 (中 for “naka,” 村 for “mura”).

This prevents any misdivisions such as “na” + “ka” + “mura” (“な” + “か” + むら”), which could give rise to kanji spellings such as 那神村, 那 for “na,” 神 for “ka” with the “mi” in “kami” being omitted in pronunciation, 村 for “mura” (this surname isn’t as common as “中村,” but you get the point).

[7]: Here, Hinorobu uses the phrase “広く宣伝する” (literally meaning “to advertise widely”), making Yuuta think of the characters, letting him put “広” and “宣” from it together to form “広宣” in his head (which in turn can mean “broad declaration”).

## April 12th (Tuesday) - Saki Ayase

I glared down at the ginger ale set in front of me.

A freshman welcome party: something I'd decided to attend, yet now that I was here, something I had no idea how to actually interact with others in.

*Seriously, I'm just not cut out for this sort of thing.*

The plates of food we had ordered for the all-you-can-eat-and-drink plan sat packed tightly together on the long wooden table of the izakaya, along with pitchers of oolong tea that were placed between one in every four people—clearly for the freshmen who couldn't drink any alcohol. Maybe because most of the girls here had just been high schoolers up until recently, there were also plenty of glasses of orange juice and ginger ale, besides the pitchers of oolong tea. Meanwhile, the girls already past twenty had no reservations, quickly starting with beer before quickly moving on to many different cocktails and sours served.

*I'm still on my first glass of ginger ale, though...* I thought, eventually raising my face to the empty seat across from me that so glaringly stood out.

I had yet to have anyone to talk to from the very start. Since I was the type who didn't like being surrounded by those I didn't know much, I had quietly slipped into a seat in a corner near the back. But maybe I had been too quiet; the seats in front of me were still left glaringly vacant. Meanwhile, the girl sitting on my left had been talking non-stop with the girl beside her, chatting passionately about whatever hit songs were currently trending, leaving no room at all for me to join in. Not wanting to bother them by butting in, I'd resigned myself to life in the corner, simply sipping away at my ginger ale little by little.

I'd have to order something new if I finished drinking it otherwise, with the ordering tablet having been pushed far down to the other side of the table, completely out of reach unless I asked someone to grab it for me. I'd have to raise my voice to do that, and just the thought of drawing everyone's attention left me frozen with the fear of not knowing how to act.

*...What the heck? Huh? Was I always this sort of person? I sat there thinking along those lines for a while. Where's this cowardice come from?*

It was only then that I realized: I had become someone who began to expect things from others.

It was a little shocking. I had never intended to expect anything from anyone—being that way allowed me to not care if no one expected anything from me. Yet somewhere down the line, that had changed.

The shift had come from a realization that there were people in this world worth expecting things from: those who'd return your kindness with their own. Sure, they were few and far between, but the chances of meeting them weren't zero. Ever since understanding that, my world had become even more complicated.

It used to be much simpler; I had thought that as long as I produced results, society would stay quiet in return, and that only effort alone was needed to achieve them. Not friends.

Just as I was thinking that...

“Maaan, we’re late, we’re late!” a bright voice rang out as two freshmen appeared. “Whoopsie daisy! Ohhhh, everyone’s already started, huuuh!?” she chimed, walking ahead of the other girl while waving her hand in front of her own face as she spotted the empty seat across from me, coming over.

“Whoopsie daisy’? Isn’t that pretty old~?<sup>[1]</sup> Are you actually from the Showa era, or something~?” the girl behind her spoke up as they walked all the way to me, exchanging such a casual conversation as if they were close friends.

“No, it’s something you’d normally say, ain’t it? My whole family does!”

“So you’re all stuck in the Showa era, *hmmm~?*”

“Oh? Lookin’ for a fight?” the girl walking ahead threatened, shaking her fists forward and back like a boxer would. “I’ll go all in, y’know?”

Yet, no matter how generously I looked at it, all it did was make her seem like a sulking child who was throwing a fit.

*Like a child, huh?*

“More importantly, *Kyoukaaa~*. Scoot over a bit, would you~? I can’t sit down otherwise~,” the girl behind her prodded her back, prompting her to drop into a seat at the very back.

That is, the one directly across from me. Her friend who came along with her sat down beside her.

So now, sitting directly across from me was a girl with ashy-orange hair.

“Ah...” I let my voice slip.

“Hm?” the ashy-orange haired girl—apparently called Kyouka—reacted, looking up as our eyes met. “Ah! You’re the Mac girl!”

*Eh? That’s how she remembers me?*

“*Uhhh*, yeah. Um... I’m Saki Aya—no, Asamura.”

“Saki-chan, *hmmm*? I’m Kyouka. Written with the characters for mirror and flower<sup>[2]</sup>, so “Kyouka,” okay? Kyouka Mizukami. Feel free to call me by my first name,” she said, breaking into a wide grin.

It was the sort of textbook, brilliant, unguarded smile that made your heart all warm and fuzzy just by looking at it.

“Oh, you’re the Mac girl~,” the girl who sat next to Kyouka-san then chimed in. “Isn’t that great? You’ve been waiting all this while to meet her again, right, Kyouka~?”

*It’s not even a way to remember me now; it’s become my full on name.*

“Oi, Mayu! I told you not to say *thaaat!* Ah, whoopsie. Look, I was just happy, okay~? I figured we’d run into you again soon since you’re a freshman, but we never did ’til now, so I had been like, ‘Huh?’, *y’knoow?*”

“Happy?”

“This girl’s been secretly worshipping you as her ‘Gal Master,’ Asamura-san,” the other girl, apparently Mayu, clarified.

“Hey, hey, hey, Mayu, cut it out! We promised you wouldn’t tell her that!”

*Gal Master? What’s with that?*

“*Uhhh*, what do you mean, exactly?” I asked, with Kyouka-san turning her attention back to me, striking out her fist with her thumb up.

“*Ehehe*, yay!” she exclaimed as she did so.

“...Y-yay?” I hesitantly held out my fist too, thumb raised, only for her to fist bump me.

*What sort of culture is this even supposed to be?* I thought, never experiencing anything like it. *Was this what they call a cultural clash?*

“Your blonde hair’s so pretty, isn’t *iiit*, Saki-chan?”

“Tha... thank you?”

“Why’d you make it sound like a question?”

“I’ve never been told that before.”

“No way.”

*But it’s true.*

Suisei High was a prestigious academic school; kids who dyed their hair as boldly as I did were the minority. Sure, there was quite the number of those who’d shaped their brows, or styled their hair in curls that would wear off in a day, but I’d never actually crossed paths with those who engaged in that sort of subtle fashion.

I had instead always tried to build up my own style, dressing how I wanted and hoping that I'd be recognized for that. But looking back now, there really hadn't been a time when someone had just straightforwardly called me "pretty"...

"No one did, I think..."

Maybe Maaya or Ryo-chin, aka Ryouko Satou, might've said something along those lines once or twice, but that was it... Being told something like this so openly right at what was basically a first proper meeting was something I couldn't recall ever happening before.

*Either way, suddenly picturing the faces of all my high school friends sure gives me a sense of nostalgia.*

That place had been my home turf. This izakaya was an away game.

"No, no, no. You're totally rockin' the look. You're a full on, proper gal no matter how you look at it!"

*I'd never thought the word "proper" would be used to describe a gal.*

"Is that... so?" I asked doubtfully.

"Yup! Gorgeous blonde hair, and piercings that glint through it every now and then. Your lips aren't gaudy, but they've got this slightly moist look that makes you just wanna suck on them."

*Suck!?*

Hearing that from someone of the same sex threw me off so much that I couldn't help but feel a little flustered. I'd never judged my appearance from that kind of perspective before.

“And then and then, there’s that one shoulder top with plenty of exposure, plus that thin necklace that naturally drops eyes down your chest,” she continued with her rambling. “It’s just perfect, isn’t it! You’re bad, aren’t you!? That silver bracelet around your wrist looks so delicate too, like something a fairy would make. And your nails, painted carefully in the blue of the sea. You’re a gal who can hold her own just about anywhere, with no shame at all! And yet, at the same time, you’ve got this sense of elegance—or rather, intelligence at your core—amirite? That’s what makes you feel like the modern gal, a li’l different from the old type. You’re perfect, Saki-chan!”

I had never expected her to describe my outfit with such poetic flair.

*As expected of someone from Tsukinomiya Women’s University... I guess?*

Or rather, having someone put it like that made me start to question how effective my armament really was.

“...Thanks,” I could only muster up that much.

From *my* point of view, it was Kyouka-san, who bared both shoulders—despite the cold still lingering on in the current season—who was really on the offensive.

“Your fashion really seemed like it left quite the impact on her, Asamura-san. ‘I really wanna get to know her,’ she’s been saying all along, hasn’t she~?” her friend next to her confessed with a smile that perfectly embodied the word “enchanting,” causing Kyouka-san to blush deeply.

“I thought I told you to quit sayin’ that!”

“You don’t need to hide how you feel, you know~? Or *rather*, aren’t you usually way more straightforward?”

*That sounds true*, I thought, remembering how she straight up told me I was “kinda weird” the first time we ever met. There have been numerous people around me who always seemed to let that same phrase slip, choosing to keep a little distance from me. “That girl’s strange,” they’d say.

*Well, those were the sort of people I'd cut ties with myself anyway.*

But Kyouka-san's "kinda weird" was different; it felt like she was just blurting out what came to mind, nothing more.

"You... wanted to get to know me?" I asked.

"Yeah! It's 'cause it was the first time anyone had told me I was cool. That's why~!"

"She usually just gets told you're sexy-cute," her friend chimed. "Is that right, Kyouka~?"

"Yup, yup! That's why I got so happy! And besides, it came from someone who was *waaay* cooler than me."

"Oh dear me~, you're totally smitten~"

"Hey, Saki-chan," Kyouka said, shifting her gaze from her friend and back to me as she leaned in. "Let's be friends, okay? Please!"

"Eh...?"

I looked at her again.

*Her fashion sense's cool*, I thought, sharing the same appreciation from when we'd first met. An impression that hadn't changed today.

Long, ashy-orange hair. Loosely curled ends of which some draped over the front of her body. Slightly large, golden crescent-shaped earrings, asymmetrical in size on the left and right—something I found fascinating. Her bold top that, like I mentioned earlier, boldly exposed her sun-kissed shoulders. And to top it off, a slim belt that cinched at the waste of her high-waisted bottoms. To me, *this* was cool.

"You mean... you want to be friends with me?"

"I'm literally saying it right to your face, aren't I?" she responded to my confirmation, something I had needed after being faced with the sort of phrase I wasn't used to hearing. "Yeah, that's right."

*Isn't this a good opportunity?* I thought. *Opportunities to meet people are rarer in uni than in high school.*

“If you don’t mind me...”

“Yesss!”

“Good for you, hm, Kyouka~?” her friend said in a laid-back, mellow tone.

“What’re you saying? A friend of a friend’s a friend, y’know!? Saki-chan, this here’s Mayu. C’mom, c’mom. Introduce yourself!”

“I’m Mayu Kaneko~; just Mayu’s fine~. Can I call you Saki too, Asamura-san?”

“Ah, *mm*. Call me however you like,” I answered, this time turning to look at Mayu-san properly.

Soft and fluffy; the same first impression I had of her before.

She didn’t seem to be the same age as me. There was this touch of maturity about her, the way she spoke was calm, and her voice—a perfect alto—was so pleasant to the ear. You could definitely fall in love with her from just her voice alone. She wore a light sky-blue cardigan (that was now folded and placed behind her), and compared to Kyouka-san, she showed way less skin. But even so, having taken off her outer piece, I couldn’t help but notice how much her blouse was being pushed up by the sheer size of her chest.

“*Uhhh*... right. Nice to meet you, Mayu.”

“I actually met Mayu on the same day as you, y’know, Saki-chan?” Kyouka-san revealed. “*Geeeeez*, we just clicked right away.”

It was only after a brief moment that I fully processed her casually spoken words, unable to help but let a strange sound escape from within the depths of my throat.

“Wha—? *Uhhh*... so you two aren’t old friends from before, or anything?” I asked.

“Eh? No *waaaay*. I’ve only just come to Tokyo from Fukuoka this spring. Mayu’s from ’round here, so there’s no way we could’ve known each other before. You’ve gotta be kidding!”

*“You’ve gotta be kidding”? There’s no way I could’ve known that even if you said that.*

Still, to think they’d already reached this level of closelessness despite only having met on the day of course registration...

“Is that... so?” I asked.

“Mayu’s an otaku, but we really hit it off, y’know?”

“Ehhh~?” Mayu-san protested. “I’m just an enthusiast, not an otaku, m’kaaay?”

*I don’t really get the difference.*

They both seemed like good people. So, having been freed from living life in a lonely corner, I started to chit-chat about the various aspects of uni life.

Things were going smoothly until the mood took a slightly strange turn, with Kyouka-san suddenly posing a probing question right when we were in the middle of eating.

“Got a boyfriend?” she asked.

“Eh?”

“A boyfriend, duuuuh,” she said in an obvious tone in response to my perceived confusion. “Or a sugar daddy, whatever. Basically, you got someone to hook up with?”

Her words threw me off.

Sure, I was aware of the common knowledge that love talk went wherever girls did. Especially with Ryo-chin; she loved that stuff. Her eyes really sparkled every time she talked about it.

*But, how do I put it... This was the first time I’ve had anyone approach the matter like this.*

“You’re out of line, Kyouka~. What if her sex partner’s a girlfriend, or maybe a sugar mama~? You need to be more considerate~,” Mayu-san interjected.

“Whoopsie! But yeah, that’s OK too!”

*OK in what way? How?*

“Ummm...”

“Ah, sorry,” she suddenly apologized sincerely, looking as if she’d realized that this wasn’t the sort of conversation you’d spring up on someone you’d only just properly met.

Or so I thought...

“You should totally start with yourself first if you’re gonna ask someone that, right!?” she then perked up again. “Totally unfair of me~”

“Exactly,” Mayu-san agreed. “Reflect on your actions, Kyouka.”

“Kaaaaay, whoopsie daisy. As for me, *hmmm*? I haven’t seen anyone for about the past three months now. I’ve wanted to find a proper boyfriend since comin’ here, *y’knoow*? Oh, and even though I’ve had sex, we’ve never quite made it to the dating stage.”

“Wha—?”

*Shouldn’t it be the opposite?*

“Yuuta: the one I left behind in Fukuoka... Maybe I made a mistake there,” she continued in a reflective tone. “But y’know, I couldn’t exactly ask a promisin’ young guy to drop everything and chase after me. A young guy who gives his all sure is nice, even if he’s pretty clumsy at it, *amiriiti*? He was really cute, wasn’t *heee*? That Yuuta.”

Yuuta, a name mentioned that made my heart skip.

*That’s not him, that’s not him.* That *Yuuta*’s not Yuuta.

“Gotcha. So you’re not into younger guys, huh, Saki-chan?”  
Kyouka asked, misreading my expression.

*That’s not what I meant at all.*

“It really is easier to leave it to someone older and more experienced, isn’t it~? Mayu-san spoke up next in her gentle, unhurried tone. “There are older people who aren’t composed too, though. But whether it’s a man or a woman, things tend to go smoother if the other person has more experience, or so I’ve heard, you *knooow~?* Plus, older partners don’t get all embarrassed every single time when buying condoms; they just take care of it properly.”

“Come to think of it, *I* was the one buying them back there. He’d just charge off right away if you didn’t do or say anything ‘bout it, wouldn’t *heee*? Training him to wait sure was tough,” Kyouka-san commented, before starting to mull things over by herself. “Guess it really was a waste to let him go after going through all that trouble, huh? But y’know, I really wanted to get into the entertainment industry. ‘It’s gotta be Tokyo for that,’ was all I had thought of.”

It looked like both of these girls already had plenty of experience back in high school, judging from the things they were saying. None of my friends—Maaya or anyone else—had been like that. I’d never even seen anyone at Suisei high being like that, I’ll tell you for sure. And yet, today on April 12th—not even a full two weeks since becoming a uni student—here I was, suddenly face-to-face with not one, but two exceptions.

*No way... No way this is it, but could it be there were actually a ton of kids with that sort of experience, and everyone had just been hiding it?*

“So well, do you have a boyfriend?” Kyouka-san asked.

*Guh.*

“I do, but...”

“Of course, right~!?!? Totally called it! Knew you had one! What’d I tell ya, Mayu!”

“Having a boyfriend and someone to hook up with are two different things though, am I right~...?” Mayu-san murmured softly in response to the all smug Kyouka-san beside her.

My heart lurched at her words, prompting Mayu-san to look at me at that moment, giving what seemed like the faintest of mysterious smiles... Or so it looked that way? Kyouka-san, caught up in her own excitement on the other hand, didn't seem to notice.

"As expected of Gal Master!"

"Please drop that nickname you two. I'm begging you."

"Then... Gal Boss?"

*That's even worse*, I thought, shaking my head firmly.

Agreeing to something like that here would definitely mean cementing my fate to being called "Gal Boss" for the next four years, no question.

After that, Kyouka-san, who'd completely mistaken me for an experienced sister-in-arms, continued talking to me as if I were. Unable to bring myself to correct her, I ended up just going along with the whole flow.

*Damn it. I should've honestly just admitted that I had no experience*, I thought regretfully, despite it meaning giving up the title of Gal Master if I had done that. *Or rather, I never even wanted that title in the first place.*

And so, despite being inexperienced, I ended up spending two whole hours listening to my two practically brand-new friends go on and on about their "experiences."

I was completely mentally drained by the time I got home, exhausted to the core. All I wanted to do was crash straight into bed.

And yet, just as I stepped up onto the hallway at the entrance...

"I'm home," a voice rang out.

It was Asamura-kun.

He had surprised me so much that my heart nearly leapt out of my chest. A complete and utter overreaction.

"You startled me," I called out to him. "We ended up getting home at almost the same time, didn't we?"

“Welcome back, *uhhhh*... Saki,” he said, beating me to the whole “welcome back” routine before I could even say that I was home.

“Ah, I’m home...” I replied hastily, with Kyouka-san’s earlier words flashing across my mind just as I was about to say his name.

*“A young guy who gives his all sure is nice, even if he’s pretty clumsy at it, amiriite? He was really cute, wasn’t heeee? That Yuuta.”*

*That’s not him, that’s not him. This Yuuta’s not that Yuuta.*

“...Yuuta... -niisan,” I finally finished addressing him after a brief moment.

*Right, this Yuuta’s Asamura-kun; my nii-san, I thought, hurriedly tacking on the “niisan” to rein in my hammering heart. It’s not him, it’s not him, this Yuuta’s the inexperienced Yuuta.*

He wasn’t younger than me either. Though technically only by a week, he was still older.

*I never imagined I’d end up depending on that whole “just by one week but still my older brother” logic—the very reasoning I had once called unfair—to steady my rationality, I thought.*

With that, I retreated to my room as if I was running away.

Eighteen was the age you’d start preparing for adulthood.

And part of becoming an adult also meant drawing closer to “those sorts of things.”

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[1]: Okay I guess I'll leave an explanation here since I'm only 90% on the localization fitting here: the girl actually says “めんごめんご” (“mengo mengo”), with めんご being an old, Showa era way of saying “ごめん” (“gomen,” literally “sorry”) in an insincere and childish tone. “Whoopsy daisy” is the localization I chose, since it's the closest I could find to being from the Showa era (it originates from the 1920s according to Google) while sounding childish.

[2]: Specifically “鏡” (“kagami,” literally “mirror”) and 花 (“hana,” literally “flower”). Interestingly, the hiragana uses “きょうか” originally when the other girl first addresses her, but then uses “きようか” here. The difference being the former using the normal sized “よ,” making pronounced as “Kyouka.” My guess is it's just some inconsistency error, given Kyouka actually says it with “きようか,” and you're more inclined to actually read “鏡花” as “Kyouka.”

## April 25th (Monday) - Yuuta Asamura

It was a sunny day, one with a temperature that had been rising since the morning.

The sunlight that streamed into the dining room was nothing but dazzling, cementing the idea that today was going to be another hot day. The light that hit the glass vase on the table dispersed in a pattern defined only by each wavelength's unique refractive index, scattering a prism of seven colors.

According to the forecast, some parts within the Kanto region were expected to reach over a whopping 30°C today.

“Looks like it’ll be hot,” I commented, earning a nod from Ayase-san as she sat across from me at the table.

It was currently nearing eight o’clock. At this rate, even Ayase-san, who had the shorter commute, wouldn’t make it for her first period lecture. But that was no issue for today; she hadn’t registered for any morning lectures on Monday, after all. And as for me, though I didn’t have a second period lecture, today’s first period one was cancelled due to the lecturer having to attend a conference.

With that, we were able to relax, basking together in the morning light for the first time in a while.

“O’ coffee, o’ coffee,” Ayase-san sang. “Want another cup?”

“I think I’ll take you up on that,” I replied.

“Roger. Pass me your cup, I’ll wash it.”

“It’s just fine like this though, isn’t it?”

“We’re opening a new bag of beans; you’d want to enjoy it properly, right?”

*Oh, that’s why...*

Looks like the last of the beans had been used up with our first cups after breakfast.

“I’ll wash the cups then. Can you handle the brewing, Saki?”

“Got it.”

“I’m home,” a voice then called out with the front door opening, just as we were talking like that, belonging to none other than Stepmom.

“Huh?” Ayase-san reflexively glanced at the clock on the wall, with me immediately following her gaze.

It was currently just past 8:05, a little early for her to be coming home. Stepmom appeared in the dining room before long, with Ayase-san and I both greeting her with a, “Welcome home.”

“Yes, I’m home,” she replied. “So you’re both starting late today, hm?”

“My lectures start in the afternoon. Yuuta-niisan’s morning one was apparently cancelled. *Uhhh*, so, Mom. Eaten yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Then I’ll get it ready, m’kay? Just sit down.”

“I’ll go heat the bath up then, alright?” I added.

From what Ayase-san had told me, though whether she ate before coming home varied day by day, Stepmom always took a bath right before heading to bed. Heading to the bathroom with that in mind, I checked if there was any water left in the tub before pressing the button to reheat it.

The current bath routine at the Asamura household for weekdays goes as so: Dad → me → Ayase-san → Stepmom (in the morning). The water gets changed after all four of us use it, of course. And depending on how dirty it gets, we sometimes drained and refilled it earlier, so it always needed checking.

By the way, Stepmom apparently takes a shower before she heads off to work to wash off any sweat too, but she usually didn’t soak in the bath tub during then.

Anyway, setting those details aside, I returned to the dining room from the bathroom, noticing how Stepmom was still unusually seated at the table while still in her work clothes. With Ayase-san handing her a glass of some barley tea fresh out of the fridge, she drank it down with obvious relish, tilting the glass savoringly before then letting out a long, relaxed sigh.

“As I thought; is it really *that* hot outside?” I asked.

“That it is~. It feels like summer already,” Stepmom replied. “Ah, thanks for getting the bath ready, Yuuta-kun. Having such a thoughtful son sure helps.”

“It’s not really *that*...” I started in an attempt to play it down.

“No really, you’ve both grown so dependable; it sure helps,” yet she warmly said again before I could finish, this time glancing between me and Ayase-san.

With that, having missed the chance to brush it off, I could only sit there feeling awkward.

“Isn’t it too late to be saying this now? We’re already eighteen,” Ayase-san said as if it were obvious, with me nodding in agreement as she did.

“I wonder if that’s so?” Stepmom raised her doubtful tone. “Hey, Saki...”

“What?” Ayase-san sat down across the table, prompted by Akiko-san’s<sup>[1]</sup> glance.

Her eyes then turned to me, and I figured that she was silently telling me to sit as well.

I slid into the seat beside Ayase-san.

“Becoming someone your parents can depend on isn’t the only thing that counts to behaving like an adult,” Stepmom spoke.

*I wonder what she’s getting at.*

“This is just how I see it,” she then prefaced, “but I think being an adult means being able to be responsibly irresponsible.”

*Responsibly irresponsible... No, what?*

“If you were truly an adult, right, then you wouldn’t back down no matter what your parents say or try to do. Because their shadows will always hang over your choices when you bend to what they say, whether or not you succeed or fail.

Hearing her words pushed me into a deep thought, and I repeated them in my head a few times.

“*Uhhh*, so you mean something like this?” I then spoke up. “That holding back on doing what *you* want—because you’re worried about your parents—means you’re really just throwing away your own readiness to take responsibility yourself, and dumping it onto them instead?”

Stepmom nodded at my words. Ayase-san, on the other hand, still didn’t look like she’d fully grasped either what her mother or I had just said.

“But it’s not like you or Stepdad’s ever forced anything on us, right, Mom?” she said.

“That’s right. I don’t want to do that either.”

“Then, we’re not exactly at odds with you or him, aren’t we, Mom?”

*Oh, I get it... What she’s implying makes sense too...*

“Even I don’t want to do anything that you or Stepdad would not like, Mom,” Ayase-san then reassured.

*I understand your logic, but what’s the reason for going out of your way to bring it up in the first place? Was what Ayase-san was basically getting at. What’s more, why would we go so far as to make us sit right in front of you? She probably thought too.*

“You know what, Saki, Yuuta-kun...” Stepmom addressed us once again. “Can the both of you make your own decisions on *your* futures without holding back for my sake or Taichi’s?”

Her sudden question threw me off, and yet, her expression at that moment was more serious than any I'd ever seen from her before. Even I could sense—even if it was only a feeling deep in my gut—that she was about to say something incredibly important.

“Uhhh...” I let out a troubling voice, all the while my palms started to sweat.

The sudden tension in the air made me awfully aware of the half-finished glass of barley tea in front of me, and my throat suddenly turned dry as the Sahara.

*Could we decide on our own futures without holding back for Stepmom or my old man?*

That was essentially the question she was posing, and yet I couldn't help but feel that it was most likely her roundabout way of hinting that she'd noticed my relationship with Ayase-san. I flicked my eyes toward her. She too wore an uneasy, almost tense expression.

What if my old man or Stepmom—or even the both of them—were opposed to me and Ayase-san being a couple? “We’re begging you, please stop.” What if they asked that?

“I’m sure I don’t want to make you two sad...” I confessed my honest feelings. “But at the same time, I don’t think that means I have to do *whatever* you two ask me to. Leaving decisions that should be ours to the both of you would just mean pushing our responsibilities onto you.”

“Mm,” Ayase-san agreed. “I feel the same.”

Stepmom let out a relieved sigh in response.

“I want the two of you to treasure your own lives above all else,” she made clear. “There’s no guaranteeing that *our* judgment will always be right...”

Logically speaking, that was obvious. But whether a parent could actually bring themselves to admit it to their child? That was another matter.

*Parents are just the type of people who want their children to see them as flawless, I guess.*

“You know what...?” Stepmom began again, her phrasing making it clear that she was changing the subject.

It promoted Ayase-san to draw in a sharp gasp next to me, seemingly already predicting her words.

*Just what on Earth could it be for her to be this surprised...?*

“Our family might grow..., whether it’s a little brother or sister...”

*Huh? A li’l brother or sister? I thought, my mind going completely blank as her words hit me all a sudden. Uhhh, in other words..., they’re having a child? My old man and Stepmom?*

But then it hit me.

*Ahhh, I get it.*

All she did was *tell* us that our family might be growing; she never *asked* if it was okay if it did.

In other words, she wasn’t asking for our permission.

*That makes sense.*

Besides, if we were to oppose Stepmom right here—and make my old man and her give up on this—then we’d have no choice but to give up what *we* wanted if the reverse situation were to happen in the future. That is, if Stepmom or my old man were to plead with us to end our relationship.

Sure, the reality was that there were probably many parents out there who, for the sake of their children’s lives, gave up on their own wishes. But *we* couldn’t let it be like that. Because if Ayase-san or I were to ever learn about it, it would incline us to abandon our own wishes as well.

*“I want the two of you to treasure your own lives above all else,”* Stepmom had said.

In order to persuade us of that value, she couldn’t have possibly come to us here seeking our permission. Even if, in reality, the positions and responsibilities of a parent and their child were asymmetrical.

I looked again at Stepmom. Her hands were clasped together on the table, clenched tightly as though she was trying to crush the anxiety of whether her own words would reach us.

Stepmom, like all parents, was flawless. Such was a line of reasoning that childhood me would have once thought. But as I grew closer to adulthood, I now came to understand that parents were just ordinary people like us. Those who worried, got confused, suffered, and those who simply lived life experiencing the outcome of choices they believed to be the best at the time.

So, with that thought in mind, I abandoned all the possible answers that had been rampaging throughout my head within the past few seconds.

“Having our family grow makes me happy,” I told her instead. “Saki probably feels the same too.”



A small gasp rippled throughout the dining room at that moment, though I couldn't tell whether it came from Stepmom or from Ayase-san beside me.

"Can you both promise me that you won't use this as a reason to hold back from doing the things *you* two want to do?" Stepmom asked immediately after, releasing her clasped hands.

In other words, it'll be my old man and her who'd shoulder the difficulty of raising a baby; she didn't want us to go out of our own ways to adjust our lives out of consideration. She was essentially saying that she wouldn't push for another child if it meant placing a burden on either me or Ayase-san.

*The positions that parents and children hold really aren't symmetrical, huh?*

Or rather, maybe it was more correct to say that it was pretty much impossible to see it in that light. Parents will often tell their children to live freely, and yet when it comes to what *they* want, they wouldn't push for it if their children didn't like it.

*Ah, so that's what it means to be a parent,* I thought, with the realization really only settling within me now.

"It's fine; I promise," I reassured Stepmom.

"*Mm,*" Ayase-san nodded in agreement. "I promise too. But I want you to tell us anytime if it ever gets hard. We're family, after all."

It was my turn to nod beside her this time.

"*Phew,*" Stepmom let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, really," she added, before continuing with a slightly bashful smile. "Honestly, we were actually thinking of taking our time and only having it once the two of you graduated from university and started to live on your own. But with my age and strength, I feel like this year or the next might really be our last chance."

Having never faced the risks or hardships that came with pregnancy and childbirth myself, there was nothing I could possibly say. All I could only do was listen as she went on.

“I love the two of you as your parent, and I’m truly happy that you’ve both grown up so well. But alongside these feelings as a mother, I also have the genuine wish to give birth to and raise a child with Taichi-san,” she explained, finishing her words before adding a comment in a soft murmur. “Oh well, it isn’t exactly the kind of thing you can just decide to make happen for sure though...”

*Oh, so this is what that was about,* I thought back to what Ayase-san had talked about before.

*“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.”*

*Why hadn’t it clicked with me back then?* I wondered, knowing what her words meant now.

“A li’l brother or sister, huh? Looking forward to it,” I declared, making sure to say it in a voice as bright as possible, having already faced Stepmom’s anxiety.

And though this was the only thing I could do as her son for now, I wouldn’t, of course, hesitate to help her if she needed it in the future. I genuinely meant it when I said I was looking forward to it, after all.

With the conversation having ended, Ayase-san and I stood up to head back to our rooms and get ready for our afternoon lectures.

“Ah, Saki. Just a moment,” yet Stepmom called out as we did so, stopping her.

Though I stood there for a bit, wondering about what they might talk about, I eventually went to my room, figuring out that it was probably something only women could speak about with each other.

As I stuffed my textbooks into my bag, my thoughts meandered toward the change that would likely come about within a year from now.

*Our family will grow,* I reflected, just as I looked around my room.

Just two years ago, this apartment had felt far too big for just me and my old man. Yet now...

*It'd be better to have a child's room, wouldn't it? I found myself thinking.*

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[1]: Yes, he defaults to calling her this here; don't know why. Yuuta has been calling Akiko “亞季子義母さん” (Akiko-gibosan) since the start of this volume, with “gibosan” being the honorific for Stepmom. Hence the localization to *just* Stepmom. It's the same localization the two previous two fan translators did with how Saki addresses Taichi (“太一お義父さん”: Taichi-ogifusan, same deal). No, “Akiko-san, my stepmother,” is not a proper nor accurate conveyance of the tone here.

## April 28th (Thursday) - Saki Ayase

Silence dominated the university lecture hall, accompanied only by the dry, systematic tone of the lecturer writing on the blackboard. The steady rhythm was almost hypnotic, with the written words appearing like nothing more than pale shadows. Yet, from the moment they did, they seemed to peel away from the blackboard, as if evaporating right into the air.

My hand, moving across my notebook to jot them down, was unsteady, as though it lacked any strength at its core.

*CHild. Child. CHILD. Child.*<sup>11</sup>

That word, sticking out from that conversation I had with Mom the other day, kept endlessly reverberating in my head.

*It's only natural if two people fall in love and get married, right?* I posed the question, before answering it myself. Yeah...

I thought I understood the concept. Yet, the moment I actually recognized it as something real, I felt as though I had been tossed into an unfamiliar world, overwhelmed by a formless anxiety.

What does it mean to get married? What does it mean to have a family? Or to have children? Such were thoughts that kept circling and circling in my head, running from front to back, right to left, back and forth. Before I realized it, my mind could think of nothing else.

*It's all Mom's fault.*

*"Saki, in just two years you'll reach the same age I was when I had you,"* she had leaned in close to whisper just to me that day, right after she'd spoken to Asamura-kun and me about having a child. *"It's why I'm sure that day will come for you before long. No matter who your partner will be, I..., and Taichi-san too, will definitely give you our blessings. Please believe in that, if nothing else, okay?"*

My mind went completely blank the moment she spoke those words; the way she conveyed them showed that she was certain that partner in question was the very person I thought she wouldn't bless.

Though Mom had already spoken to me before in a way that suggested she'd already noticed, this time it felt like confirmation. What's more, the very fact that she went out of her way to add "and Taichi-san too" could only mean one thing: she was assuming that my partner would be none other than Asamura-kun. My stepbrother, Yuuta.

*As expected, you're sharp, Mom.*

Maybe I couldn't lie about it anymore.

"*I, and Asamura-kun...*" I had almost blurted, leaning forward with that thought in mind.

Yet just before that, Mom softly placed her finger on my lips, stopping me right as I uttered the "A" of "Asamura-kun."

"*I'm not pressing you for an answer, really,*" she had said, smiling gently. "*I just wanted to let you know that your choices are yours alone, and we'll bless it. I won't ask about it until the day truly comes. Cherish the time you have now, and nurture your love slowly.*"

She had seen through everything, and yet avoided saying anything decisive.

*How unfair, I thought.*

But then again, maybe *this* was what an adult's kindness was.

I had always believed that showing the other person your hand and reconciling your differences was important, that that, in itself, was what it meant to be an adult.

But even so, the world wasn't always neatly black and white. Compromise wasn't always necessarily the right choice in each and every case. For example, it can, at times, carry the notion that you wouldn't trust the other party unless they laid all their cards on the table, amounting to that of a cold declaration that you had no intentions of giving more than what was written in contract.

By leaving things vague and entrusting them all to me, Mom's way of communicating felt like it stemmed from unconditional love. On top of that, the fact that she chose to speak to me alone showed that she most likely came from a place of love—and strictness—for her own daughter.

*"Take your mother's words to heart, and think about what the two of you will do together,"* was what she was basically getting at. *"Take the lead and decide, Saki,"* and so on.

\*Clack,\* came the sharp, resounding sound of chalk on the blackboard, jolting me back from my drifting voyage of thought.

*No good; I need to focus.*

I've heard more than enough about former honor students who ended up failing to become capable adults after slacking off in their four years of university.

*Surely this sort of lack of concentration piling up bit by bit was what sent them tumbling down,* I thought, sternly scolding myself.

Still, universities were places littered with devilish temptations.

"The guy I met from this matching app yesterday was seriously insane!" Kyouka-san exclaimed. "Super tall with a chest like a wall!"

"See~? Older guys are the best, aren't *theeey~?*" Mayu-san followed up.

"Gah, I wanna stick with younger guys, but... if it's just for fun, stepping up the ages works too!"

It was currently a break between lectures, and I had gotten swept up into a brutally intense conversation about relationships at the terrace of a campus cafe, forcibly reminding me about the very subject I had been chewing over.

Mom's talk about "making a baby" was something earnest—a serious topic that related to the future of our lives itself. On the other hand, the same topic came up in my classmates' casual chatter as something fleeting and feather-light.

*It's the same thing, so why's it treated so differently? I thought, faced with the sheer difference in perception. And how am I supposed to face it myself?*

Still, talking with Kyouka-san made me realize once again just how powerful words were.

*The gravity of definitions, the pull of prejudice, or maybe the binding force of titles in effect, huh?* I mused, only managing vague nods while barely keeping up with most of the sex talk.

Yet, with the firmly fixed image of me in Kyouka-san's mind as her "Gal Master," she never once noticed, no matter how many blunders I made.

Such was the power of definitions, of prejudice, and of titles.

*So then... What am I, really?*



By the time I finished my last university lecture and was about to leave, the sky had already taken on a reddish tint. With the lingering chill that had lasted all throughout March already beginning to wither away, I walked toward the station, stifling a yawn that threatened to escape into the faintly warm air which in turn had started to take its place.

*Whoops, not good,* I thought as I straightened my back.

Showing such a careless side of myself outdoors? What a disgrace. Sure, I had lately begun to think that I was fine just as long as I kept up my armaments, but that didn't mean I wanted how I looked to become all soft and fluffy.

Taking the Chuo-Sobu line to Yoyogi, I transferred to the Yamanote Line. Leaving through the Hachiko Exit, I crossed Shibuya Crossing and headed toward the building that housed the bookstore where I worked part-time, realizing that I had grown pretty used to the whole sequence of movements.

*This life, too, will end the day after tomorrow.*

Working shifts at a job where I already knew I was quitting sure brought about a strange feeling. It wasn't exactly exhilarating, nor was it melancholic either. Instead, it felt as if I was already not here at all, while at the same time being allowed to catch just a small glimpse into a world without me... As if I was drifting along like a ghost.

Today's shift was with none other than Asamura-kun and Erina Kozono-san.

*I'll be the only one gone here starting next month, huh?* I found myself absentmindedly thinking as I watched the two of them work. *Has Kozono-san changed a little?*

She had always been someone who dressed stylishly, but it wasn't just that now. There was this sort of allure radiating from within her body: a subtle, mature charm. Or maybe it was better to say her sex appeal had grown. It was as if she was spreading her pheromones around.

*No, I don't actually know if she's giving off something like that.*

Maybe it was because she had become a second-year high schooler now, the junior high vibe to her had completely vanished.

And it wasn't just that she had become more alluring; she had also become quite the capable part-timer. Thanks to having excellent mentors in both Shiori-san and Asamura-kun, her customer service and capacity in handling inquiries was nothing short of flawless. We'd been getting a lot of foreign customers lately as well, but thanks to her attending an international school, she looked to be good at English too. It allowed her to handle them without calling for another staff member.

*Amazing. She's killing it.*

I then glanced sideways. There, Asamura-kun was adjusting some book cover. Though he focused on his hands, he kept an edge of his awareness turned to whether any customer was approaching the register. Realizing that he wasn't gazing at Kozono-san like how I was, I found myself oddly relieved.

"Hm? Something wrong?" he asked, noticing my gaze.

“Eh? No, mm. It’s nothing,” I made that quick excuse.

*Did he realize something’s off about me? Do I come up with some sort of excuse?* I worried, turning such a thought over in my head before going over a few possibilities. *No, this won’t work... Not that either...*

“Ah,” Asamura-kun then murmured in the next moment.

Yet, his gaze wasn’t directed at me, but instead just slightly off to the side.

*Oh crap, a customer!* I thought, turning around quickly in a fluster.

“Ah, Fujinami-san,” Asamura-kun called out to her.

“Heya,” the woman—so tall that you’d instinctively flinch if she appeared before you suddenly—lightly waved her hand in front of her chest as she replied, before continuing to talk with Asamura-kun across the register counter. “It’s been a while, hm? You still work here even after getting into uni? Ah... no, I mean, about *getting* into uni...”

“It’s all good, really. Got into my first choice with no problem.”

“So that’s how it is? Then, I can talk without holding back, hm?”

“And you, Fujinami-san?”

“I got in too. Waseho’s Law School,” she declared in a flat voice devoid of any excitement, utterly lacking in party-girl vibes as she flashed a half-hearted peace sign with both her hands.

She was someone whom I couldn’t figure out: whether she was easygoing or not, and whether she was lighthearted or serious.

*...Huh? More importantly, I feel like I’ve seen this girl somewhere before.*

I racked through my memory. A tall, model-like girl who looked like she didn't spend much time on her simply styled black hair. Her clothes were plain too, but the glasses she had on featured an elegant frame. It was also clear that, though it didn't look like she was consciously aiming to stand out, the clothes she chose to wear harbored colors and designs that suited her body type and overall impression. I couldn't deny that she had good taste.

*I feel like I've seen a girl like that at least once before... I mused again as I continued to comb through my mind. Ah, that's it.*

It was on the day I had waited in front of Asamura-kun's cram school in the hopes of going home with him. I recall seeing her leaving the building then, thinking how distinctively beautiful she was.

*Fujinami-san, huh?*

I get it. So she's the "female friend I talk often to at cram school," isn't she?

*Hmm... I see. Hmm...*

She might look plain at a first glance, sure, but that was clearly just the impression she was going for. Her features were actually pretty striking, and you could also make out the piercings in her ears that suggested that she must've worn some earrings before.

*No, the fact they haven't shriveled up means she still wears them, I think.*

Maybe she only dressed down on weekdays and went for a much more daring appearance on the weekends.

Whether it was because of her imposing height, or maybe even the sharpness in her eyes behind those glasses, she carried an air that compelled others to straighten their postures, despite not behaving in any domineering way at all herself.



*How frustrating.*

It wasn't as if he'd hidden her complete existence from me, but I never expected her to be *this* beautiful. What's more, there was this sort of frustration that I only felt toward her; Shiori-san and Kozono-san had been different.

*How do I put it... I can't really express it in words, but... Ah, right, that's it.*

She felt just a little bit similar to me.

If I was considered as his romantic interest, then so could she. That was what it somehow ended up feeling like.

*No, well, it's not like I think Asamura-kun's the type to do anything like that. I trust him. I do. But still, hmm... I chewed over the thought, keeping my eyes down and focusing on only my hands as I fiddled with some book covers, all while the two of them continued to chat.*

It didn't feel like it was my place to barge into their conversation, especially when we didn't really know each other to start with.

"Oh, right, Ayase-san. Got a sec?" yet Asamura-kun called out to me.

"...What?" I reflexively let out a curt reply to his question in a tone so cold that it startled even me.

*Am I stupid? I thought immediately after. Don't show your bad mood so blatantly, me.*

"This is Fujinami-san. I think I've mentioned her before," Asamura-kun explained. "Y'know, my friend from cram school."

"Ah, her..." I said, putting on a face that showed that I had already guessed that much, while suggesting at the same time that I hadn't been thinking much about it at all.

"And this is Ayase-san."

"I had a hunch about that," Fujinami-san told Asamura-kun in a casual tone.

*Gah... I struggled, biting at the lips of my heart. So she had already noticed me from the corner of her eye and connected the dots, either while approaching the register or when talking with Asamura-kun, didn't she?*

She had essentially recognized me in the same way as I did, thought in the same way, and yet compared to my pretentious act, she was completely composed and honest.

It made me realize how petty I was, and it stung a little.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Kaho Fujinami,” Fujinami-san introduced herself. “‘Fuji’ as in the usual Fuji, and ‘nami’ as in wave. Then there’s summer *sail*: Kaho Fujinami.”

“Summer... *sale*...?” I repeated her words, picturing the flashy red-and-yellow stickers slapped on bargain items as they flickered through my mind.

“Not *sale* as in selling, but *sail* as in setting *sail*,” she clarified.

“Setting the *seal*...? [2] Eh? Ehhh...?” I stumbled, misunderstanding which kanji character she was getting at again, in large part due to me having just imagined a bunch of stickers.

“Didn’t get through to you, huh? I was confident that a self-intro like this would make me instantly memorable. Guess my prep wasn’t enough,” she lamented, bowing her head deeply.

“Ah, no, I’m the one who should apologize,” I said, giving a bow of my own in return. “I’m just too slow to catch on...”

*What’s with this weird feeling?*

Shiori-san’s lighthearted humor had its own sort of sparkle, but this was different. Fujinami-san was simply a type of person I’d never ever encountered before, so no matter how much I rummaged through my drawers, I couldn’t find the right response.

And yet, the fangs of jealousy that had just begun to sprout within me fell away with a plop.

“Probably not the best to chat too long while you’re both working,” she said. “I should get going too... Ah, I’ll buy these,” she then held up the books she had.

“Ah, yes. Right this way,” Asamura-kun chimed, prompting Fujinami-san to place them down on the counter (with them being books about politics and international affairs or something).

*She’s in law school; isn’t this not related to law?*

With that fleeting thought, I switched myself into customer service mode as well.

“Would you like a book cover?” I asked.

“Ah, I’ll take one, please.”

“Certainly.”

“I’ll help, Ayase-san.”

“Thank you very much, Asamura-san.”

\*Beep, beep, beep.\* Scanning the barcodes, I handed the books off to Asamura-kun, who in turn took and wrapped them in covers with professional speed, yet with a touch as gentle as a soft flutter of feathers.

Fujinama-san then ended up paying with her smartphone.

Paper books—almost unchanging cultural symbols for decades—being purchased with the latest technology.

*It’s sort of strange, isn’t it?*

It wasn’t something I would’ve noticed if Asamura-kun and Shiori-san hadn’t broached a similar topic a while back though. But now, having been fully conscious about it, I did think it felt a little bit surreal.

The way Fujinami-san tapped her phone so casually, her expression composed and unchanging as if she were just buying some bottle of tea at a convenience store, made me feel that way all the more.

Having finished with her shopping, she then raised her hand to a wave before giving a small bow.

“Right then, *c’yaaa*,” she bid her goodbye, leaving the store with a sway in her steps that made me genuinely worry about whether she even had a spine or not.

Just as she left, Kozono-san came walking back from the sales floor.

“That person just now was super tall, seriously,” she lowered her voice from behind us at the counter. “Eh, Senpai, you guys know her?”

“She’s Asamura-san’s friend,” I answered, maintaining my distant, workplace tone.

“*Uhhh...* Ayase-san?” Asamura-kun spoke up. “The way you’re talking somehow kinda feels...”

Sharp, maybe? No, of course not. I had no reason to be jealous.

“She was really gorgeous and had a model’s figure... Yuuta-senpai..., seriously?” Kozono-san then pressed him mercilessly.

“That’s not it, that’s *really* not it,” Asamura-kun refuted.

His flustered denials looked pathetic, so far from suave that it looped all the way back around to being endearing.

“*Pfft...*” I couldn’t help but snicker.

“Ayase-san? *Uhhh*, what’s with that laugh just now?”

“It’s nothing, really.”

“*Huuuh...?*”

*Yep, nothing at all.*

Sure, it’d be completely and utterly outrageous if Asamura-kun really were the unfaithful type, going so far as to secretly have some improper relationship with someone like Fujinami-san. But there’s just no way such a thing could happen; I trust him. It was only the small, trivial everyday things that I always ended up getting jealous about, so it wasn’t as if I was seriously insecure or anything.

*This sort of thing’s just harmless messing about, nothing more.*

If anything, what I should be worried about was what I was about to broach next.

Specifically, about how that snicker wasn't ridicule directed at Asamura-kun.

But rather ridicule directed at myself.

"Are you really okay, me?" it had instead practically conveyed.

*And that makes sense, doesn't it? If anything, I was so absurd that it'd make you want to laugh.*

If I had already become jealous over Fujinami-san, someone whom he'd introduced to me fairly and squarely, then what would become of me once next month rolled around?

The day after tomorrow would be my last day on the job, after all. That meant my time with Asamura-kun was bound to shrink.



My shift ended.

As always, Asamura-kun and I walked side by side along the usual road home today. It was the same route, and yet the scenery wasn't quite what it had been from back when we were still in high school.

First, the time was different.

Ever since April came upon us, my shifts have been starting at around 6 or 7 p.m. (depending on when my last lecture ended), lasting all the way 'til midnight. Back in high school, the law governed us out of all shops by 10 p.m. But now, freed from such a restriction, we were able to boldly stroll around through Shibuya in the dead of night.

*And no, I don't have plans on partying out late or anything.*

The Shibuya past midnight looked worlds apart from the Shibuya at around nine o'clock. It was as if the level of how safe it was had dropped down a notch, or rather, there were more drunkards wandering around compared to those who weren't. And since the more "decent" types had made sure to head home by the last train, those who remained were, well—to put it harshly—the more hopeless ones. The scraps of conversations I could make out from here and there were just louder and more brash, I guess.

And then there was another big change.

Asamura-kun no longer pushed his bike.

I'd asked him why a while back, and apparently it was because he had simply nowhere to park it. He always had a place for it back in high school, and there was even a rack at his cram school. Even the place where we worked part-time had a spot near it where you could park your bike for free, albeit you had to pay to go for more than two hours.

But now that he was a uni student, he'd have to rack up a ton of fees if he used the paid lot near the station, using it all the way through his classes and then his part-time shift afterward. So, even though nothing had changed for him at work or home, his way of commuting had completely transformed.

*Just a small change in daily life can make everything change this much, huh? I couldn't help but chew over the thought. I wonder what will change for me then?*

Just being out at midnight instead of 9 p.m. made even the streets of Shibuya feel different, and just by moving onto university from high school, Asamura-kun's daily habits had changed completely. As for me, I was going further: quitting my part-time job at the bookstore to go off to an internship position somewhere completely different. My daily rhythm, the scenery I'd see—everything would change.

*It makes me anxious.*

And with that looming anxiety came the realization of just how much I've been depending on *him* this whole time. On Asamura-kun—on Yuuta Asamura—and the time I've spent with him.

The reason why someone like me—someone so innately jealous and dependent—hadn’t gone crazy up ’til this point, and the reason why I was able to nurture a gentle, comfortable sort of love—satisfied with even a slow, plain relationship—was because that very Yuuta Asamura had spent so much time right beside me.

And yet after tomorrow, that world would end.

The very environment that had allowed us to share so much time together would be broken apart, and what would come in its stead would be a world in which it was harder to see what the other was up to.

How would Asamura-kun and Kozono-san work together, and what sort of conversations would they have? Would Shiori-san still drop by the bookstore from time to time? What about Fujinami-san? All of that would become utterly invisible to me.

*Well, I wouldn’t be able to argue if you said that’s normal, and that most couples are actually like that.*

Or rather, I already understood that much myself. I knew that overly tying down your partner’s life wasn’t good; that wanting to be super possessive was completely wrong.

*I obviously know that without being told, don’t I?* I convinced myself.

Then once again, I recalled Mom’s words.

The refrain begins once more.

*What does it mean to get married? What does it mean to have a family? Or to have children—*

“You okay?” a gentle voice spoke up, cutting my endless looping thoughts.

*Thank you, Asamura-kun.*

Even though it was something I could only say in my heart.

“Mm. It’s nothing.”

Before I knew it, the version of me who wore her mask of strength and coolness had spoken, rejecting his kindness.

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[1]: The word “child” was written here in different orthographies, specifically (in order) hiragana, kanji + hiragana, katakana, and just kanji. “こども。子ども。コドモ。子供。”

Hiragana is often used as a pronunciation guide for words kanji (as furigana), hence the localization to English phonetic transcription.

Kanji + hiragana is just standard writing, hence the font being Arial.

Katakana is usually used for foreign loan words, but can be also used to emphasize local words. Hence the capitalization.

Just kanji is only used in formal/legal writing, hence the font being Times New Roman.

[2]: Here’s a breakdown. “藤” (Fuji), as she mentioned, is just the common and ordinary one, while “波” (nami) means “wave.” Kaho (夏帆) consists of “夏” for summer, and “帆” for sail. Saki mishears this for “summer sale,” which is wrong, and upon being corrected, she mistakes it for “seal.”

This is because Kaho says “張るほう,” which can either mean “to stick/set” (as in “setting the seal” of a sticker) or “to spread” (as in “spreading the sail” of a boat,) which I’ve localized to “setting sail”). This confusion is also mainly caused because Saki had just imagined a bunch of stickers as well.

Hence the double meaning, “setting sail” and “setting the seal.”

## April 29th (Friday) - Yuuta Asamura

Despite it currently being in the middle of a lecture at university, I just couldn't bring myself into focus.

Guilt's worst side effect, I think, is how it slowly and continuously gnaws away at your spirit over a long stretch of time. A corrosion of the mind that spreads throughout your entire body, like being wrapped in thinly stretched rubber, all the while your head and body grow heavier little by little, as if someone were stacking those tiny little one-gram calibration weights on you one at a time. It was something that doesn't make you fully realize how tiring it can be, and yet at any sudden moment, *haaaaah*, your fatigue shows its color through the form of a sigh that unconsciously slips from your lips.

Several days had already passed since Stepmom confided in me and Ayase-san, saying that she wanted to have a child, yet here I was still reeling from the impact of her words.

*How should I put it...? I thought, trying to find the right words for my recent state of mind. It feels as though I'm being constantly reminded of my own shamefulness with each passing day lately.*

I thought that having a child between my current parents would be nothing short of something incredibly happy and wonderful. It was a rational line of reasoning, a calm layer of thought located at the very surface of my brain that formed my judgement. A place where no negative emotions could possibly ever arise from.

Yet deeper down, not on the surface but at my brain's very core, was a sensation of "dirty thoughts" born from instinct: ideas that threatened to well up to the surface. Akin to throwing a rock into a seemingly pristine looking lake, only to witness mud from the bottom swirl up and break the water. It caused me to, without any deliberate thoughts—and almost as if reflexively—associate them with "that kind of act."

Of course, it wasn't as if I was just sitting here imagining or fantasizing about it in detail; just the idea of consciously imagining *that* was something revolting to me. Seeing family through those kinds of indecent lenses was something I'd never want to indulge in, and when such imagery does happen to break free and surface, I wanted to erase it immediately. But at the same time, just seeing Stepmom or my old man at home inevitably made me draw up such associations, and every time that I did—even if just for an instant—I would find myself loathing in a pool of hatred for projecting such thoughts, followed by being gripped by a guilt as heavy as mud.

*She'd talked to me with serious intentions; why's my mind thinking 'bout stuff like that?*

But even so, it being *only* my parents would still have been okay... No, okay it wasn't, but at least I could firmly say that it was just a spur of reflexive association rather than my own desires. That made it somewhat more copeable.

The *real* problem concerned Ayase-san—Saki—specifically the times where I'd end up picturing “that kind of act” when I spent time with her.

Just holding her hand, feeling her warmth, or even catching a whiff of her scent was enough to make me all too aware, to the point where even our most everyday conversations started to feel awkward. It was something that made me spend each living day without enough focus.

*Come to think of it, we haven't been doing any “couple” things recently: things only lovers would do.*

The right mood had just never come up recently, between all the exams, graduation, and the chaos that ensued university enrollment... Yet even now, with things having relatively settled down, the inertia from that period still persisted in lingering around. We hadn't even kissed.

*How do we bring back that kinda atmosphere again, though?*

I recalled the day we touched each other's bare skin.

If we did something like that again, slowly building intimacy while making sure to check with each other if it was okay like back then, then maybe...

*No wait, suddenly suggesting that without any trigger?* I stopped myself to reflect. Yeeaaah, how troubling.

How troubling indeed. And on top of that, here I was thinking about something like this during a university lecture. I was being pathetic and had lost all focus, and I hated myself for it.

Even as I was making my way to the student cafeteria with Nakamura and Kikuchi<sup>[1]</sup>, having been invited to lunch by them after my morning lecture ended, I still remained so lost in thought that I barely even registered their conversation.

Placing my usual order, a bowl of lotus root tempura udon (light, yet good for getting in some root vegetables that I otherwise rarely ate, having ordered it several times before now for that very reason) onto my tray, I took a seat at an open table on the terrace. While waiting for Nakamura as he indecisively went back and forth across the menu, and Kikuchi who moved along at his usual sluggish pace, I started to slurp at my noodles with an empty mind.

*No, “with an empty mind” is a lie here...*

Sure, I was *trying* to have an empty mind, but every time I caught sight of a male-female pair of students, that very indecent association popped back into my head yet again. At this point, I was seriously starting to worry if I maybe had some kinda illness.

“What’s up with ya, Yuuta? Ain’tcha been sighin’ nonstop now? Yer soul’s gonna up and leave ya, and you’ll turn into a mummy at this rate!”

“Mummies don’t become mummies because they’ve had their souls sucked out; it’s all the water, isn’t it?” I responded to Nakamura’s comment.

“*Ohhh, that’s a good one!*” Nakamura said in return. “A real smartypants comeback. We’re startin’ to see yer real flavor here, Yuuta.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, I guess.”

I had gotten pretty used to Nakamura's energy by this point. Turns out spending a few days with someone allows you to get a good surface-level sense of their personality.

In retrospect, it had been the same with Ayase-san. We'd each gotten a sense of what type of person we each were after about the first week of living together, and had even opened up a little to each other with some personal stories back then too.

“...!” I gasped.

The first week. Suddenly recalling what had happened then, the feeling of her breath and warmth right beside me in my darkened room all came flooding back. I nearly choked.

“*Haha~*. I see it now,” Nakamura grinned as he caught sight of me like that. “Woman trouble, ain’t it?”

“Huh? Why?”

“Cause there ain’t no reason as just any ol’ shit! When ya think ‘bout the stuff a college guy broods over, what else’s there besides women or pachinko, I ask ya?”

*Talk about two overly biased answers.*

“Yer girl then? Or a spot to snag one?” Nakamura asked, leaning in toward me with eyes sparkling like a mischievous boy. “Don’t fret here man, either way you’re dealin’ with an expert here. Tokyo grub sure sucks as heck, but them ladies ’ere are somthin’ else. I’ve got yer back if you wanna ditch yer V-card. Let’s scout out some good spots for that together, whatcha say!?”

“Th—that’s fine, there’s no need for that. It’s more ‘bout like, um... my girlfriend,” I decided to just be honest, albeit after a moment’s hesitation.

“*Ohhh!* You’re kiddin’ me... A naughty problem, eh?”

“...A little.”

“For real!? Shoot, let’s hear it!” Nakamura then leaned in at an even more steep angle.

I had never expected this to be that interesting to him; his energy was so far from what I had anticipated that I couldn't help but give a wry smile.

I'd actually never really interacted with someone as openly blunt and frank as Nakamura before, and never really liked the frivolous type either if I was being honest. Sure, I didn't mind the kinds of sex jokes that Yomiuri-senpai made—since they so clearly didn't hint at any of her sexual desires—but hearing things like who slept with whom, or what they liked "doing" were the types of raw conversations that I just couldn't bring myself to like. I felt that they were just far too disrespectful, as if they weren't seeing the person someone was involved with as human at all.

But maybe it was because I'd grown up a little myself, or maybe because Nakamura—despite talking about such raw, personal things—spoke in a way that carried no trace of guilt. Or maybe it was even because I was currently in an environment like university, far from home and from those important to me that I didn't want to be misunderstood by, I thought like I could afford to expose just a little of my own "dirty side."

In any case, I felt that I could actually talk about the problems weighing on me right now... At least, that's how I felt.

"Huh, what? What's this talk about?" Kikuchi, holding a tray that wafted the scent of European-style curry, asked with a frown, most likely sensing the odd atmosphere in the air.

"Dirty stuff, I'll tell ya," Nakamura answered. "Yuuta here seems to be troubled with somethin' bout his girlfriend, ya see."

*Way too blunt, man.*

I really wished he could just stop putting it that way.

"Huh? He's got a girlfriend? Whoa, man I'm jealous..." Kikuchi responded instantly, shooting me a look as if I was some sort of filth.

To be honest, I couldn't even imagine what either of them had to be jealous about, at least from my perspective. Nakamura had always been boasting about his escapades with women since the start, so that was that. And as for Kikuchi, sure, he's got this gloomy vibe to him, but his features were actually sharp, and he was actually pretty well groomed and put together, so it looked like he could definitely be popular. If he was jealous, then that meant he probably didn't have a girlfriend at the moment. But if he wanted to, it didn't really seem like it would be hard for him to find someone, with the right timing of course.

*Well, leaving Kikuchi aside here...*

"I'll spare the details, but, *uhhh*, I've been with my girlfriend since before the entrance exams," I started with some background. "Since we were busy studying, we didn't really do, you know, *those* sorts of things at all... And even though that's been over with for a while now, I still don't really know how to bring those kinds of things up again, or y'know, invite her, rather."

Given I wasn't exactly the type who could mimic Nakamura's sheer bluntness, I ended up dancing around my words instead of saying them outright.

"So you're sexless, ain't ya!?" the very guy in question then blurted. "Hah? Hold it, ya mean you've been goin' months without doin' it and you didn't get all pent up!? Ah, I getcha, you're a real master gooner! You put the 'master' in masturbate!"

"Uh, yeah..., maybe lower your voice a li'l?" I said flatly, completely taken aback at his reply that had ended up being three times more vulgar than I'd initially imagined.

"Oops, my bad."

*As I thought, maybe I shouldn't have confided my troubles about my sex life to this guy after all,* I lamented, suddenly being struck with a deep sense of regret.

"*Weeell* fine then, I'll treat it as a serious problem and hear ya out. *Errrrr*, now how far did ya go with this girl again?"

"Just kissing, and well, some bare skin contact, I guess."

“So ya ain’t got to the real deal yet. Well now, that ain’t the same as bein’ sexless, ya reckon?”

“Well, yeah, I guess. Given it’s been a while—or rather because I simply don’t know jack about going further—I don’t really know how to take the first step,” I admitted.

*I get it now: putting it into words really is important*, I thought, feeling as if the true shape of the problem was finally coming into view as we continued to talk.

Though the physical intimacy we’d had up ’til now and what actually lay ahead seemed to be along the same lines, the reality was that they were clearly different.

“Say, Nakamura, you’re pretty experienced with that kinda stuff, aren’t you?”

“*Yeeeup!* So leave it to me, y’all! I’d gone and done half the class by fifteen already, ya know?”

“Ew, creep. That’s gotta be a lie, right...?” Kikuchi, who’d been silent until then, quipped with a murmur.

“Can it, will ya? I was just goin’ with the flow,” Nakamura shot back. “Well anyway, worry not, Yuu-Yuu duo. As the senior here in life, I’ll be sure to teach y’all. Like, both of y’all look like ya have this ‘nah, can’t do that’ type mentality, ya know?”

“Mind your own business. Drop dead from an STD,” Kikuchi spat venom with a look of genuine contempt.

I, on the other hand, actually found myself drawn to Nakamura’s words.

“What is it about me that, *uhhh*, makes me look like I wouldn’t be able to step up to something like that?” I asked, prompting Kikuchi to look at me in surprise.

“Huh, no way he’s actually got you curious, Asamuu,” he spoke, giving me a look as if I were some kind of traitor.

*Cut me some slack; it’s my own situation we’re talking ’bout here.*

I had been given the nickname Asamu before I knew it as well; it was probably just because calling me Yuuta felt weird when his own name was Yuuma.

*But still, that's a first for me. I'm not used to it.*

Having seen me lean forward eagerly, Nakamura shot a grin.

“Good, you’ve got a curious li’l mind in there, don’tcha?” he said before raising his index finger as if he were some teacher making a point. “Right, listen here. First off, ain’t nobody be startin’ off like, ‘Well then, shall we get started?’”

“...So it’s all in the flow, you mean? As in going with the vibe?”

“That sure’s right.”

“But not using words? Yeah, that sounds really difficult... You can’t just start without consent here...”

“Oh, words and all that? Just one back-and-forth’s plenty for the final check, ain’t it? ‘Is this aight?’ ‘It’s aight.’ Done! You don’t need a dang thing else.”

“*Huuuh...?*”

His logic was so alien to me that I couldn’t grasp it at all.

*Like, first of all, when even is the right moment to ask if it was okay?* I wondered, voicing such a doubt to Nakamura after a brief moment, only to receive a blank look in return.

“That kinda thing’s somethin’ y’all would figure out when ya start with the touchin’, won’tcha?”

“Touching...? Like, hands?”

“Hands are aight. Hair, legs, neck, face, back, ass; anythin’ goes. Yer bound to touch ’em all naturally if y’all been foolin’ around.”

“Even if you say it like it’s a given...”

“There it is! That right there’s the kinda thing that shows yer the type of fella that can’t get laid! Touchin’ a gal? That’s natural, ain’t it? Just put your hands on her body somewhere, and if she don’t mind, and her eyes get all dreamy while she stares back atcha, then that’s basically her OK! Everyone does it.”

“No way, no way, no way.”

*No way you can declare something so debatable like that as if it were the most obvious thing in the world...*

I had never encountered anyone like this at all back when I was still in Suisei High, so being able to talk to someone like Nakamura was so rare that it actually impressed me. Sure, Narasaka-san—if anything—was a little similar, but despite how she looked, she was actually the kind of person who was at least *somewhat* capable of being considerate. Hironobu Nakamura’s way of living, however, literally felt as though he’d left the word “delicacy” behind from where he came from. It genuinely felt refreshing.

“Look, there’re plenty of women who don’t like getting touched, right?” I reasoned, giving my opinion on the matter. “Especially with their hair or face, since you can mess up makeup and stuff pretty easily.”

“Well that right there just ain’t right for sure,” Nakamura clarified his stance. “Doin’ something your partner can’t stand’s downright unacceptable. The absolute worst.”

“Right...? So that means you shouldn’t be touching her without checking first...”

“No no no, that ain’t the same,” yet he interjected. “Just say yer sorry if she don’t like it; ain’t that all there is to it? She’s *your* girlfriend, ya know?”

His breezy way of talking sent a wave of *déjà vu* washing over me.

I had the feeling that I’d stumbled across a similar line of thinking from somewhere before.

*That’s... right, the day of my first parent-teacher interview after my old man had remarried.*

Specifically when I had talked to Stepmom in the school hallway.

*“If you’ve made a mistake, a simple ‘I’m sorry’ resolves everything,”* she had told me as I stood in that hallway, wondering if it was really possible when she had previously declared that she could completely read a man’s ulterior motives just seconds before.

*How sly of her,* I had thought at the time.

“Well now, goin’ around touchin’ some random missy just walkin’ down the street ain’t right, I’ll tell ya that,” Nakamura joked as I still found myself lost in my own thoughts.

I thought back to the day when I first kissed Ayase-san. We had been staring at each other from across a jack-o’-lantern right before that moment, our faces slowly drawing in closer. How many words had we actually exchanged back then?

*“The both of you are too smart for your own good; I shall put a curse on you that’ll turn you into dummies.”*

Professor Kudo’s curse suddenly came back to me.

If we’d really been struck by her spell back then, then maybe the reason we were able to step forward without needing any words at the time—and maybe the reason most couples were able to begin their nights together by just simply feeling the mood alone, as Nakamura had explained—was because we were...

“Dummies, huh...? That’s it. Dummies...” I muttered, lifting my head at such a revelation.

“Hah?” Nakamura made a face as if he’d been caught off guard.

“...Pfft,” Kikuchi burst out laughing meanwhile.

...Huh?

“Did I just say something weird?”

“That was great, Asamu. Hahaha.”

“Wha—, ain’t that harsh!? I’d done went and gave ya some honest advice here!”

“Ah, my bad. I didn’t mean you were the dummy here, Nakamura.”

*“Heheheh, ahahahaha!”* Kikuchi seemed to laugh even harder the more I tried to explain myself, hunching his back and trembling all over.

Still, it made me feel as though my mind had become clearer.

Sure, I still hadn’t found a clear breakthrough for what I should actually do, but having an atmosphere like this—where it felt okay to honestly talk about things like this—openly was something I was grateful for. Exaggerated as it sounds, I even felt like I had been saved.

*Ah, so it’s not like I’m the only scumbag out there.*

It was a really depraved way of thinking. Anyone who was a real stickler for being upright would definitely scold you if they heard you saying you felt fine with being a scumbag just because everyone else was as well. My biological mother would especially get angry. “Don’t let yourself stoop to that level,” I can practically hear her say now. Still, I didn’t want to lie about how much this stupid conversion was comforting me.

Having been riled up by Stepmom’s recent words as of late, here I was finding myself in moments where I imagined Ayase-san in that kind of light... That, without a doubt, was nothing less than the genuine and real Yuuta Asamura, just as he is.

From then until our next lecture began, the three of us kept up with the sex talk.

“By the way, y’all better do it while you’re still all lovey-dovey and hot. Yer girl’s gonna get snatched away by some other dude if ya leave her alone for too long,” Nakamura explained, talking with a tone as if he were telling some sort of ghost story in an attempt to spook me.

*Maybe it’s payback for being laughed at and being called a dummy.*

It was apparently based on his real experience too, so even though he was the one who’d brought it up, he was the one who’d ended up taking the hit. It turned into nothing but tearful tales of heartbreak from there, with Nakamura going on and on as he left Kikuchi and me to just chime in here and there as we listened.

Though the stories he told were so detailed that they didn't sound made-up at all, the fact that there were so many of them made it hard to believe and he and I had lived for the same amount of years.

*I had thought that he looks a li'l more mature than us, but maybe he's just repeated a year or two and is actually older?*

I was curious, but the timing never came to ask. Deciding that I'd just have him tell me when the next opportunity came up, I left it at that.

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[1]: Yes, he drops the honorifics from here on out, and addresses them as how he does with Maru.

## Epilogue: April 30th (Saturday) - Yuuta Asamura

Night had come, and as per usual, it was time for my part-time job. But today's shift wasn't a usual clock-in, and it wasn't just because it was a Saturday, a day that brought in more customers and more staff on duty. The difference instead lay in the fact that all those extra staff members were currently all talking to Ayase-san. It was largely in part due to her bringing a box of sweets as a token of appreciation, with everyone being able to drop a convenient "Thanks for the treats," to start a conversation with her.

That wasn't to say that Ayase-san had been on unfriendly terms with most of them before; she'd always just kept her focus solely on the job during work hours, never being the one to actually start small talk herself. Sure, Yomiuri-senpai being the type to come up to her on her own accord was one thing, but other than that, no one else had much reason to just start talking to Ayase-san when they saw her working so earnestly.

But seeing that today was her last day, everyone took their chance in taking whatever opportunity they could to go over and say at least a word to her.

Watching her being cherished by our coworkers, and seeing them reluctant to have her leave, gave me a sense of warmth that welled up deep within my chest.

*It's proof you've worked hard, Ayase-san.*

And yet, at almost the same time as that comfort, a dark and heavy sense of loneliness surfaced as well.

*Today's the last time I'll ever get to work with her...*

"*I've decided to intern at Ruka Akihiro-san's company,*" were the very words she'd told me a short while ago over dinner.

I had always known that Ayase-san had this deep interest in design, and I genuinely felt that finding something she truly wanted to pursue was nothing but great. It's why I'd smiled and said I'd support her at the time, and why I had felt such a deep fondness for her when she had given me a shy "thank you" in return. There was not even an ounce of dishonesty in the way I felt back then. None at all.

*It's really the truth, so then why? Why's my heart threatening to lose its balance like this all of a sudden?*

It was strange. We'd still be seeing each other at home every day, after all. But still, our time together was bound to decrease if we were comparing that to working part-time with each other.

Just then, a story that Nakamura had told me the other day came to mind. Not one of his many so-called tales of glory, but rather his tragic heartbreak. Specifically, the story about how his time with his girlfriend had gotten scarce, resulting in her growing close with a new guy in some community he wasn't part of, being snatched away from him in the end. It was a tale Nakamura claimed to be one of his go-to funny stories now, yet I couldn't bring myself to laugh.

Given my old man had gotten a divorce after being cheated on, I had gone through a secondhand experience on the impermanence of the human heart, as well as the sorrow that comes as a result of being betrayed. It was why hearing those kinds of stories made me feel uneasy.

*Ayase-san... No, Saki, of all people, would never betray me. I believe it.*

But still. Uni life. Her internship. A new world surely full of excitement, tossing her this way and that like some kind of thrill ride. Ayase-san was someone with a strong curiosity; her instincts would definitely long for something more flashy and exhilarating than some slow-moving attraction that never picked up speed.

*I guess feelings naturally fade when time together shrinks, huh?*

Just like it had for Nakamura's ex.

*Oh well, Tsukinomiya's a women's university; it should be fine... Wait, no, there'll definitely be men at her internship. She'll have plenty of chances to meet someone...*

This feeling definitely wasn't good...

Arguing with yourself was a classic recipe for self-destruction. Sure, it was one thing in the context of positive self-reflection, but it only sought to destroy your heart when not.

I tore my gaze away from Ayase-san and the surrounding staff members bidding her farewell, focusing on my own work with that warning in mind.



Even special days pass by in the blink of an eye. The clock had already struck midnight by the time I noticed, and it was time to clock out. With one final check of the store, cleaning, and closing the register, I changed out of my uniform and returned to the office. There, I saw the manager waiting with a big grin, handing me a square-shaped object which I silently accepted with a nod. Seeing Ayase-san come in a little later, I passed it over to her.

“Thank you for all your hard work,” I said.

It was a signed card from all the part-timers, addressed to none other than Ayase-san. We even had Yomiuri-senpai stop by after work to secretly add her own message too. Kozono-san (though she was already home by this hour, given she was still a high schooler) had put in a ton of effort into writing her own message as well.

*The “I absolutely won’t lose to you, okay!?” part doesn’t make much sense as a farewell message, though...*

Ayase-san clutched the card tightly to her chest as her emotions overcame her, a stark contrast to the calm smile she managed to hold firmly in place during her shift.

“Thank you... very much.”

And with that parting gratitude, Saki Ayase’s last day as a bookstore clerk came to an end.

As we left the store after finishing our goodbyes, we glanced back at the manager and some other veteran part-timers who'd stayed to chat idly after closing. Though we were reluctant to leave, we knew we couldn't stay for much longer. We'd make our parents worry, after all, never mind the fact that we were already uni students.

But as we were about to step out into the late-night hustle and bustle, my hand was suddenly grabbed from behind.

"Wait," a voice came after.

"Ayase-san?" I turned, seeing her staring at me with an unreadable expression.

"There's somewhere I want to go."

"At *this* hour? *Uhhh*, what for?" I asked, prompting Ayase-san to think for a moment before giving her answer with a hint of playfulness.

"A pilgrimage."



Midnight Dougenzaka was chaos in its truest form, full of suspicious touts, drunken adults sprawled about, and lights from stores that still hadn't gone out even after midnight.

Climbing a short flight of stairs of a building that housed several restaurants, we arrived at our destination: the landing of a staircase. Leaning against its railing, we looked down at the bustling, chaotic streets from below.

I glanced at Ayase-san's profile, a sight that made me acutely aware of her as my younger sister.

It'd been a while since I'd seen her in this light, having been so conscious of her as my girlfriend as of late.

So then, why was I now suddenly aware of her as my sister?

There was only one reason.

“This place’s nostalgic, isn’t it?” my little sister spoke up, narrowing her eyes as she uttered that very reason.

Her presence refused to fade into the background, even amidst the dazzling city lights, just as it hadn’t back then.

Golden hair and eyes that carried a strong will. A poised posture with a firm core. A presence so definite that it felt as though she could swim strongly through the waters of any world.

And yet at the same time, it felt like she and I could share the same values—an encounter that was nothing short of a miracle.

“Yeah... It’s where we first met.”

*Yes, this was the place.*

A family restaurant up a flight of stairs: the very location where me, my old man, Ayase-san, and Stepmom had our first meeting.

And it was on this very staircase landing where we had settled our terms.

An agreement to not expect anything from each other.

“A new life had begun for me that day. One of the happiest, most bright moments of my life,” Ayase-san declared.

“Same for me; I feel that way too.”

“And you know what? I think it’s because we’d made sure to align ourselves properly back then.”

“That’s true. I think us doing that here made us able to live and share the same values together easily.”

It had been a proposal to approach a relationship like a contract: a suggestion that could potentially put the other person off. But for her, all it had been was a confirmation through communication. A step she took even at the risk of being disliked.

Testing the waters. Great if the other party didn’t mind, and a simple sorry if not.

It had been a single step forward, full of courage.

And it was thanks to that courage of hers that our lives as siblings had become a comfortable one. You could even say that I had, in a way, been freeloading off said courage up 'til now.

*That's right, I thought as a realization sprung into mind. Even this relationship of ours—one where we try to put everything into words and reconcile our values—was something that only existed after pushing through the risk of being disliked, wasn't it?*

"So, you know..." Ayase-san then said, looking straight into my eyes before trailing off, making it clear that her next words wouldn't come out so easily.

*Was she searching for the right ones?* I wondered, just as her beautiful eyes wavered back and forth between mine and just a few millimeters off to my right.

It was a sight that would've made the me up until this moment wait, waiting for as long as it took for her to find her words. Because to me, stealing someone else's words, or speaking in their place, was something I had always thought was rude.

*But if we're to build a new life together...*

"Want to reconcile our values?" I gathered my resolve, stealing her words away. "On one big decision that'll affect our lives from here on out. Just one."

"...!" Ayase-san gasped, her eyes widening at my words before she nodded over and over vigorously. "Mm! Yes, yes I do!"

She then leaned in close, her breath ragged with excitement.

"Let's talk about making a baby!"

"...!"

This time, it was my turn to shoot my eyes wide open in surprise.

"Ah, that's not... I mean, no, that's not what I meant..." Ayase-san quickly snapped to her senses, her face reddening as she stammered on with excuses she attempted to make. "A-anyway, I didn't mean it like that. Look, Mom asked us about *her* having a child the other day, didn't she?"

*“O-ohhh. Yeah, that’s right.”*

She had also told us to not hold ourselves back from what we truly wanted because of it.

But more importantly, just the flow of that conversation from back then, and the surrounding atmosphere, had given me the suspicion that Stepmom had already realized the true nature of my relationship with Ayase-san.

“So um, you know what? Mom told me something after that,” Ayase-san continued. “About how in just two years, I’ll be the same age as she was when she got pregnant with me. And that, because of that alone, she thinks that I’ll surely be bringing someone home important to me in the not-so-distant future.”

That’s right, Stepmom had pulled her aside after asking us about her having a child.

*So that’s what they were talking about back then, huh?*

“And, you know what...? Mom told me that no matter who that person is, she—and Stepdad too—would definitely give me their blessings.”

“She’s... clearly referring to me, isn’t she?”

“Mm. We were too obvious, for sure,” Ayase-san nodded, giving me a self-deprecating smile. “And yet she cut me off when I honestly tried to outright confess that *you* are my partner, Asamura-kun. Ah, I’d almost blurted it out without talking to you first; sorry. It’s just... I just felt like I had to at that moment.”

“That’s all fine. I was honestly feeling like she must’ve figured us out by now anyway...”

*Still, that’s not what worries me.*

“Why did Stepmom stop you?” I asked. “Was it ‘cause she didn’t want to hear it yet?”

Could it be that she’d sensed it but was unwilling to make it certain?

*Like some form of escape?*

“Hmm, it didn’t feel like that at all,” Ayase-san immediately denied my thoughts. “She just... told me to cherish the time we had now, and to nurture our love slowly.”

I chewed over Stepmom’s words and actions as recounted by Ayase-san, just as countless people passed by—nearly colliding as they weaved around each other—from beneath the railing under us. Maybe some of them had even been drinking at the bar where Stepmom worked.

Just as Ayase-san and I had started uni and made new friends, people’s lives often underwent major turning points every few years. Transitions happen as many times as there are people, and it was those comings and goings that Stepmom—having worked in Shibuya for a long time—must have experienced and heard of from customers visiting her bar.

*The only constant in life is change, huh?*

Maybe Stepmom felt that letting us confess honestly right now could end up shackling us in the opposite way.

As a mother, what she wanted for us wasn’t to be happy as lovers.

What she wanted instead was for us to be free: to happily live life without being bound to anything.

Romantic relationships can go any number of ways. People could drift apart no matter how happy they seem, or even break up over the smallest of misunderstandings. My old man and biological mother had gone through that, and so did Stepmom and Fumiya Itou.

So, confessing our relationship right now, at a time when marriage wasn’t even on the table yet, meant setting ourselves up for an awkward announcement of our break up if that were to ever happen. In that case, then Stepmom would rather have us only tell them once we’d nurtured our love even further, and once we’ve made that truly important decision.

*I think that’s what she meant?*

I put this hypothesis into voice, earning an immediate nod from Ayase-san as she looked to think in the same way.

“We should... cherish and nurture our relationship,” she told me.  
“We should, really, but...”

“But?” I asked as her words faltered strangely.

I took a look at Ayase-san’s profile. The coldness she’d harbored on the first day we met had long dissipated, replaced instead by an air of softness. There was also a flush to her face, but whether it was because her skin was merely reflecting off the red glow from the nearby traffic lights, or whether it was because of some other reason, was something I couldn’t tell.

“Today was the last day working part-time together, wasn’t it?” she asked.

“Yeah. That’s right.”

“With our university schedules, and work too; I think our daily rhythms will start to drift apart.”

“That’ll... most likely happen, won’t it?”

“The time we’ll be together will get smaller.”

“And even though we live in the same house..., we can’t really think of it that way, can we?”

“...Mm.”

After all, Ayase-san had already experienced a life of missed connections with her mother during those still sensitive years in junior high and high school. She’d gone through, first-hand, the experience of barely seeing someone else despite living under the same roof, just because their daily rhythms were completely opposite.

“I’m a little scared... to be honest,” Ayase-san confessed. “It’s not that I don’t trust you, Asamura-kun. Or at least I don’t think it is... But you know, a relationship where you’re both siblings and lovers at the same time is, well, in the end, ambiguous. It’s as if it’s defined, but not. Sure, constantly talking and checking in with each other means we both won’t lose sight of it, but I can’t help but feel that if our time together decreases, it’s fragile enough to naturally fade away.”

I was surprised.

*So she’s been feeling the same kind of unease as I was, huh?*

I hadn’t gone as far to think of it in terms of our relationship being ambiguous or not well defined, though.

*“No no no, that ain’t the same. Just say yer sorry if she don’t like it; ain’t that all there is to it? She’s your girlfriend, ya know?”*

I recalled Nakamura’s words.

Could I really agree with that? Deep down, no. It felt like a slippery slope to prejudice.

*It’s fine ’cause it’s here? No, I really don’t think there’s any way that sounds right, I argued in my head. Saki Ayase is Saki Ayase, and slapping on some convenient and arbitrary label of my own is unthinkable.*

But what Ayase-san was saying certainly had its truth.

People were bound by definitions. “*This is what it is,*” was a term we so often simply accept as things were explained to us, after all, adopting it as an understanding without any further cumbersome questioning. It often went so far to the point that even if said specific thing changed slightly, people were still unable to recognize it as being different, often instead just lumping what it has become together as something similar.

I've always avoided all kinds of stereotypes, and Ayase-san has always disliked them too. But being bound by definitions and caught up in prejudice was basically just human instinct itself, and it was all precisely because it naturally bypassed the hassle of clumsy thought. Stable, fast, takes little mental effort: all the characteristics that define it as something that easily persisted.

Was she my little sister, or my lover?

*Make it clear; don't let it waiver anymore.*

"I won't call you my nii-san anymore," Ayase-san took the first step, declaring her promise. "So, I don't want you calling me Saki in the way like I'm your little sister anymore too."

A promise like the one that she—**Saki**, who would only be my lover from here on out—had made on that very fateful day.

"Is that the big value you wanted us to reconcile over?" I asked.

"Mm," Saki nodded. "But what do you think? ...**Yuuta**."

"I..."

I shifted my body to face Saki head-on.

Her silhouette, even while bathed in Dougenzaka's vulgar lights, still retained its elegance, yet her thorns—defenses that seemed like they would hurt if touched—were just for show. They were, in reality, as soft as a stuffed animal, and would give way with just the touch of a fingertip. A generous presence that would accept all of me even if I revealed my pathetic side...

I quickly realized that the expressions I was using to describe her were richer than ever before.

*And it's precisely because we're here that I can see it.*

Compared to the girl I had met on that day, the Saki I was looking at now felt much more three-dimensional.

*That's right, and that's fine.*

Had I simply defined her on that day, then I would've lived my whole life without ever seeing "Saki Ayase" as who she truly was in all these dimensions.

*But I won't lose sight of her now, even if I've just defined her a little.*

"I want a definite definition of us too," I said, reaching out to her.

"Yuuta... Ah!" she gasped in surprise for a brief moment as my hand touched the back of her neck.

It had simply stretched out naturally, as if it'd been drawn in by her presence. I continued to caress her nape, feeling the sensation of her hair brushing against the back of my hand, before sliding my hand up to her cheek, confirming its shape and warmth.

*Am I scaring her? Do I apologize?* I asked myself, nervously standing there as I looked into her eyes.

"Ah..."

And then, I finally understood, truly feeling it for the first time.

What it meant to get an "OK" without words.

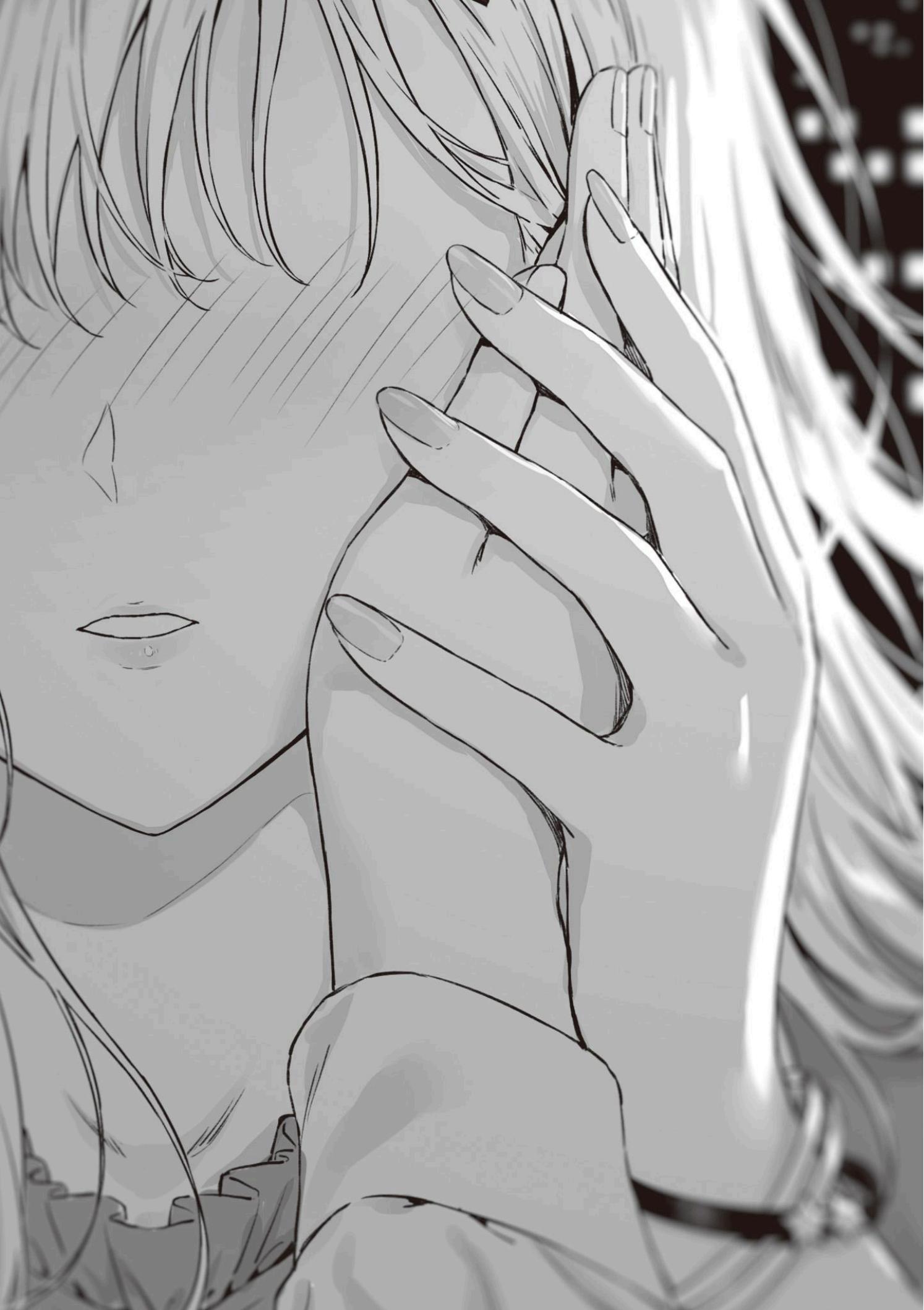
She placed her hand over mine, pressing it over with her own.

With my hand now sandwiched in between the warmth of her own and her cheek, I slowly took up her body heat. It, in turn, slowly rose within me, coursing not just through my hand, but through every vein in my body.

*She's not my sister; she's my lover.*

We'll define the relationship between us, and pave the path for Yuuta and Saki to exist together as something certain.

"Is this... okay?"



“...It is.”

The mingling of our mild warmth burned even the heat of the entertainment district, and the lights, sounds, and crowds of Dougenzaka quietly dissolved at the edge of our wordless world.

## Saki Ayase's Phone Notes

Important note: absolutely make sure no accidents happen.

Don't panic if the drugstore's closed. Buy it at a convenience store.

April 30th or May 1st; which diary entry should I write it in?

I wonder which date would become our "anniversary."

I'll decide with Yuuta later.

## Author's Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the 14th volume of the Gimai Seikatsu light novel. I'm Ghost Mikawa, both the original creator and light novel author.

I am sure that you readers had felt a certain sense of an "ending," following the passing of university entrance exams and high school graduation. However, let me assure you that Yuuta and Saki's lives do not come to an end here. Just as graduation marks the beginning of a new life for many, for Yuuta and Saki as well, graduation is nothing more than a mere single event that serves to color their lives.

With this 14th volume, I depicted both an ending and beginning.

The graduation trip arc had been the culmination of Yuuta and Saki's relationship—as well as Maru and Maaya's—up until this point, serving as a story of "departure." More than where you go or what you do, what's important is "who you go with." I am glad that you all were able to witness such youthful scenes.

From their conversations about deciding on the destination, to the actual sightseeing in Osaka, and then onto the very beginning of their university lives, their settings change. Yet, there still remains "something unchanging" between the two, with only just a faint hint of a new air blending in. I had written this volume in such a manner with the hope of carefully preserving those minute changes.

How will their relationship change as a daily life with a stepsister<sup>[1]</sup> gradually shifts away from a high school stage of life? How will it not change? I'd be deeply delighted if you continue to watch over them.

Now then, I think this will already be announced by the time Volume 14 releases, but I will be publishing a new series: Sister Mercenaries, with MF Bunko J. I would like to now take a little space here to share with everyone reading Gimai Seikatsu a little about the circumstances behind writing this series, and my thoughts behind it.

First, *Sister Mercenaries* was not written as a serialized novel, but as a oneshot that will be complete with just one single volume. Gimai Seikatsu was approached with a personal theme that I had set: to delve deeply into the actual subject of the story and the characters, to portray Yuuta and Saki—and others—living in contemporary Japan with a high level of faithfulness and detail, capturing all of it fully. Based on that, I had chosen the approach of weaving their lives continuously and endlessly. It is why I have ended up with writing a long-term series, spanning 14 volumes so far, with the decision to continue it more into the future as well.

*Sister Mercenaries* is, in terms of spirit, close to *Gimai Seikatsu*. Yet, you can still describe it as a series that is the complete opposite. The approach of “delving deeply into the actual subject of the story and the characters, portraying them with a high level of faithfulness and detail, and capturing all of it fully” is the same, but the world in which this new story takes place in is not contemporary Japan, but a modern battlefield. That is the kind of series it will be: it may or may not be the same as the world that Yuuta and Saki live in. Even if it is, it is something that could only be recognized as a world faraway. Such is the story of such a world. And unlike Yuuta and Saki’s story, I have packed everything into just a single volume, allowing readers to have the ability to experience it all within just one book. If *Gimai Seikatsu* is a diary that spans multiple volumes, then *Sister Mercenaries* is a single memoir, or perhaps even a documentary. Please rest assured that the existence of this new series will not in any way affect *Gimai Seikatsu*’s release pace. It is a new step forward for me as a writer, and I sincerely hope that everyone reading *Gimai Seikatsu* will read it too.

Now then, as always, let’s end with my acknowledgements. To Hiten-san, who always creates such wonderful illustrations; to Yuki Nakashima-san, Kouhei Amasaki-san, Ayu Suzuki-san, Daiki Hamano-san, Minori Suzuki-san, and director director Yusuke Ochiai-san, as well as all staff members who breathed life into the YouTube series; to mangaka Yumika Kanade-san, editor O-san, and to director Ueno-san and everyone involved in the production of the anime production, as well as all the staff, I express my heartfelt gratitude.

And above all, to all you readers who picked up and read this book. It is thanks to all of you that this story has been able to continue this far. Please continue to accompany these two in their story from here on as well.

That's all from me, Ghost Mikawa.

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[\[1\]](#): No, Ghost doesn't title drop here :(

## E-Book Exclusive Bonus: New Short Story - The Two Who Pass Each Other By

A name isn't important here.

So for now, let's just go with Hachi. After all, this is about a dog that lives in Shibuya.

Hachi's favorite things are yakitori and walks. Almost every day, his master takes him out to patrol the streets of Shibuya, both in the mornings and evenings.

But because Hachi's master disliked the crowded hustle and bustle surrounding the station, Hachi's routes usually followed backstreets within residential neighborhoods, situated a little way from the station.

Today too, in the clear morning air, Hachi was plodding up the usual gentle slope toward a park.

Sparrows chirped. Leaves rustled within their trees. Beyond a chain-link fence was the park that came into view, its greenery glowing in the Month of the Satsuki azalea's<sup>[1]</sup> morning sun, glittering so brightly that it dazzled the eye. Those currently gathered in the park would certainly say that it was the most beautiful season of the year.

But of course, Hachi is a dog; he doesn't think nor feel the same way humans do. And though it depends on the breed, a dog had an intelligence roughly equivalent to that of a two or three-year-old child, at least according to various sources. They can understand simple words, and they have feelings of pleasure and discomfort as animals do, yet aren't capable of complex human thought.

Even so, Hachi was aware of something.

He was aware that there was a boy he passed nearly every morning while walking this slope.

About three years ago, that boy used to solely ride a bike.

He'd ring his bell, *\*ring ring,\** and race downhill toward the station.

And on evening walks, it'd be the opposite: the boy would come riding uphill from the station.

Because their routines overlapped, Hachi had unconsciously learned the boy's scent.

Yet, it was about two years ago that the boy's behavior started to change.

He had always *just* passed by on his bike, but maybe starting during the summer from around two years ago, the boy would now sometimes walk side by side with a girl that Hachi didn't know, someone around his age.

At first, it wasn't something Hachi noticed.

The girl hadn't walked the same school route at the same time as the boy in the beginning, after all.

She walked with her back straight, earphone cords dangling near her ears, with even Hachi realizing that much of her attention was drawn to whatever she was listening to. Dogs, you see, had far sharper hearing than humans. They were able to pick up sounds even from a kilometer away, so even the faintest voice leaking from her earphones reached Hachi.

The girl was listening to a conversation in a language that wasn't Japanese.

One day, the boy—who usually rode his bike—was walking, as if chasing right behind the girl. They both stopped at an intersection, standing a little apart. The sound of the traffic light changing rang out. A car rounding a corner too fast without looking around came speeding about. And then, a shout of warning.

The girl, about to step onto the crosswalk without noticing the car recklessly swerving in, was pulled back at the last instant by the boy. The sound of her ragged breathing as she landed on the ground, nearly run over, was something that Hachi's ears could even pick up.

“How dangerous, am I right? You too must be careful when you cross the street, Hachi,” said his master.

Though Hachi didn’t understand every word his master had uttered, he knew that they were clearly worried for his safety.

“Woof,” Hachi barked, letting his master know he understood.

Some time later from that point, the boy and girl then began to sporadically walk side by side.

Hachi’s polite master would always nod with a “Hey” whenever they passed by the two the park, and the boy and girl would both smile and return the greeting.

The girl would sometimes even come over toward Hachi, gently stroking his fluffy fur after getting his master’s permission.

Her gentle petting felt nothing but pleasant, so much so that Hachi grew fond of the girl.

“He’s a smart one, ain’t he? It’s like he’s used to it,” the boy said.

“Seriously. His eyes look intelligently sharp,” the girl added.

“He calls out to me every time we meet too.”

“Eh? He remembers you?”

“Looks like it. He even looks my way whenever I pass by on my bike.”

“That’s amazing. You’re a clever one, aren’t you?” the girl reflected out loud.

Though Hachi could tell that she was praising him, all he could do was answer with a bark.

“Thank you very much,” his master replied in his place.

And then, another change came about around a year ago.

The boy and girl began holding hands as they walked side by side, leaning in close to each other.

And Hachi knew what that was too. It was a common behavior pattern often seen in pairs within the human species.

In other words, the two were *that* kind of couple.

The seasons passed on slowly.

Spring ended, and summer came. Hachi, not being a dog that was good with the heat, had his walks shifted earlier in the morning. That made it harder to run into the pair.

*We'll meet again around autumn*, Hachi thought in his own doggish way, wondering what new changes would accompany the boy and girl once again.

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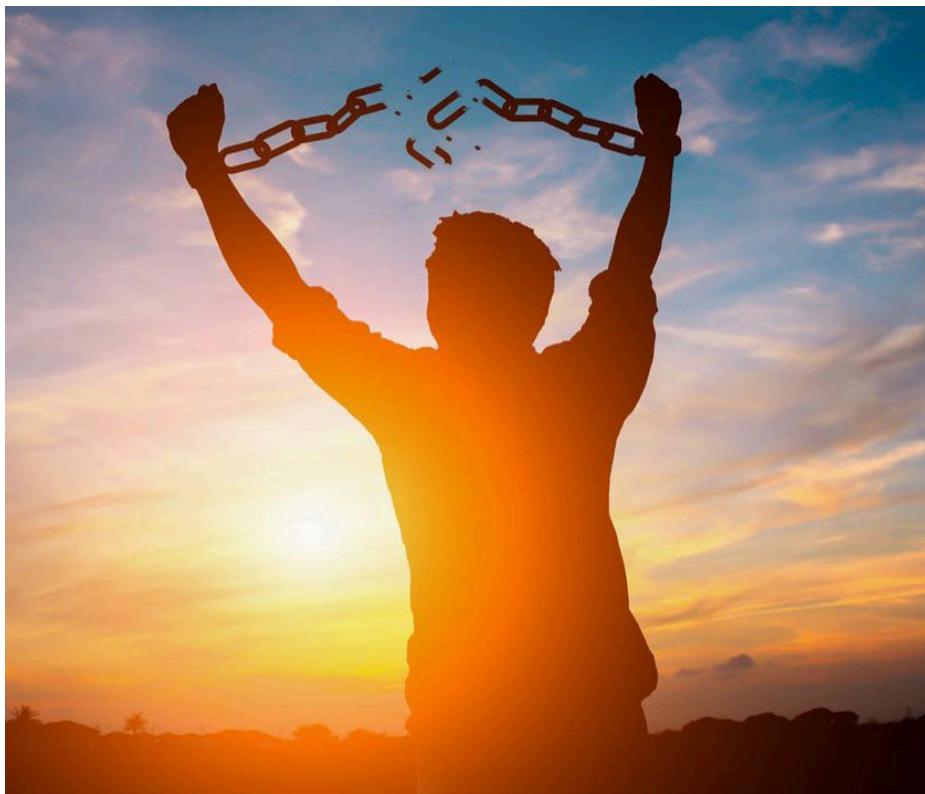
[1]: “皐月,” Same deal as TN#2 in Chapter 6, with “皐月” being Japanese for the fifth month of the lunar calendar. I don’t really think there’s a widespread historical and cultural connection with May to Satsuki azaleas (at least to the extent of April and deutzias), but they do bloom in May lol. “皐” is also literally written as “Satsuki” too, so there is a phonetic link as well.

## Fan Translator's Note

Yo. Thanks for reading our fan-TL of Gimai Seikatsu, Another Days! 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 for helping me with accuracy checking, as well as existence is pain and gorg for helping with proofreading. They were a big help. Huge thanks to Indi for typesetting the English cover and illustrations too.

Anyway, here are my thoughts on this volume:



This volume was also pretty hectic, to translate for me; not because of the volume itself but the circumstances around it. From losing our Wordpress (we've migrated to [glucosetl.xyz](#) btw), to needing to translate Roshidere Volume 14 at the same time (sorry for putting a priority on that and finishing that way earlier first), to being super busy in my lab as an undergraduate researcher, it really was really overwhelming at times.

We also had that one bozo unedited/ESL MTL incoherent loser trying to snipe us too (for context, please take the time to read [this document](#) if you haven't already; stay informed). I basically had to sacrifice all social life and my other hobbies, given my translating pace is pretty slow. But oh well, being able to finish Roshidere Volume 10 in around 1.5 months, and this volume in around 2.75 months (despite basically doing both at the same time), made it all worth it.

Regarding this issue, if you care about our translations (or light novels in general) then please contribute to our cause by spreading the 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.

Volume 15 releases October 24th! I'll definitely be translating it when it comes out, but here's a disclaimer and apology in advance: I will be going into an incredibly busy period from now 'til late December. On top of my lab commitment for my undergraduate research, and taking some heavy classes, I am currently in the process of applying to grad schools.

I will try to translate as much as I can, but please be understanding if the releases slow down. I am **NOT** sacrificing my translation quality by changing my methodology to being something more "quick and easy." For more information, again, please read the document linked above.

Feel free to check the other series we fan translate too (you can check them on our [website](#))! Definitely join our [Discord server](#) as well.

As always, please support the author by buying the [official translation!](#) **Do not reupload our chapters behind ad-link shorteners or websites/forums with ko-fi links**, or any other methods to generate revenue. We will literally doxx you and find who you are, your real name, and where you're from if you do **(we've unironically done this to success before)**. Our operation is just a hobby for us, and is strictly non-profit. 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.

Catch y'all in the next one!

- NaCl

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