

義妹生活

三河ごーすと

illust Hiten



Days with my Step Sister

presented by
ghost mikawa

Illustrations



Days with my Step Sister



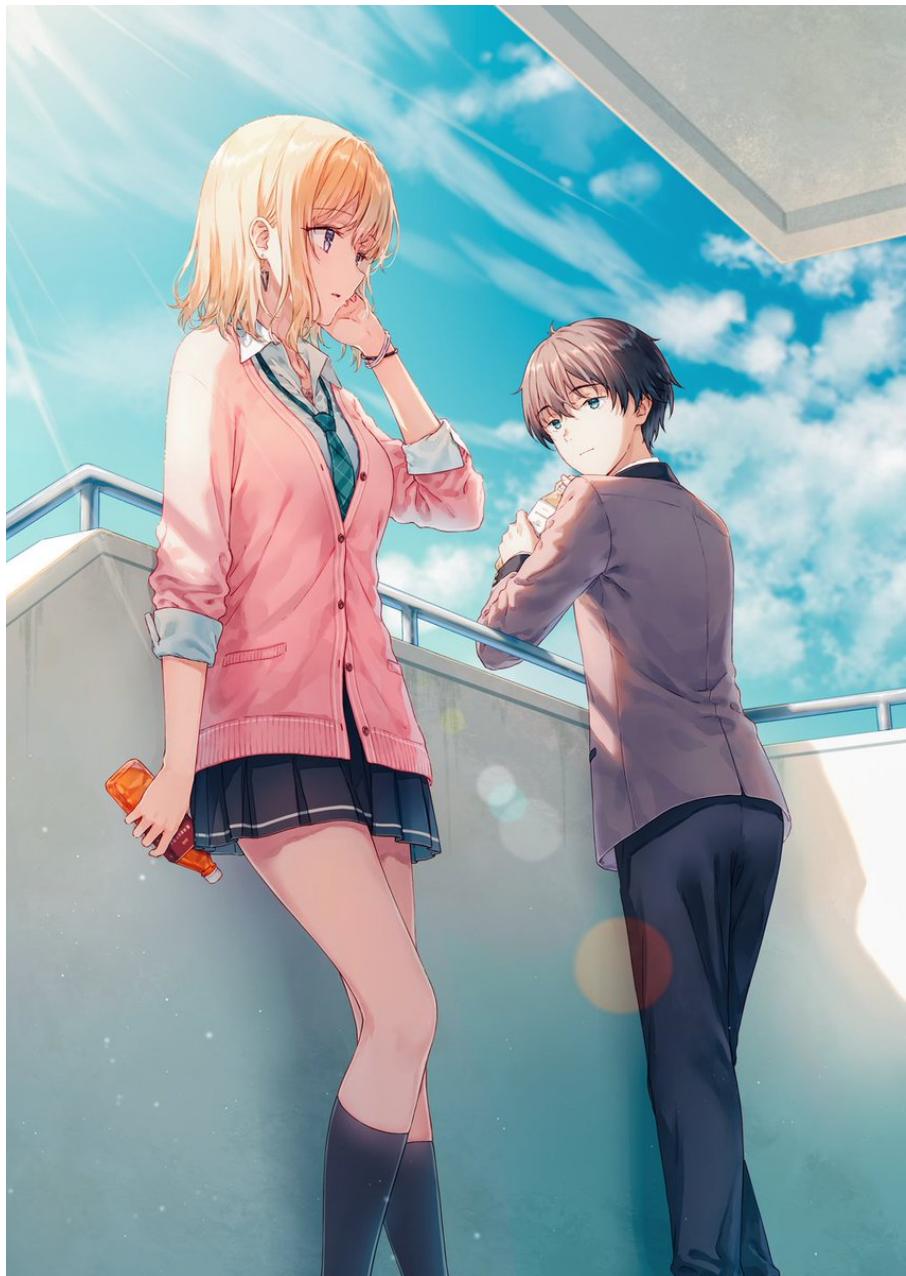
presented by
ghost mikawa



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三河ごーすと

Hiten







「今年は浅村くんと
過ごせてうれしい」

【万聖節の宵祭り】

S
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BIRTHDAY
DECEMBER 20TH

LIKES
MUSIC, HISTORY AND HISTORICAL BUILDINGS, AQUARIUMS, SWEET FOOD, FORTUNETELLING

BAD WITH
MEN, SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA AND HORROR

FAVORITE LINES
INDEPENDENCE AND SELF-EXISTENCE; HEAVEN HELPS THOSE WHO HELP THEMSELVES

DISLIKES
HAVING PICTURES TAKEN OF HER

GOOD AT
FASHION, MAKEUP, COOKING, ROTE MEMORIZATION

FIRST IMPRESSION OF YUTA
SEEMS RESOURCEFUL

浅村 悠太
Asamura Yuta



BIRTHDAY
DECEMBER 13TH

LIKES
BOOKS, MISCELLANEOUS KNOWLEDGE, SPICY FOOD, FISHING, QUIET PLACES

BAD WITH
WOMEN, FASHION

FAVORITE LINE
UNIVERSAL BENEVOLENCE; A HEDGE BETWEEN KEEPS FRIENDSHIPS GREEN

DISLIKES
BAD-MOUTHING, INSULTS

GOOD AT
WORKING WITH MINIATURE OBJECTS SUCH AS PLASTIC MODELS

FIRST IMPRESSION OF SAKI
A COLD BEAUTY

Prologue

Prologue: Asamura Yuuta

That day, I, Asamura Yuuta, was strolling around Suisei High's cultural festival. It was the second week of October, the time of day a tad bit past noon. Upon looking outside the window, I was greeted with the sight of a clear sky and the trees rustling with a cool breeze. Wherever you looked, you would encounter signs that fall had come upon us. Despite the sun still standing tall in the sky, you couldn't help but crave something warm to drink away the chilliness settling onto your skin.

When I directed my gaze downward, I spotted a large number of people making their way up a small hill from the school gate, entering the school building like ants entering their nests. It didn't take much detective work to deduce that Suisei High's cultural festival was in full bloom this year, too. Us students were excited about this special day of the year, and the occasional cheers or applause filled the cozy air.

It wasn't too rare to spot either unfamiliar school uniforms from distant schools or other adults such as guardians or parents and the like. Some of the children running around screaming in excitement were periodically reprimanded by their parents. Amidst the chaos, I spotted a boy and girl holding hands. I hadn't seen either of them before. And

despite that, the way they kept their bodies close to each other, spending time in absolute bliss, caused me to find myself unable to tear my eyes from them. Boldly holding hands in front of other people must be something that only those who openly admit to dating are permitted to do.

I personally don't perceive this as something the two of us should be doing in front of others, let alone so confidently. Along with that thought, the appearance of a girl came to mind—Ayase Saki. My little sister... or rather, my step-sister.

About four months ago, the two of us became siblings through the act of our parents' marriage. Since I had lived through hell with my biological mother, I'd set my mind on not expecting anything from women in general. Ayase-san experienced something somewhat similar and acquired a dry and distant attitude. Despite this grand rift between us, for the sake of our parents' happiness, we decided to work with each other, to adjust to each other, and to try to be the best kinds of siblings the situation permitted.

However, through certain events, I'd begun to see Ayase-san not as my little sister but rather as a woman I might or might not be romantically interested in. At the end of September, Ayase-san and I revealed our feelings to each other and adjusted accordingly. We certainly hadn't reached the status of a clearly-defined lover's relationship, but instead we arrived at a decision that would let us meet halfway. We'd continue as siblings the way we'd done before, although being a bit closer and more intimate than an average brother and sister, which will allow us a certain level of physical intimacy that we won't be too quick to show in public. It's a mysterious and confusing secret life, that's for sure.

Walking around the festival, holding hands while doing so... For a couple like those two, it was something they didn't have to think twice about, but my current relationship with Ayase-san won't permit something like that. At the very least, not in front of other people. Naturally, I've given up on keeping secret the fact that Ayase-san and I are siblings. During our parent-teacher meeting, both of us decided that it would ease the burden on our parents if we chose not to attempt to keep it secret any longer. However, that very fact makes it exceptionally difficult, as nobody is allowed to see us as lovers. Brothers and sisters are not societally permitted to become lovers.

The law states that, as long as we're not related by blood, there are no hurdles standing in our way, but the view of the world and its perceptions is an entirely different matter of conflict. I don't know how strict the laws are, or to what extent they cover our specific case, and the people who don't bother considering our circumstances and feelings will most likely raise the cry of immorality in the blink of an eye. That in itself seemed far too much to deal with, and we wanted to avoid it.

I bought two bottles from the class that was selling drinks, one of them being coffee, the other black tea (both hot), and quickly made my way away from the noisy hallway. Next I made my way to the special classroom building's highest floor, specifically to a certain corner thereof. Upon opening the door there, I found myself on the emergency stairs. There I was greeted by a solitary female student who was standing next to the wall in boredom: Ayase-san.

"I bought them, Ayase-san."

"Thanks."

The highest point of the emergency stairs was the place farthest from all of the festival noise, and it made it virtually impossible for anybody to spot us. It was probably to be expected that we would decide to meet up here. I handed Ayase-san the bottle of hot tea and sat down next to her.

“How’s it going?”

“In what sense?”

“Are you enjoying the festival?” I asked, and Ayase-san made an expression like she was lost in thought.

Was my question really that philosophical in nature?

“Yeah, I think I am. How about you, Asamura-kun?” Ayase-san threw the question back at me.

Ah, she did it again.

“Hm? Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing... Don’t mind me.”

The way she addressed me reverted from her previous “Nii-san” back to “Asamura-kun.” As of late, she’s only been calling me “Nii-san” when we’re at home.

“I’m enjoying it as well...I think.”

I don’t like crowds, nor do I like all of this noise or chaos, but I certainly don’t despite the cheerful atmosphere of the festival.

“Did you find any interesting places to check out?”

“Err...Not really, no.”

“Oh, really?”

“Then again, I think that’s just me. I don’t really know how to... enjoy them.”

“How to enjoy them?”

“Like...my perception of them, I guess?”

“I see?” Ayase-san’s intonation showed that she wasn’t exactly sure what I meant.

The fortunetellers, haunted houses, and other booths I had encountered along the way are bound to be fun with friends or lovers, I’m sure. But if I said that in front of Ayase-san, it’d just sound like a snide remark. Before the actual day of the festival, Ayase-san and I discussed what would and would not be acceptable for us to do at a public event like this, and we reached the conclusion that we should resort to only actively talking to each other in isolated places such as this. Naturally, I agreed. However, that doesn’t change the fact that walking around the festival all on my own wasn’t exactly the kind of exciting experience you would envision when picturing a cultural festival.

“Did you see anything that looked fun?” I asked Ayase-san.

I tried changing the topic before she could guess how I truly felt.

“Over there,” Ayase-san said, pointing towards a corner of the courtyard.

Located in the corner of the roughly 400-meter-long circular track in the sports grounds was a small stage with audience seats. The music from the large speakers there was audible even from all the way up here. Since it’s not indoors or

under a roof, the words are a bit hard to make out from this distance, but that's about what you could expect from the limits of a school cultural festival's PA system.

"A concert?"

"Yep. The girls in our class are doing this...err, visual kei band¹ thing? I tagged along with a girl who wanted to see it."

"Oh, interesting. I've heard of it, but I can't say I've ever looked into it much."

I only knew that they dressed in a flashy, abstract way. Ayase-san was kind enough to give me an explanation, which pretty much was just a quote from her friend, since she previously thought the same as I. According to her friend, these bands not only focus on the songs and sound they create, but also the kind of visual image they imprint on the viewers, creating their own personal worldview... or something along those lines. Even the boys from that class were wearing similarly gaudy clothes with surreal makeup, but the fact that they were handsome made them popular with the girls from other schools. That much I can follow.

Makeup, stylish clothes, supernatural-looking hairstyle... all of these things aren't exactly on the list of things I excel at, so I can't help admiring the people who wholeheartedly commit to it. Even more so if they actually get up on stage looking like that. Well, since I'm not nearly as handsome as them, nor am I even able to play an instrument or sing, thinking about any of this is a waste of effort.

"Oh yeah, what about your class, Ayase-san? What are you guys doing again?"

“A maid cafe.”

“A what?”

Hearing such an unexpected response from Ayase-san made me bewildered.

“It was Maaya’s idea, of course.”

“Right.”

“If she brings it up, everybody else will join in no matter what.”

“Yeah, I’d expect as much.”

Ayase-san’s friend Narasaka Maaya-san is exceptionally skilled when it comes to talking to others, which makes her famous not only among students of her year but also students throughout the entire school.

“Then I guess I might check it out later with Maru.”

“Is that a friend of yours?”

“Yep. We have a lot of cafes this year, right? He said he wanted to check out all the cafes and their special concepts, or something like that.”

“Is it such a big deal?” Ayase-san sounded slightly bewildered.

“Well, you rarely get to experience something like this.”

The image of Ayase-san dressing up as a Victorian maid, saying ‘Welcome back, dear master,’ came to mind, which filled me with the desire to actually see it.

“I’m not dressing up, okay?”

“Ah, okay.”

I guess I was showing it on my face.

“My job was to help with the preparations, so I finished up all my work for today.”

“As expected. Good work.”

It’s a bit of a shame, to be perfectly honest.

“That kind of affectionate customer service is way too much for me,” Ayase-san said.

“Too much how?”

“It’s more like... I can’t deal with it?”

“Oh, I see.”

“If I’m compensated for my work, I can see it as necessary customer service, but I have trouble otherwise.”

“That makes sense.”

Whenever our shifts overlapped at work and I got to see Ayase-san’s customer service, she’s never impolite. It’d be more accurate to say that she interacts with everyone in a normal way, nothing more. That explains why she has trouble providing services that go beyond the bare minimum.

Well, I’m having trouble imagining Ayase-san drawing a heart on the omurice someone ordered and carrying it to the table like a maid. Overly-friendly treatment, huh? Would that also refer to an emotional distance... one that a couple

would have? I mean, it's not as if I'm experienced enough to understand exactly what that means.

A shadow appeared on the emergency stairs. The bright sun up in the sky started to become covered by clouds. Shadows covered the world, and the cold breeze sunk deep into my bones, making my body shiver. The same thing seemed to happen to Ayase-san, and she sat next to me.

"Should we head back?" I asked.

"I'm okay."

I had raised myself halfway up, but I sat back down. If I'm being honest, I wanted to stay like this a bit longer myself. I glanced at Ayase-san's small hand which she had placed right next to my waist. I can't explain why, but her hand seemed cold to the point that I wanted to place my own on top of hers to give her warmth. Could I really do that? I never got an answer to this question, as Ayase-san quickly moved her hand away again and started holding her bottle of tea with both hands.

"It sure is getting a bit cold."

"It really could have been sunny and warm at least for today." I looked up at the sky, cursing whoever decided to make it so chilly today. "If you're feeling cold, we don't have to stay out here, you know?"

"I'm fine, okay?"

So Ayase-san said, and she tilted her hips slightly to close the distance between us. I did the same, bringing our shoulders closer. We soon were close enough that we may or may not have been leaning our shoulders together. At the

very least, it felt like I could feel Ayase-san's warmth next to me.

With this being the case, I abruptly remembered the incident at the end of September, specifically when she hugged me out of the blue. That was the definitive moment where I could directly feel her warmth mixing with mine. And of course, the sheer act of reminiscing in that bliss made a bit of extra heat rush to my cheeks. However, the warmth and happiness I felt back then had now grown hazy and dim. Needless to say, ever since that incident, we never shared physical intimacy to such an extent.

That hug of hers was a means of reassuring and calming me down after I had gotten anxious, and certainly not of light feelings that we could just replicate whenever we wanted to. I was painfully aware of that. We may have reached the conclusion that, although they might not be of purely romantic origin, we do hold positive affections for each other, and we adjusted in that regard to fit each other's interests best. If you asked me what had changed since then, though, I would have a hard time finding anything worth mentioning. We simply exchanged our genuine feelings towards each other; nothing more, nothing less.

That being said, the fact that we hadn't indulged in any further physical intimacy since then showed that both of us were satisfied with where we were right now. She knows about my feelings and openly accepts them. That is something I have confirmed, but it's more important than anything else, and touching each other is nothing more than the first step... or so I think, at least.

And despite that, somewhere deep inside my heart, I find myself wishing for more. Not necessarily on the level of holding hands at this point in time, but simply spending

more time together. Maybe I should invite her out somewhere? But is that really something she would want? As of late, these thoughts keep coming to mind on a periodic basis.

Hold on... Is this really okay? Should I really be pondering this all on my own? Interpreting her desires, twisting them to my own convenience, then expecting her to understand what I feel and what I want... Isn't that the exact type of forced communication and attitude that both of us despise? Honesty and adjustment beat everything else. I can't believe I almost forgot about that.

"It sure is chilly today," Ayase-san said as she gazed up at the sky.

"Fall has started, after all."

"Yeah, you're right. It is Fall."

"With such cold breezes left and right, it sure makes me feel like winter's gonna be right around the corner starting tomorrow."

"I feel like that's a bit of a stretch."

"So anyway... once it gets cold out, it'll be even more of a pain to go outside, won't it?"

Ayase-san is pleasantly perceptive, so she must have already guessed what I was trying to say. However, I couldn't just let it end there. I needed to finish what I wanted to say. That's what it means to take the first step and adjust.

"If you're okay with it, I'd be happy if we could go out somewhere sometime. Together, you know."

The few seconds before the response felt like hours, making my heart beat harder than during a marathon. At the same time, a slight change occurred in Ayase-san's expression. It was barely recognizable—almost to the point where I doubted it myself—but it felt like she seemed relieved, almost happy.

"Okay." She faintly nodded.

I immediately sighed in relief. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. And then I went back to thinking. If we were any normal high school boy and girl couple, we'd probably be enjoying this cultural festival to the fullest. We'd be walking around the school, creating countless precious memories. And yet we met up in an isolated location, not even holding hands as we simply sat next to each other. We're adjusting to each other, making promises to head out somewhere together if time permits it.

It's half-baked, and dare I say...awkward. We haven't even properly defined if what is driving us closer is romantic affection or familial love. However, there is one thing I can be absolutely certain about. Sitting on these emergency stairs, distanced from all the noise of the festival, simply enjoying a bit of casual conversation without much meaning to it...is what made me feel comfortable. And if Ayase-san feels the same way, I would have no greater joy in life at this point.

The clouds in the sky moved, revealing the bright afternoon sun. Once our bodies had warmed up through the natural sunlight bestowed upon us, we stood up from the emergency stairs and left that isolated space one at a time, with a bit of time between us. After that, until the school broadcast declared the conclusion of the festival, we never ran into each other again. Mine and Ayase-san's cultural

festival ended without any particular incident worth mentioning.

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visual_kei

Chapter 1

19th of October (Monday) - Asamura Yuuta

Another week began. I woke up on Monday morning, roughly around 7 am. Upon opening my eyes, I was immediately notified that I had received a LINE message while I was asleep. I turned my phone's night mode off and ran my eyes over the message. It was a message from Narasaka-san. She sent it at 2:07 am...Hold on, after 2 am?

“She was up late, huh?”

I definitely don't think I'd be able to get up on time if I stayed up that late. Anyway, moving on to the actual message she sent me...

An important notice from Maaya.

Attention! The upcoming 21st is actually the day Narasaka Maaya has been blessed upon this earth! In other words, I'll be holding a birthday party! I know this is pretty abrupt, so you don't have to worry about a present or anything like that! I just want you to participate, that's all!

Sooo...she's inviting me to her birthday party, right? And she's planning her own birthday party? I rarely ever hear of

people doing that. Most of the time it's just surprise parties thrown by other people. Well, I've never held a birthday party of my own, so I'm not exactly one to talk...nor have I ever been invited to one. What bothers me most is that Narasaka-san and I aren't even all that close. If anything, the only connection the two of us have is Ayase-san. And we rarely ever talk at school, let alone run into each other. So she invited me because I'm a friend's friend? Oh wait, there's still more to the message.

Saki is coming, too.

Upon spotting Ayase-san's name, my heartbeat accelerated ever so slightly...Err, why is she emphasizing that? Did she catch on to the faint change in our relationship or something? No, relax. When we planned the trip to the pool, Narasaka-san invited me because I'm Ayase-san's older brother. She's the type of girl who sees everybody she's talked to once as a friend, too, so there might not be any hidden meaning behind it. But that still left me thinking.

"There's bound to be a lot of other people, just like back at the pool."

I remembered my first proper meeting with all of the other students from the different classes. There were people from Ayase-san's class, as well as people from completely unrelated classes. The only common ground between all of them would be...that they're exceptionally sociable. Leaving me out of the count, of course. Thinking that far, I happened to envision Ayase-san's relationships with other people that I did not know, which made an oddly gloomy and hazy emotion grow deep inside my chest.

I'm **jealous**, huh? It's pretty pathetic if you think about it. On the day we confessed how we felt and started adjusting

to each other's wishes, I should have rid myself of this emotion, and yet it's showing roots once more. Well, noticing its growth and trying to pull it out from its roots is bound to be some kind of positive change I must have gone through. Or so I'd like to think.

Then there's also the male student, I think his name was Shinjou, who I spotted at that convenience store together with Ayase-san. I'm not too sure how to react if I were to run into him again. As a basic principle, things will probably work out if I just read the mood as I did during our day at the pool.

"No, hold on."

Is it really the same as back then? I read through Narasaka-san's message once more, only to feel a sense of discomfort creep up my back. Back then, as a means of showing consideration for everyone participating, she told us to wear our uniforms. However, I don't see any of that in this message. And there's another point of concern. Suisei High is seen as a high-level high school inside the city, with relatively strict student and life guidance at work, making it risky to bring goods unrelated to the classes to school.

She said that we didn't have to worry about presents, but I doubt anybody would really show up with nothing at all, so all participants would have to temporarily head home to then head over to Narasaka-san's place.

"So in other words..."

All participants will probably change into casual clothes. That's the most logical outcome I'm seeing here. I'd stick out like a sore thumb if I was the only one participating in my school uniform. I'm glad I realized that so early. I sighed in relief and read the final line of Narasaka-san's message.

You and Saki make sure to dress up, you hear me?

Yep, it seems like my deduction was right on point. Still, she's prepared quite the hurdle for me to clear, huh? Not only do I have to wear casual clothes, but I'm also supposed to dress myself up? What a terrifying condition you've thrown my way, Narasaka-san. I'm about as average as a high school student can be, but when it comes to fashion, I'm an absolute novice with no sense at all.

I've never thought of fashion and appearance as an armament like Ayase-san does. That, of course, makes perfect sense, as I don't see my daily life as a never-ending battle. I wouldn't need something like an armament. However, now I think I might understand how she feels. Upon thinking about all of the other people who will attend this birthday party, I saw myself as an outcast with no sense of fashion or style. Is this how a soldier feels if they step out on the battlefield without wearing any armor?

It's weird. I'm not defending myself or fighting anybody. Yet Ayase-san has been experiencing this on a daily basis. She styled herself up to not be colored by her surroundings, all that she would stand out from the rest of society around her. That thought alone made a shiver run down my spine.

Fashion, huh? I guess I should look through some fashion magazines for starters. Know your enemy, know thyself, and you shall not fear a hundred battles, as they say. My brain was finally allowed a moment of rest after endless thinking, and I sent Narasaka-san a brief response to the tune of 'I'll be asking Ayase-san for advice.' I feel like this is going exactly how Narasaka-san wanted it to go.

I finished preparing to head out for school and made my way to the living room, only to stop in surprise. Ayase-san

isn't around. Maybe she overslept? Only my old man was sitting at the dining table, not doing anything.

"You're not gonna eat, Dad?"

"I wasn't sure if I should eat without you two."

"I see."

He probably wasn't too keen to storm in on Ayase-san to wake her up. When I looked at the table, I saw that he had already set up breakfast. There were even some vegetables.

"But I really should be eating in a bit."

"Are you still busy at work?"

"Hm? Yeah... Sure am. Though it's gotten a lot more relaxed as of late."

As soon as fall season started, my old man ended up hammered with work, which was why he'd been arriving home later and later. Akiko-san even seems concerned about him, and I catch her muttering about him from time to time. Well, he never lets on that he's stressed when he's at home, which doesn't help I guess.

"Should I warm up some miso soup?"

"The heat's still on, so you can just put it on there."

"Gotcha."

I turned the burner up a bit, put some miso soup into the bowl, and placed it down in front of my old man.

"Ah, thanks."

Now, as for the breakfast prepared by Ayase-san...I see. Ham and natto along with toasted seaweed, is it? Also, what's that over in the small bowl? The green-colored food must be boiled spinach, but what's that white thing? Sardines? I looked over at my old man, who had mixed the natto with the eel, dipping it into soup stock soy sauce. So this is a natto-sardines dish with dressing?

“I never knew you could eat it that way.”

“Yeah, Akiko-san used to make it for me pretty often. It's so simple that it really made me wonder why I'd never tried it myself up to this point.”

That's an easy question. It's because the food being delicious or not used to not matter to him. He spread the natto-sardines mixture over the white rice and gulped it down. Maybe because he's busy, or possibly because it's actually tasty, but he seemed to be scarfing it down quite quickly.

“The prickly consistency of the natto combined with the gritty sensation of the sardines tastes great, let me tell you. Add some green perilla into the mix too, if you'd like. And you can use enoki mushrooms as a supplement for the natto.”

He's sounding like some kind of cooking show host. But if he hadn't gotten married to Akiko-san, he'd probably still be eating white rice with raw eggs and soy sauce, so it doesn't hold that much credibility.

“I'll try some later.”

I looked at my old man, who was hurrying to finish his breakfast.

“Dad?”

“Hm?”

“Ah, you can keep eating, it’s no problem. I was just wondering if you were ever concerned about how you looked while standing next to Akiko-san.”

“In what context?”

“Err... well, she’s always very stylish-looking, right? But you’re not really—”

“I’m always handsome and stylish, you know.”

“I’m not sure if you should say that in front of your own son.” I retorted, and he grinned in response.

“After Akiko-san and I started going out, I did go through various changes in that regard, but I was always your average salaryman, you know?”

And you still are. Don’t act like you’re hot stuff now.

“To get back on topic, I don’t force myself to look exceptionally stylish and all that. Not more than what is expected from an adult, I guess?”

“Oh, I see.”

“I mean, if my profession was something similar to Akiko-san’s, I bet I’d have a different opinion about it, but as long as I don’t look filthy, that’s about all the attention I give my appearance.”

He kept explaining his views while munching on his breakfast. According to him, a businessman wanting to look modern and stylish is an entirely different focal point of

fashion compared to the desire of looking more attractive to the opposite sex. Concerning the former, my old man still has the impression that he looks like one, but since he's married, he doesn't see any value in dressing up simply to impress. What valuable information he's giving me.

I also asked him if he wasn't concerned about all the men swarming around Akiko-san presumably during her work hours. He paused for a moment, closing his mouth to think about it for a bit.

"Hmmm... not really? Back when I was still a student, I definitely pondered about the relationships my crush had with boys and other people in general, but once I started working full-time, I stopped caring about that sort of thing."

"Working full-time... so you mean after you become a working adult?"

"Pretty much. Or rather, once I found myself a job, the points of concern in my life changed, I guess? How stylish and hip I looked didn't influence how much money I earned, if that makes sense."

"Ah, so that's why you still care about how you look as a businessman?"

"I was part of the sales department before, even if it doesn't look like it. Also, I guess it'd be more accurate to say that I had other worries than looking like a model on a catwalk."

"I see."

I get what he's trying to say. There are things that I never bothered with when I was a child, only to slowly but steadily pay more attention to them in high school and beyond. My old man always finished his breakfast with an egg on rice,

but up to now, I never felt bothered or inconvenienced by this lifestyle at all. It's simply amazing of him to even preserve that situation. Even if he's a blockhead at home.

"Things were different when I was a student. I was practically trained to be conscious of how I looked in comparison to all the other stylish guys around me. In a co-ed school, you're perpetually surrounded by love and horny teenagers, so the environment engraved that kind of conscious thinking into my brain."

Or so he says, but...

"Is that really the case?" I pondered.

"I think so? You must have experienced that as well, right?"

"I wonder..."

Hearing my vague response, my old man made a worried sigh. Does he think I'm insensitive and dull when it comes to trends and that sort of stuff? That I'll change once I grow up? There's no way to confirm if he's speaking the truth or not for as long as I'm still a child.

"Well, if Akiko-san were working in the same company as I, I'd probably wear clothes that'd make me look like a rapper in a vain attempt to stand out."

"I'm quite glad I don't have to see that." I verbally jabbed my old man as he finished his breakfast.

"That was delicious."

"I'll wash the dishes later, don't worry about doing them yourself."

"Gotcha. I'm heading out, then." He left these words behind as she rushed out of the house on his way to work.

I checked the clock on the wall to confirm the time. If Ayase-san doesn't get up sooner or later, she'll run the risk of ending up late. I figured I might as well call out to her from the hallway, so I headed over to her room. Right as I got there, the door swung wide open. Ayase-san appeared with a panicked expression, only to stop dead in her tracks right in front of me.

A few seconds passed, giving me the illusion that time had stopped. She had a severe case of bed hair, strands of it standing in every direction, and she was even still in her pajamas. It was a defenseless sight I had never seen on her before, not even after she moved in with us. Ayase-san finally recomposed herself from her shocked state, immediately rushing toward the nearby bathroom. Immediately after, she slammed the door in front of me.



“Err...”

I had the sneaking suspicion that this entire ordeal, namely seeing Ayase-san right after she woke up, made my heart race faster than hers did. Explicably so, as I had never once seen her in such a vulnerable state as her sleepwear. While I realized my heart was beating painfully fast, I also realized how absurd this entire situation was, considering that this was the first time this had happened despite us living together for all these months. But as long as she's awake, that solves this major problem, at least.

"...If you're okay with toast, I'll prepare some for you," I said.

A few seconds later, a faint response came from the opposite end of the door.

"Sorry, and thanks."

I returned to the kitchen. I put the bread into the toaster oven and set the timer. I also turned on the burner to warm up the miso soup, took the sliced ham out of the refrigerator, and put it on a plate. The door to the bathroom swung open once more and Ayase-san hurried back into her room. During that time, I turned my back toward her to try to reassure her in a way. I imagined she didn't want to be seen the way she was right now.

I took out the crispy hot toast and put it on a plate, sliding it towards Ayase-san's seat. The miso soup was close to boiling point, so I turned off the burner and poured a good amount of it into a small bowl. To make a really stylish breakfast with toast, it'd probably be ideal to have some kind of fancy soup with it, but that'd just cause the miso soup to go to waste. When your cooking is limited to a domestic environment, you don't have to worry about the

values of cooking show hosts or critics. It's all freedom here for us.

On a somewhat related sidenote, according to my observations for the past few months, Ayase-san doesn't eat natto in the morning. Maybe it's typical for a girl her age, or maybe it's related to her personal preferences, but I nonetheless decided to leave the natto in the fridge for now. With that, preparations for a perfect breakfast were complete. At around the same time, Ayase-san entered the living room and sat down on her chair. She had finished dressing up for school, once again showing her perfect armament. I found myself internally clapping out of respect.

"Sorry about that, and thanks for taking care of everything."

"This much is nothing. And you prepared everything last night, too. Is this even enough? Should I get out something else?" I glanced at the fridge while asking this.

"It's more than enough. Really, sorry about this."

"It's totally okay. But it's pretty surprising to see you oversleep."

"I was on the phone with Maaya until late at night. It went past my bedtime."

When she said this, I remembered Narasaka-san's LINE message.

"That reminds me, I got a LINE message from Narasaka-san. You've probably heard about it already?"

"Ah... yeah."

"What should we do about it?"

I just bluntly asked without giving it much thought, and Ayase-san suddenly froze in place. She had picked up the boiled spinach with her chopsticks, only to move the toast towards her mouth instead. She noticed this before taking a bite, and she dropped the spinach on top of the toast, added the edible seaweed on top of that, and started munching away. I was a bit bewildered at this strange way of eating your toast, and she made a somewhat complicated expression. She probably didn't even realize what she'd done.

"...What do you mean? I was thinking of celebrating it with her. What about you?"

"I'm totally fine with going if she's okay with it. I just don't know much about Narasaka-san. She said she was fine without us getting her anything, but turning up empty-handed goes against my common sense."

"Ah, yeah. Right. Well, we're both still in high school, so I don't think you need to wrack your brain about it that much."

"You think so? But I'm still a bit confused about what I should get her. I've never given a girl a present before."

"Oh... never?"

"Nope, never."

"I see. So this is a first for you... Yeah, it can't be helped, then. Uhh... Would you like to go buy presents together?"

"Yeah, good idea. But..." I started pouring some tea into my teacup.

I glanced at Ayase-san, using my gaze to ask if she wanted some as well, to which she shook her head. I guess she's good for now. Then again, toast and tea aren't the best combination, I guess. I took my time with the tea and decided to wait until she was done eating. I think this depends on the person, but I try not to clean up any dishes from the table while somebody is still eating. If I did, it'd just make the other person feel rushed, ruining the great taste of the food with that. Well, it's a trivial thing to be concerned about, I know.

"...If we go shopping around the area here, people from our school might spot us." I continued our discussion from before.

"Yeah, that makes sense. Going out shopping as just the two of us...is not something that should be seen by someone else, then?"

Rephrasing that, she was asking if it was more acceptable if we went out shopping as siblings. I thought about it for a moment and answered.

"I think it's something perfectly normal for a couple of siblings who are close to each other to do."

"Yeah, I agree. But I... don't want that." Ayase-san mumbled only to continue after choosing her words carefully. "Well, since we're heading out somewhere together... I don't want to think about unnecessary things like how other people look at us... and all that."

"Ahhh...that's a good point."

Leaving aside the debate if you could call this a date or not, we're still spending time together. Obviously, I'd prefer if

that was a time where we could relax and ignore any possible onlookers and resulting stress.

"Then let's do that tomorrow after classes. We both have a shift tonight, so today won't work anyway."

"Yup."

Hearing my suggestion, Ayase-san nibbled away at the corner of her toast and faintly nodded. Since Ayase-san would usually eat breakfast ahead of me and rush out of the house, we rarely have a chance to eat breakfast together. I'm glad I got to ask her about this now. I'm feeling oddly thankful to Ayase-san for oversleeping, to be honest.

"Do you remember what we talked about during the cultural festival?" Ayase-san asked.

"Of course."

We promised that we'd take the time to head out somewhere together. It seems like the chance arose a lot faster than we had initially thought.

Fast forward to the end of this week's first morning homeroom. A listless atmosphere filled the classroom as us students either mentally prepared for another tough week ahead of us or indulged in passionate conversations to exchange impressions of the past weekend. I personally am part of the faction that prefers drowning in a listless sensation. I can't help but admire that the others have so much energy on a Monday morning.

"You seem oddly exhausted, Asamura."

My friend Maru Tomokazu loudly pulled his chair back and sat down at the desk in front of me. Since his stature was a

good bit taller than mine, whenever he appeared out of the blue, it made me feel like I had been fishing in the woods only to encounter a wild bear.

“Oh, Maru? I was just admiring the seemingly endless amount of energy everyone has.”

“Are you going to die?”

“It was just a busy morning. Relax.”

Because of how deep I had been in thought earlier this morning, I had to rush over to this classroom from the shoe locker to not be late.

“Sorry to hear that, but I’m afraid there’s still more on your agenda today.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, feeling an ominous premonition.

“That stalker of yours has been quite relentlessly bothering me. They really want a chance to talk to you, ya hear me?”

“What kind of manga have you been reading lately...?”

“Don’t try to play this off as some kind of joke. I’m dead serious here.”

“So you say, but who would even bother to stalk me of all people?”

There aren’t many people at this school I’ve personally talked to. Excluding Maru, there’s pretty much just Ayase-san, Narasaka-san, and the people who were with us on our day at the pool. However, I didn’t have to do much guesswork, as I immediately found the answer. Maru

glanced over at the hallway and waved his hand, and a male student entered the classroom with a pleasant smile on his face.

“Thanks for putting this together, Tomokazu... And it’s been a while, Asamura-kun.”

“Huh? Ah...yeah?” I was bewildered for a moment, which delayed my greeting.

It was none other than Shinjou Keisuke, the smart-looking tennis club regular with his short, dyed hair. He’s one of the people who were with us when our group headed to the pool, and also the person I had previously seen with Ayase-san, which was what made me feel jealous in the first place. It wasn’t his fault in the slightest, but I had an awkward feeling when dealing with him, so I had to make sure that I didn’t openly show it.

“He wanted to get to know you better, so he used any possible source of information to look into you. The guy gives me the creeps.” Maru complained.

“Oh, really? We’ve talked before, so you could have just come up to me.”

“I still barely know anything about you, so I didn’t want to suddenly impose on you if I was too pushy.”

“And that’s why he came to ask me for help. He told me to introduce you to him.” Maru audibly sighed.

Oh yeah, Shinjou just called Maru “Tomokazu,” didn’t he?

“Are you two close?”

“Not really, we’ve just known each other since middle school. And since we’re both part of sports clubs, we sometimes exchange information with each other.”

“Oh, wow. That’s a connection I didn’t expect.” I was genuinely surprised.

Two people I encountered at different times turned out to be acquaintances all along. That’s the type of trope you’d expect from a novel. Like when all the puzzle pieces come together to explain the greater picture. I guess reality really is stranger than fiction.

“So what did you want to talk about?” I asked Shinjou-kun.

To be perfectly honest, I had no idea what it could be.

“Yeah, about that... Have you got a minute?” He said, leaning over towards me as he glanced at Maru.

He probably meant to say that this was a private conversation only meant to be heard by the three of us. After that, he started talking in a hushed voice.

“You’re friends with him, you should know about his relationship with Ayase from my class, right?” Shinjou said as he looked at Maru.

“Hm...?” He glanced at me.

He probably wanted confirmation that Shinjou-kun was allowed to know. I nodded in silence, and the conversation continued.

“Sure do. They became siblings after their parents remarried. What about it?”

“In other words, you should know Ayase the best out of all of us, Asamura-kun.”

“Well, I guess so.”

...Or so I said, but I was genuinely baffled by my own words. What I said just now wasn't representing my actual feelings in the slightest. We may be living together, but assuming I knew even the slightest bit about Ayase-san would be nothing short of arrogance and conceit. Even her appearance after having overslept is something I had witnessed just today. Yet I bluntly agreed with Shinjou-kun's assumption... Maybe this impulse sprouted from the slight amount of mental resistance I still had.

“I reached the conclusion that, if I got to know you better, I might understand Ayase more, and how she ticks.”

“What am I hearing here? Shinjou, are you gunning for Ayase?”

“Err, well... Yeah, I guess I am.” Shinjou-kun awkwardly scratched his cheek after being questioned by Maru's sharp remark.

Looking at his face, I was filled with a small glimmer of admiration. I was admiring the fact that he could openly admit and voice his feelings. What surprised me the most was that I wasn't particularly jealous of his feelings for Ayase-san, but rather his ability to be so honest about them.

“You too, huh? There's been some kind of surge in numbers ever since this summer break. Well, she's always had the looks, and once people found out that those nasty rumors regarding her were fake, it makes sense that guys would start swarming after her.”

“Could you not make us sound like moths gathering around a lamp?”

“From the view of an older brother, that’s exactly what this looks like, you know. Right, Asamura? You wouldn’t allow some lowlife to act friendly with you if he’s just gunning for your little sister, yeah?”

“Now hold on, I’m not asking for this with some ulterior motive like that! Well, I would be lying if I said that wasn’t completely the case, but I was also curious about what kind of guy he was to end up in a family with Ayase of all people!”

“Ahaha, you’re not in court, you don’t have to be so desperate with your defense.”

Seeing Shinjou-kun genuinely panic made me burst out laughing. Then again, I think he’s being serious here. If he really were focusing on that goal, he should have definitely used a different approach altogether.

“If it’s just us talking at school like this, I’m fine whenever, to be honest.”

“Seriously...?! You’re a huge help, Asamura-kun!”

“Only at school, though. I’m busy with work once classes are over, so I’d have a hard time finding an open slot.”

I wasn’t just saying that to avoid him as effectively as possible. Besides the one time Maru took me to the anime merch store, we’d never met outside of school.

“Also, using an honorific with me makes me feel weird. You call Maru “Tomokazu,” so feel free to do the same for me.”

“Gotcha. Yuuta it is.”

“Yep, and I’ll go with ‘Shinjou’.”

“Wha, not ‘Keisuke’?!”

“I’d rather keep it to second names, to be perfectly honest. Plus I do the same for Maru.”

“I see... Well, I won’t complain if that makes it easier for you. Anyway, I’m glad to have you around, Yuuta!”

“Yeah, likewise. And to celebrate our newfound friendship, I have something of a question. I need your help with this as well, Maru.”

“Of course, fire away. Just make sure that it’s a question I can actually answer.” Shinjou made a smug expression.

“Someone’s passionate, all right... but sure. Let’s hear it, Asamura.” Maru shook his head.



Like a godsend during a time of peril, Shinjou looks to be the type to be knowledgeable about fashion, so I might be able to ask him for a tip or two. Naturally, I had a glimmer of

hesitation in my mind, considering he has feelings for Ayase-san, but that is that, and this is this. Looking at it from a neutral perspective, his feelings have nothing to do with my question.

“Leaving aside the potential of being a couple and all that, let’s say there’s a girl you’re interested in, and this girl is participating in a party. Just think of anybody that comes to mind, really.”

“I see. And?”

“What kind of clothes would you wear to that party? The same stuff you usually go with, or something different?”

Maru prepared his stuff for the upcoming first period as he thought about it. Shinjou made a serious expression like he was lost in thought. Carefully considering his answer to my question and not just laughing it off shows that deep down, he really is a good guy.

“I wouldn’t go as far as to buy new clothes entirely, but I’d definitely choose the best clothes I have on hand.”

“I see, I see.”

It’s an answer very much like you’d expect from Shinjou, seeing how he cared so much about looking stylish. Maru seemed to agree.

“Yep, same here.”

“Wait, Maru? You too?”

“Why so surprised?”

“I mean, knowing you, I figured you say that your normal clothes would be best.”

“I’m not telling you to go all out. But the other person should at least understand that you’re trying.”

“You want them to understand? Not to make them feel like you’re forcing yourself?” I was surprised to hear Maru’s argument.

“This depends on the other person, of course. Under any normal circumstances, I’d agree with you. The people who really care for the convenience of others try to keep their very hard work towards that goal a secret. However, this time it’s different. We’re talking about the O of TPO. And in this case, the *Occasion* is different.”

“Agreed. The fact that the girl you’re interested in is participating plays a huge role. If anything, not being concerned with your own appearance would be bad manners, I’d say.”

“What Shinjou said, yeah.” Maru nodded and continued. “It’s important to show off how you care for a person you hold romantic feelings for, even in the smallest possible ways. Be it a bird or a beast, courting is always made to be visible by the person you are trying to woo.”

“Woo...?”

Hearing that word out of Maru’s mouth made me temporarily perplexed, and I lost my train of thought for a second. Maru didn’t miss that chance, and he proceeded to drop a bombshell of a follow-up.

“Out with it. Where did that question come from? Have you finally found your Cinderella?”

And why does he look so happy?

“Not at all, I just asked because I was curious.”

“Spill the beans.”

“No beans for you. And also, there really isn’t anything to tell.”

“And? How did you get to know each other?”

“Seriously, listen to me... I just wanted to know how you two feel about fashion and all that.”

“Pfft... Hahaha! You’re a great guy, Yuuta.”

“Huh? Did I say something funny?”

I found myself flustered when Shinjou suddenly burst out laughing.

“I just had to admire your thought process for a second. Like, what kind of clothes you’d wear when heading somewhere with a girl. Discussing something I never really gave any thought up to this point really surprised me.”

“...So you usually don’t think about clothes all too much?”

“Not at all, to be honest. I think this is the first time ever that I’ve actually given it some thought. It feels... refreshing,” Shinjou said, smiling.

What I’ve considered being normal and self-explanatory turned out to be something he had never done before. If you put it in reverse, he saw fashion and the thought behind it as so natural that he didn’t even have to think about it, whereas I had to consciously consider my clothing choices. I always thought some people had it, and some people didn’t,

but I guess this is more a “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence” type of thing.

“By the way, Shinjou might look like a stylish kind of guy, but he’s not exactly playing fair.”

“Ah, hey, Tomokazu!”

“What do you mean?”

“Ack...” Shinjou scratched his cheek and explained, seeming reluctant. “Well, err... I have a little sister myself. She’s in her third year of middle school, so whenever we go shopping for clothes and I pick up something that’s not to her liking, she’ll tell me ‘You look lame, Bro’ or such.”

“Your sister does that?”

“Yep. She’s a girl, all right. So having a girl’s opinion when buying clothes is always greatly appreciated.”

“Meaning that you don’t necessarily have to be the greatest fashionista. I see. I never even thought about it that way.”

“Why not ask your own sister to give you some advice on fashion, Yuuta?”

“Have Ayase-san help me? I don’t think I should...”

“You moron. Ayase’s more like a classmate to him than a sister, so don’t compare their situation to you and your own sister.” Maru jabbed his elbow into Shinjou’s flank.

He apparently didn’t show much restraint in that, and Shinjou held his side, gasping for air for a bit before he continued.

“I-I guess so... Then should I ask my sister for help, instead?”

“That’d probably be even worse.”

I’d just feel bad for getting his sister involved in this mess.

“You should know that girls are actually into this sort of thing. She has a blast looking at pictures of my friends, which then leads to me giving the guys from the tennis club advice on their hairstyles or clothes.”

“So that’s what you two are always up to...? Ah, that explains things.”

Students who have siblings generally have a lot more senior-junior connections than only-children students. It’s something I’ve witnessed ever since middle school. I was always curious as to why that was the case, but I guess this is where the siblings-related conversation skills are coming into play, helping them form new relationships among their surroundings. Maybe the reason a lot of stylish and handsome-looking guys fill Shinjou’s friend group isn’t that they’re trying to constantly one-up each other, but it’s just a result of their constant exchange of information and sharing of the same environment.

“And since the other guys are doing it, you’re totally A-OK to get some of her advice, Yuuta. If you send me some pictures of you over LINE, I’ll relay them to her no problem.”

“I don’t have any urgent need for that... but I’ll keep it in mind, thanks.”

“Well, that’s about the same for the fashion sense inside the baseball club. Either it’s circumstances that make it easier for guys to pick up on what it means to be stylish, or they

study their butts off and learn about it the hard way for whatever possible reason. Without either of those two things, you're not gonna make much progress. Not to mention that you're never really up with the newest trends and such, so there's genuinely no need to rush things." Maru said.

He should have no way of knowing the minor details of my current predicament, and yet his advice was as good as if he could read my thoughts. That's my reliable best friend, all right. In that sense, maybe it'd be best to avoid any problems relating to Ayase-san when he's around. At this rate, he'll make me 'fess up to everything...

"Oi, Shinjou, the bell rang already. Back to your classroom! Shoo!"

"Oh crap, it's already this late?"

We quickly exchanged our LINE IDs.

"That was fun, you two. I'll stop by again sometime!"

"We're not waiting," said Maru.

"Catch you around."

Shinjou left our classroom while waving his hand at us. I genuinely felt glad that I was able to talk to him. I always thought of him as some different type of creature, but this conversation made me realize that we're more similar than I initially thought. And at the same time, I decided to properly give my own fashion sense some more thought.

Since we've found ourselves in the latter half of October, the sunsets happen a lot quicker than during the summer. After my classes ended, I opted to immediately head over to

work without taking a pit stop at home. Around the time I made it to my workplace, the sun had already dropped close to the horizon to the east. I'm pretty sure it's supposed to be all gone by 5 pm.

Well, give it another two months and we'll be in the middle of winter. It won't be long before this chilly breeze changes into a cold wintry wind. It's already reached the point that I can't ride my bike anywhere without wearing a thick sweater. But for work, I had to take that off in the changing room, so after that was done and I finished changing into my uniform, I immediately encountered Ayase-san and Yomiuri-senpai upon entering the main office. Today, I have a shift with both of them.

"Morning, Junior-kun."

The first to turn around was Yomiuri-senpai, who greeted me ad-hoc. She was wearing our bookstore's plain uniform with our classic apron on top, rocking the looks of a Japanese beauty with long, glossy black hair.

"Good mor—Wait, we're almost done for the day. Isn't that a bit too early? This is the time to say 'good evening,' no?"

"It's industry terminology, okay?"

"I don't know what kind of industry you are secretly a part of, but I'm fairly certain it couldn't be further from working in a bookstore. So what's up?"

"Don't just let my joke slide into obscurity. A mature reaction is way too boring for a mature adult like me, sniff sniff."

All I can see is childish behavior from a middle-aged man in the body of a young woman.

“Saki-chan and I are doomed to be on register duty today.”

“Oh, I see.”

Now it makes sense why Ayase-san has the eyes of a dead fish. I don't particularly mind cash register duty too much, but it is the most annoying part of working in a bookstore, that's for sure. Anything related to the cash register or counter is the most tedious type of work.

“There's so many things to remember.”

“But my dear Saki-chan, you learned about everything there is to know in the first two weeks.”

“Just about everything, yes. I still mess up here and there.”

“Diligent, very diligent. It took me three months to get totally used to it. Not to mention that I've gotten more sloppy compared to when I first started.”

“Is that so?”

“Nowadays, there's an even greater choice of possible payment methods. Not just credit cards; there are also a lot of customers who pay via an app. Though we should soon be getting machines that allow for both cards and apps to work simultaneously, thank goodness.”

“Oh, so it's finally reaching us, too?”

That is some great news to start the shift. It should make things a lot easier at the cash register.

“Well, as much as methods of payment have gone up in number, we also lost some things along the way. You rarely see anybody using a library card anymore.”

Ayase-san seemed bewildered to hear that. “What’s a library card?”

“Wohaaaaa?!”

How did you even produce such a voice, Senpai?

“No way, it’s here! This is the generation gap I’ve heard so much about! Junior-kun, did ya hear that just now? That’s what you would call a shiny-sparkly high school girl move. We’ve been blessed with a zoomer!”

“I find it hard to believe that a gap in generation would cause such a difference in knowledge...”

“It’s all over...I’ve become a lady-in-waiting...a court lady nobody would dare to woo. Wahhhhh.”

“Why are you verbally crying now? Also, I’ve never heard anybody cry while saying that.”

“Then what about waaah aaaah waaah?”

She’s just adding more syllables now.

“So, um... What’s a library card?”

Before it was time for our shift to start, we tried our hardest to explain the ancient payment method called a “library card” to Ayase-san, but it never really clicked for her. Both library cards and other paper cards like stationery vouchers have all been lost to history as of late. Even physical cards for phones have been starting to die out.

I watched the two girls enter the cash register area from the corner of my eye as I moved the trolley behind me towards the bookshelves. On top of the trolley was an empty

cardboard box to be packed with returns. I grabbed the list I was given with all the books that will be leaving today and mentally prepared myself.

“Now then...”

I should start with the bigger stuff. The trick to this kind of work is to get the bigger books out of the way first. Since you’re not exhausted and tired of work yet, your energy should go towards the bigger hurdles. And it makes you feel like you’ve accomplished a lot already, which increases your motivation even further. If you were to start with the smaller books, it’ll give you a false sense of lethargy and that you’ve been wasting too much time instead of actually getting work done.

In this case, I was dealing with larger magazines. I looked through the flat table in front of the shelves, picked out the magazines that will be getting their new issues tomorrow, and stuffed them into the cardboard box. If there were only one or two left, some of them could end up being moved from the flat table towards the bookshelves, so that required attention, too. Identifying them with just the binding took time, but I made sure to grab everything.

During my work, I spotted a men’s fashion magazine that seemed like it had never been touched before, its pages ready to cut your fingers—which has happened to me before during the winter season. It showed a handsomely-dressed man on the cover. Generally, books of the same genre come and leave on the same day, so the fact that we’ll get new magazines tomorrow is merely a coincidence. I’ve probably run my eyes over such fashion magazines countless times before, but I’ve never really given it any proper thought.

I see, so these kinds of clothes are in fashion right now... Honestly, I wouldn't be able to tell either way. That reminds me, they usually split these up between men's and women's fashion magazines, but do people check out what's popular for the opposite sex? Or do they put more emphasis on their own fashion sense over what the other people might think? Namely, just as I might not think of a weird women's hairstyle as cute, a woman might not see any refined taste in the clothes shown in a men's fashion magazine... maybe?

I was blessed enough to hear the opinions of Maru and Shinjou, two men, earlier, but I'd love to hear a woman's view on that. Conveniently enough, Yomiuri-senpai is here. Once I had completed all my necessary work, I immediately pushed the trolley to its original place and made my way to the cash register. Ayase-san spotted me entering the inner perimeter and shot up.

"I'll take over for the maintenance," She said and left for the area with the bookshelves.

Why's she so restless? I feel like she glanced at me in passing, but what was that about...? As the time of day was close to evening, the inside of the bookstore was less crowded than a few hours ago. As a result, we ended up practically sitting around bored at the cash registers. There was no line on either of our sides, either. With nothing else to do, and Yomiuri-senpai at my side, I decided now would be a perfect time to consult with her.

"Were you discussing something with Ayase-san?"

"Nothin' at all! Don't sweat it~"

"...If you say so?"

Well, it'd be rude to pry into their conversation. Especially considering the possibility that they may have very well been talking about me behind my back. Just the thought gives me shivers.

"Hm? Is something up, Junior-kun? You've got the face of a sleepy frog."

"What kind of face would that be?"

"Something like this."

She half-closed her eyes, jutting out her chin to direct her gaze upwards, with her mouth open like a small chick waiting to be fed... The heck even is this? Was I really making that kind of face? I was worried that I'd be dragged into a weird conversation otherwise, so I decided to just bring up what I had been meaning to ask while redacting any sensitive material.

"Okay, this is just a hypothetical question. Let's assume you found yourself a boyfriend, and you two go out on a date."

"...Hee, hee."

Huh? Hold on, why'd she laugh like that?

"Anyway... you would probably like your boyfriend to dress up...right?"

Taking in my question, Yomiuri-senpai put one finger on her chin and once more looked up at the ceiling. The way she pursed her lips and stared into the void above her was quite adorable to say the least. She truly resembled a prim and proper university student, but if that's true, how can she even copy the face of a sleepy frog in the first place?

“If he dressed up too much, I’d probably be put under a lot of pressure.”

“Pressure, you say?”

In other words, it would force the girl to pay more attention to her appearance, and inflict large anxiety and mental exhaustion. I see, that’s some crucial intel.

“Then again...”

“Hm?”

Yomiuri-senpai’s voice showed a faint glimmer of caution.

“Leaving that aside, there’s no need for him to dress up excessively. Just knowing that he’s trying to make me happy by giving me an easier time would be enough to give me a sense of being treated right.”

These words made me gasp. Maru said something similar along those lines this morning. That showing care and consideration for one’s partner is just as crucial as anything else. At the same time, Yomiuri-senpai’s argument focused more on the idea that one’s partner could be dressing up in an attempt to match the other person, which showed how much they cared. If a boy did this for her, she apparently would think that he was being cute, and would ultimately feel happy.

“Thank you very much for all of these pointers. I understand where you’re coming from, but calling a boy ‘cute’ isn’t that much of a compliment, is it?”

“Oh, is that how you feel?”

“I wouldn’t be too happy to be praised in that particular way...”

“Words hold meaning in the context in which they are spoken, Junior-kun. As the book lover you profess yourself to be, that should be common sense!”

“Context...Indeed. So, what would be the meaning of ‘cute’ in that particular context?”

“Respect!”

“I shouldn’t have asked...”

“Just kidding, what it really means is...”

Yomiuri-senpai spotted a customer walking towards her cash register and switched to work mode while saying her next sentence so quickly that I wasn’t even able to react.

“‘I love you a lot, you lucky guy’ is what that means.”

The fact that she could say such an embarrassing line with a straight face made me feel nothing but admiration for her for a split second, but upon closer reflection, that line invoked no doubts or further questions inside my mind, so this is most likely how Yomiuri-senpai would feel in this context. Needless to say, the same thing isn’t guaranteed for Ayase-san, and I would bet good money that there are quite a few women in the world who would vehemently disagree. In the end, I’d be best off buying a fashion magazine to study later...

10 pm rolled around, and after the end of our respective shifts, Ayase-san and I made our way home. I had to push my bike as always, with Ayase-san walking next to me. I could see her hands poking out from the sleeves of her

winter clothes, which looked a bit cold to me. Since the sun set earlier, the temperature naturally had started to drop quite quickly.

“Do you not have any gloves on you?”

“It’s still too early. It’s barely October. But it *is* a bit chilly today.”

The thermometer at Shibuya train station said it was currently 9°C. Considering the season we’re in, you could say this is a rare cold snap.

“Should we go buy something warm at the convenience store on the way home?”

“I’m fine. We’ll be home soon, anyway. It’d just be a waste.”

“Okay... Well, I guess so.”

In times like these, I find myself unsure of how to handle the situation, considering our current relationship. Holding hands may have been an option if I didn’t have to keep both my hands on my bike. In the manga I read a long time ago, the protagonist forcefully stuffed the girl’s hand into his own pocket to warm them up, but I fear that kind of embarrassing action is reserved for people who are strictly a couple. If somebody asked me if I’d like to do that, I would probably politely decline to save my face in public.

In other words, maybe my ideal relationship with Ayase-san isn’t that of lovers, but rather that of normal step-siblings who care for each other. That brings up a question: Is this emotion I feel towards Ayase-san really that of romantic affection, or is it not? I still have yet to find a definitive answer to the question she posed that day. And while I was

lost in thought once again, Ayase-san had already stuffed her hands into her pockets.

“What?”

“Ah, well...”

There was no way I could confess the thoughts filling my head at that moment, which is why I frantically searched for any possible way of changing the topic. I attempted this by closely observing Ayase-san’s current appearance, and then I thought of something.

“Your outfit...”

“Huh?”

“I mean, we first met in the summer, right? Seeing your winter clothing just felt so...fresh to me.”

“Does it look weird?”

“No, not at all. Um... it looks great.”

Ayase-san’s body tightened up to the point I could faintly see it, and she directed her gaze forward.

“You won’t get anything from praising me.”

“That’s just my genuine impression.”

“Oh really, now. That’s so like you, Asamura-kun...”

I wonder what she meant by that.

“I’m looking forward to going shopping tomorrow.”

“Me too.”

The flame of our conversation burnt out with that final exchange, and we continued to walk the rest of our way home in silence. Each time we passed through the ring of light provided by the street lights periodically placed on the side of the road, I could see the faint image of Ayase-san's face. For a moment, I indulged in her profile as she walked on ahead with a straight back.

Stunning, I thought to myself. We may not have talked much, but I didn't feel discouraged in the slightest. Instead, even this small stretch from work back home, and the short time of being together with her that it gave me, filled me with plenty of happiness.

Chapter 2

19th of October (Monday) - Ayase Saki

Shortly after midnight, I once again found myself lost in thought. The main thing on my mind naturally was the promise Asamura-kun and I made on the day of the cultural festival... that we'd head out and go somewhere. Just the two of us. Ever since then, my mind had been filled with questions such as where to even go, how to invite him, and what there was for us to do.

The biggest problem of all was Asamura-kun's attitude. The way he interacted with and around me filled me with anxiety that he may have forgotten about our promise, which is why I am agonizing about it in silence. It made me feel like I was the only one who was constantly thinking about it, that I was the only one who genuinely was looking forward to it, and this caused me to toss and turn in my bed over and over. Come on, I'll end up missing precious sleep if this continues. So I keep telling myself, and yet...

It's Monday already. Once I wake up, it'll be time for school. I pulled my blanket up over my head and forced my eyes shut. I need to sleep. It's time to sleep... I kept telling myself. I was still telling myself this when my phone's ringtone pierced through the silence.

“Oh, come on now...”

I grabbed my phone to check who'd bother me this late, which unsurprisingly turned out to be Maaya. I had a LINE message from her.

“What time do you think it is?” I grumbled to myself as I ran my eyes over her message.

‘I can’t sleep, help meeel’

You too? I sighed to myself and typed a response.

‘Sleep.’

‘But I’ve been thinking about it for hours on end now! I just watched a video and the guy in it said something so weird!’

‘What did he say?’

‘He said “We’ve thoroughly confirmed everything！”, which in itself is fine, but think about it! When we are sure of something, we use 確 followed by the verb of compiling something with the kanji 認 to form the word ‘confirm’ and the kanji 確認. It’s been like this forever. Yet the fall 落 from a horse 馬 is what we put together in 落馬. The kanji for the verbs are switched, and it’s driving me nuts!’

Who the hell cares about that?

‘So I was thinking; what if we changed that up? But the deeper I went down the rabbit hole, the more messed up my head became! It makes me want to stop using that phrase!’

That mattered even less than her previous dilemma.

‘Go to bed.’

'Nooo! Let's think about this together!'

'Why are you watching videos at this hour anyway?'

I asked her that in the heat of the moment, and Maaya immediately returned a lengthy message explaining the reason. Maaya would always send messages that are dense in content. I'm always a bit surprised how quickly she can type them up. To sum up what she told me in a few words, she had watched the late-night anime she couldn't miss, which is why she was wide awake. In an attempt to get sleepy again, she started watching someone's livestream, which achieved the opposite effect.

My very first comment on that would be: Don't involve your friends in your own problems. Secondly, I'm pretty sure there are streaming services that allow you to watch anime episodes on demand. There's no actual reason to stay up late to watch them anymore. And Maaya herself had made that very argument not too long ago. So why did she have to watch the episodes in real-time?

'I do use streaming services like that, but it doesn't beat the feeling of watching them in real-time! The feeling of being connected to all sorts of people across the world as they watch the same anime episode as you are and feel the same emotions in that very moment is something you can't easily replicate!'

'You have no way of knowing if they're feeling the same emotions, do you?'

'Bla bla bla! Don't spoil my fun, Sakinosuke! I do most humbly have to admit I am unquestionably disappointed in you!'

Sakinosuke? Is that me? When did this turn into a historical drama?

'...Ah, my fingers are all tired now. I'm gettin' cramps.'

How do you get cramps from texting?

'If you're still up, should we call instead?'

Again, don't drag me into the mess you've created... Sheesh. I was really hoping to get some sleep, but I happened to coincidentally remember something I'd been meaning to ask, so I agreed. The instant I sent her my response, the notification for the incoming call popped up on my phone. So fast. She probably had her finger on the call button.

"Aloha, Saki~"

"Did you move to Hawaii?"

"I'm feeling lonely so I wanted to warm up my dampened mood with some good vibes."

"...I'm gonna hang up."

"Ahhh, nooo! Pay attention to mee! ...Oh, also."

"What is it now?"

I was surprised by Maaya's sudden change of tone.

"Saki, there's something you wanna ask me, right?"

"...Huh? No, not at all."

"Reallyyy? You usually go through life at your own pace, so normally you wouldn't agree to a phone call this late, right?"

“Ack.”

“And I figured you said ‘yes’ because you need my advice on something, no?”

“Seriously... sometimes you’re way too sharp for your own good.” I sighed in defeat.

I was thinking of guiding the conversation in a direction that’d allow me to ask it naturally, but my good friend seems immune to such techniques.

“I knew it.”

“Well, you know... Let’s take a hypothetical scenario where you’re going out somewhere with a random boy.”

“Going where?”

“Um, the place doesn’t matter much. You just want to go anywhere with this boy.”

“Okay, I got it.”

“How would you invite him in a natural way?”

“Are you going out somewhere with Asamura-kun?”

Wha?!

“I-I never once mentioned Asamura-kun’s name, right?”

“Saki, you wouldn’t care about some random person, right? If it weren’t somebody close to you, you’d act like the world’s greatest sniper and keep your distance from everyone with a cold attitude like the second ice age befell all of humanity.”

“...Is that how you see me, Maaya?”

“I mean, Asamura-kun would be about the only person who’d make you worry and concerned about inviting someone out.”

That’s not...

“Shinjou’s attacks have simmered down as of late, so it’s gotta be Asamura-kun.”

“Maaya. Before you get any weird ideas, even if we assume that this boy is Asamura-kun, the reason we’re heading out together is definitely not whatever you’re thinking.”

“Oh really now?”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard such a distrustful comment from anyone in my entire life. I subconsciously gripped my phone harder than before. Maaya continued talking with a dubious tone of voice.

“The excuse is crucial here. If you don’t have a genuine-sounding reason to invite him, it would make it sound like you have an ulterior motive, and it’ll cause them to be more cautious.”

“I don’t have any ulterior motives.”

“Hmmmm...”

“Again, that’s not—”

“Then that’s even more of a reason to come up with a good excuse. You don’t want him to reject you, right?”

“Well... I...”

I hadn't even considered that possibility. But she's right. Why did I never even consider that? Maybe Asamura-kun doesn't actually want to head out somewhere with me. He never brought up our promise again after that day, after all. What should I do if he actually says no?

"Just for example..... Hey, are you listening?"

"Ah, yeah, of course."

"Two days from now, your friend named Narasaka Maaya will be celebrating her birthday."

"Ah, congrats."

"So flippant! And too early!"

"Should I have told you on the actual day instead?"

"I don't mind. Anyway, you could use this as an excuse to invite him. Say that you want to buy a present for Narasaka Maaya's birthday party, you know?"

"You're planning on having a birthday party?"

"Not at all. Or more accurately, I didn't... I was thinking that maybe I could hold one so that you have an excuse."

"Isn't that too much effort on your end?"

"Not at all. After all, it'd only be you and Asamura-kun who'd come."

Can you actually call it a birthday party then? How is that any different from just visiting her place like we'd sometimes do anyway?

“That’s what makes it great. You don’t have to be nervous, and neither does he. And you’ve got the perfect excuse to invite him!”

I see. I’ve been to Maaya’s place before, and if it’s under the pretense of Maaya’s birthday party, Asamura-kun surely wouldn’t be as hesitant.

“But are you sure?”

“About what?”

Unlike me, Maaya’s popular at school. If she said she was holding a birthday party, she’d gather participants not only from our class but across the whole school. I wouldn’t be surprised if she held a party every year, to be honest. So when I asked her about that, she explained that with the sheer number of possible attendees, she wouldn’t even be able to fit all of them under the same roof, thus forcing her to reject people who want to attend. To her personally, she’d rather not hold a party at all than hurt people that way. Seriously, how perfect can she be? She cares about everybody equally.

“But this time around, my only goal is to support the blooming love between you and Asamura-kun, so this much should be fine~”

“Again, it’s not what you think.”

“Anyway, I’ll be sending Asamura-kun an invitation after this. Also, keep it a secret that I’m only inviting you two. It’ll be a surprise for him, tee hee.”

I heard her giggle from across the phone when I checked the time. It was already past 2 am, and my shoulder poking out from beneath my blanket was starting to feel a bit chilly.

“Oh man, it’s already this late... What if I’m late tomorrow...”

“I can recover fully with a minimum of three hours of sleep!”

“Are you fit enough after that?”

“Are you worried about lil ol’ me? I’m fine. I’m still sleeping a total of six hours.”

When do you get those six hours, exactly?

“I’m not too fond of that... I’d like to get up before Asamura-kun to tidy myself up.”

“Looking perfect 24/7 isn’t going to earn you any bonus points. Show an opening here and there, and I’ll bet he’ll find it cute. Adorable, even.”

“That’s not...”

Back during the cultural festival, I realized that I’m not very skilled at showing cuteness like that.

“Well, I get what you mean, but...”

“Ohhh! Are you finally being honest with me, Sakippe?”

Again, who’s that?

“Boys secretly like that kind of stuff, or so I’ve been told.”

“Oh, oh, oh! News flash! Who’d you hear that from? Oh, right. Then you should take a detour to go home to change before you come to the party.”

“Even though it’s just us three?”

“Surprise is the best spice, after all! And that’ll allow you to go on a date two days in a row, right?”

It’s just a random birthday party, there’s no reason to go all the way, geez.

“...I’m heading off.”

“Okaaay. Nighty-night!”

We said good night to each other and ended the call. It’s all teasing and teasing when I’m dealing with Maaya, geez. But... show some openings, huh? Is that necessary so that he’d call me cute? No, there’s no way. Think about it, Ayase Saki. You shouldn’t put that much faith in Maaya’s words. Purposefully showing sleaziness will only backfire. I think.

I pulled my blanket up over my head once more, forcing my eyes shut—Yeah, there’s no way.

To the surprise of no one, I overslept the following morning. Worst of all was that I ran into Asamura-kun on the way to the bathroom... while still wearing my pajamas. God, that was so embarrassing. When I looked in the mirror, I had crazy bed hair everywhere. I felt like I would die from embarrassment. How could I create such an opening myself?

As for Maaya’s birthday party, Asamura-kun brought it up himself during breakfast. He asked what we should do about it. All the words I had come up with ahead of time were reduced to atoms. My heart was beating so hard that I was worried he might hear it from across the table. I focused really hard on keeping composure and responded.

“I was thinking of celebrating it with her. What about you?” I returned a question.

I had planned to nonchalantly bring up the talk of buying a present, but Asamura-kun got the jump on me. I was terrified. I genuinely thought he could read my mind. He then commented that this was his first time giving a girl a present. I see. So he'd never had someone like that before... Wait, why do I feel relieved to hear that? Well, Mom's the only person who's ever got presents from me, so I'm not one to talk. I steeled my resolve and brought up the question I'd been meaning to ask.

"Would you like to go buy presents together?"

I think my voice was shaking when I asked that. At first, Asamura-kun responded with a blunt "But," which made my chest tighten up to the point it hurt. However, he didn't say no. Instead, he seemed to be worried that people from school would spot us if we went shopping somewhere near here. I felt the same. After thinking about it for a brief moment, Asamura-kun proposed that we could go somewhere a bit further away to enjoy our shopping trip. I replied with a faint nod.

"Do you remember what we talked about during the cultural festival?" I carefully asked.

Asamura-kun is a kind person, he might just be on board with this in order to buy a present for a friend of mine. But he responded with—

"Of course."

I'm so happy. I'm glad I went ahead and confirmed it thoroughly.

I'm still working part-time at that bookstore. Lately, I've been on the same shifts as Asamura-kun. Today, there are three of us. Yomiuri-senpai and I were tasked with manning

the cash registers, whereas Asamura-kun went to make room for the new incoming magazines. As the line in front of my register decreased in length, I found myself glancing over towards Asamura-kun. Yomiuri-senpai naturally called me out on that and started to tease me, saying that I must be interested in “Junior-kun” after all. I vehemently denied her accusation, saying that it was just happenstance.

“Really now?”

Yet again, another person who has close to zero faith in what I tell her. Since barely any people were there wanting to buy something, and since we were fairly bored as a result, she probably decided to strike up a conversation.

“Halloween’s pretty close, isn’t it?”

“It’s on the 31st, right?”

“Yep, at the end of October. Because Halloween is the small festival before the big event—All Saints Day.”

“All Saints...what?”

“All Saints Day, which is November 1st. It’s the day you pray for all the saints in the world. The day reserved for all the fools is April 1st.”

“April Fools’ Day, you mean?”

“Exactement. For all the April fools. But, we don’t call November 1st November Saints’ Day, right? Or do we? Do you know anything about that?”

“No, sadly not.”

“Anyway, Halloween’s a big thing here in Shibuya.”

The topic was tumbling and rolling all over the field, but this was nothing new when talking to Yomiuri-senpai. I've finally gotten used to following her strange trains of thought. Her thought process is terrifyingly fast, as a matter of fact. Well, she's always bumping heads with Assistant Professor Kudou, so I'm not surprised at that. I thought back to the day I attended her university's open campus event and I found myself feeling slightly disheartened.

"Halloween's the event that turns Shibuya into the city that never sleeps."

"You're not wrong. It's been feeling a lot like the Holy Land with all the costumes as of late."

Especially the city center of Shibuya, which always gathered enough costumed people walking on the streets to warrant a broadcast about it. The crowd is always so dense that you'd always be bumping into someone.

"The crowd is honestly nauseating. I definitely want to avoid the city center during that time."

"Saki-chan, there is a reason why we poor human beings have to force our way through the city center despite all that."

"Wait, really?"

"Because we have work."

Ah. I remember now. Both Asamura-kun and I have shifts on the 31st. I guess Yomiuri-senpai's another victim like us.

"How about we at least have some fun and wear costumes during our shift?" She asked.

Despite being at work still, I shook my head as fiercely as I could. How preposterous.

“I’m sure you’d look cute dressing up as a witch with a triangular hat, you know?”

“Cute...?”

“Ah, bulls-eye?”

“Not at all,” I tried to act calm, but my words had no strength to them whatsoever.

Yomiuri-senpai once again used this opportunity to tease me, saying “I knew you were thinking about Junior-kun,” which made the blood rush to my head. As if that wasn’t bad enough, Asamura-kun returned from his work at the bookshelves.

“I’ll take over for the maintenance,” I blurted out and ran away from the cash register.

...He didn’t think that was weird of me, right?

Later, we made our way home. The air was cold, which made it feel like winter had arrived. I rubbed my hands together to keep them warm. Asamura-kun was walking next to me, pushing his bike along. Moments like these truly show how my lack of humanity. I can’t even come up with any topic to talk about. I failed to brew up a conversation he’d enjoy partaking in. Instead, I just searched for a way to make him think I wasn’t completely lost. The best I could do was blow warm breath on my shivering hands.

He praised me, saying that my clothes looked good on me... He’s probably trying to not make me feel bad, right? I

shoved my hands into my pockets, gripping them tightly. I finally managed to force the words out of my throat.

“I’m looking forward to going shopping tomorrow.”

I’m going to cry for real. Why am I like this? And yet, Asamura-kun—

“Me too.”

—Responded with that. I felt embarrassed, thinking I was the only one who was excited, but he immediately agreed. I glanced at his profile while he walked next to me, filling me with joy. I slightly opened and closed my hands inside my pockets. Finding a conversation topic that works both ways is so difficult. Instead, we just ended up walking our way home in silence. But I guess this isn’t so bad, either.

When we opened the door to our apartment and distanced ourselves from each other, I was hit with a wave of regret.

Chapter 3

20th of October (Tuesday) - Asamura Yuuta

Ever since the afternoon rolled around, I had been feeling restless. My first class of the afternoon was supposed to be modern Japanese, and yet my classmates reading from the textbook sounded like they were speaking a foreign language. Everything was entering one ear and leaving through the other. There was only one thing my simple-minded brain could focus on—The shopping date later with Ayase-san.

My mind was solely focused on working up plans to make the date a rousing success. I'm nowhere near confident enough to expect she'd have fun just by being with me, but I at least don't want to bore her into oblivion.

“What are you groaning about now, Asamura?”

I raised my head and was met with the sight of Maru turned towards me.

“Oi, Maru. We’re in the middle of class.”

I thought I was the one being reasonable, and yet Maru gave me an exhausted stare.

“What are you on about? Classes have already ended.”

“Wha?”

I frantically looked around and saw that my classmates were packing up to move classrooms. Oh yeah, today's 6th period is a chemistry experiment in a separate classroom, isn't it?

“You're flustered again. I don't mind hearing you out. Though I won't promise I'll be able to help.”

“Not going all the way with your promises is just like you, Maru.”

“I won't promise to help with stuff I can't do.”

This is exactly why I trust him. That aside, however...

“Is this a continuation from last time?” He asked.

“Not exactly...”

When I saw the dubious look on his face, I was reminded of what he had told me before.

“You mentioned that it's crucial to show the person you like how much you care for them, right?”

“I sure did, but what's important is the process. You can't trust the results by themselves.”

It seemed that he had expected me to bring up that topic again. I can't tell him that he's wrong, sadly, but I want to. Then again, he's not entirely wrong, either. On a different note...

“What do you mean you can't trust the results by themselves?”

“This is coming from a guy with no interest in make-up, so take it with a grain of salt. Let’s say you see a girl that styled herself up with makeup. Can you really judge for yourself that she’s worked hard to impress you?”

“Err...”

“The only guys who can confidently say that are those who use makeup themselves. That’s how I feel, at least.”

“Mhm, that makes sense.”

I thought back to Ayase-san. Because I had seen her in such a defenseless state, namely with just pajamas and bed hair, I now understood how much effort goes into her usual get-up.

“Results are just... well, results. Nothing more, nothing less. It’s the same in baseball.”

“Isn’t it bad in sports especially?”

“It’ll swing you from joy to sorrow. It’s ten years too early for me to be confident in my results. If you can’t even see how much effort your opponent puts into their training, you yourself aren’t going to make any progress. I’m not going to let down my guard for even a moment.”

I see, I guess? That’s a pretty stoic outlook.

“That’s why it’s important to see the process behind the other person’s efforts. Even if it’s the woman you’re dating.” I tried to summarize his argument.

“Exactly. Again, the same goes for baseball. I have no intention of showing off my efforts under any normal circumstances, but the argument changes if it involves the

person I'm interested in. Compare it to eating food from a restaurant and eating homemade food your girlfriend made. You'd be a lot happier about her cooking because she did it for you, even if it doesn't compare to the taste of restaurant food."

Good point, although Ayase-san's cooking is better than most of the food I could eat in restaurants.

"Working hard in itself also helps your appeal. Well, I personally wouldn't tell you to follow my advice, if I was you."

"...Aren't you basically contradicting yourself? Telling me to not follow your advice."

"Asamura, you are the exception to the formula."

I slightly tilted my head to emphasize my confusion. I failed to understand why I would be an exception.

"You actually don't know?"

"I'm lost."

"It's because you're so obvious and easy to see through. You'll be just fine."

For a split second, I was at an utter loss for words. I'm easy to read...?

"So just be you. Act normal and it'll get through."

"Uhh...?"

"No worries, my dear Asamura Yuuta. You're way too clumsy to do any of this. You're also too clumsy to actively hide any

effort you put into something—or someone. Don't try to be candid, just go all out. Full force, no brakes."

Do you think I'll be relieved to hear such a statement? What the hell does 'normal' mean? Act normal? How do I usually act, anyway?

"Now I'm only more confused."

Maru, however, just laughed at my misery for so long that we were almost late for our next class.

Once classes ended, I made a temporary return home to change my clothes. I figured that if I went there in my uniform it would only make us stand out. All the same, I may not be an experienced casanova, but even I'm aware that a school uniform isn't proper attire for a date between a man and woman. But more importantly... clothes.

After hours of pondering, I couldn't come up with an outfit I was confident in wearing. Another problem I only caught onto a little while ago is that having your date partner living in the same apartment makes it exceptionally hard to check how you look in the bathroom mirror. She'd definitely hear me stomping around if I keep making trips from my room to the bathroom and back.

Maru said I should be proud and own it, but that's impossible for me. However, since I am nothing but an average highschool boy, I don't have a giant full-body mirror in my room, either. After agonizing back and forth, I decided to use humanity's most resourceful and portable tool of the modern age—my smartphone and its camera function to take selfies. I set it up at eye height and stood back far enough from the phone to show off my entire body.

"Yep, it's gotta be this."

In the end, I found an outfit that felt best to me. The problem was just that it turned out to be about the same I usually wore when going out. It's totally normal. A black jacket with a light grey knitted sweater and matching black denim jeans. It's not bad, or so I'd like to think, but I can't exactly be confident in my own tastes.

“...Other guys wear stuff like this too, right?”

I pondered on it for a moment to then send one of the pictures I had taken over to Shinjou via LINE. I added a message that I'd like his sister's refined opinion. Under any normal circumstances, there was no way I'd rely on such a method. However, weighing it against the risk of Ayase-san potentially thinking that I was lame, I'd take the possibility of being roasted by a random middle school girl in a heartbeat.

However, all this back and forth delayed my realization of the fact that Shinjou should be in the middle of this club activities right now, and I doubt his sister is any more available than he is. I won't be able to complain if I only get an answer after I'm already out with Ayase-san. I can't believe I didn't even think that far ahead... Or so I was blaming myself when I saw that my message had been read already. He was probably taking a break at this very moment. Not to mention that I got an immediate response.

‘She answered me.’

When I read those words, a cold sweat started running down my back. Only now did I feel embarrassed from sending my selfie to someone who's practically a stranger, seeking their evaluation. All I could do however was type up a response with quivering fingers.

‘What did she say?’

'It's normal.'

'Huh?'

'That's all she said. Normal.'

He sent me a screenshot of his chat with said sister. Doesn't this just mean she's not interested enough to give an actual response? Maybe my outfit is just so tasteless that it seems bland?

'Sorry, break's over.'

He left me that final message. I sent him an emote to convey my gratitude and sighed to myself. I'd completely messed up. Getting a response as vague as that only makes me more confused, so there was no benefit to that whatsoever. It was wrong of me to try and rely on others with the small amount of time I had been given.

"But aren't his little sister and him a bit too close?" I muttered to myself while checking the screenshot of their chat.

Being able to immediately hop into a conversation at any given moment truly shows how close they are as siblings. Then again, he's the only person I can measure myself against in that regard, so there's no guarantee that this kind of relationship is normal or not. I continued that train of thought and compared it to Ayase-san. If a boy I knew sent me a selfie of him, asking me for Ayase-san's opinion, would I relay it to her? I had a hunch that I probably wouldn't. I'd think up some sort of reason not to do it. I desperately didn't want to hear Ayase-san's opinion of another boy, no matter the subject.

In comparison, Shinjou and his sister have reached a bond where they trust each other, allowing him to just randomly send over pictures for her approval and evaluation. The fact that neither of them have any problem with that shows proper interaction between a pair of siblings. So keeping that in mind, maybe my feelings differ from that concept after all?

“Are you ready to head out?”

A voice called out to me from the other side of the door to my room, which interrupted my train of thought. It seemed like Ayase-san had already been prepared for a bit.

“Yeah, I’m all good here...I think?”

I’m still devoid of any confidence in my outfit, but standing around worrying about it won’t do either of us any good. I had to run with it and pray it worked. Upon opening the door, I saw Ayase-san getting up from the living room sofa. She walked in front of me and I immediately swallowed my breath when I laid my eyes on her. All I could think was—*That’s Ayase-san for you.*

She was wearing a knitted, wine-red top with a moss green jacket that emphasized the difference in color quite well. They’re complementary colors and yet it’s not too bright to look at. Once again I was impressed by her admirable sense of fashion and outfit coordination. I could see a small triangular pendant dangling on her chest as well. Her uniform aside, the majority of outfits I’d seen her in were a casual shorts kind of look, so this was quite different. She’s wearing a skirt today, not to mention a long one that goes well below her knees, which gave her a calm and peaceful image.

Her usual armament was something close to the image of an average high school student, yet today it felt like she had loosened her defenses a tiny bit... like she was a bit more approachable. She's just as beautiful as ever, she's cute all the same... Then again, I'm no fashion critic, this is just my personal opinion.

"Then let's go."

"Ah... Right, wait a sec."

"Hm?"

Ayase-san was about to put on her boots, but she stopped in her tracks to turn towards me again.

"Did you forget something?"

"Not exactly. I was just wondering if walking to the train station together would be such a good idea."

"Because we're both wearing casual clothes? I think it should be fine. This is something normal siblings do, too. I don't particularly mind."

"That makes sense, then. Sorry for bringing up something weird like that."

"Don't worry about it. It's important, so I'm thankful you reminded me. Whenever we're troubled with a decision, let's adjust to each other the same as ever." Ayase-san said, and it made me feel relieved from the bottom of my heart.

...This is it. This is what I really like about her. And with that last check out of the way, Ayase-san and I left the flat behind us.

While waiting for the next train at Shibuya train station, I was filled with a strong sense of discomfort. At first, I didn't even know what exactly I was so bothered by, but then I realized that our gazes kept meeting as we stood next to each other. It's Ayase-san's face... or rather, her expression. It seemed like she was trying to hold back her laughter.

Whenever she glanced at me, her mouth twitched... I think, at least. Is she laughing about my outfit? I don't think that's the type of person she is... I hope. Maybe she spotted a part of my outfit that made her giggle? If I asked about it, I might leave the conversation with a knife stabbed into my chest. So I can't. Maybe she's just trying to be considerate by not mentioning it.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed realistic to me. I quickly shook my head to rid it of these wicked thoughts. Both correct and wrong answers would probably make things awkward, so I decided against bringing it up. But even so, it sure does feel weird... Okay, enough! I shouldn't be constantly glancing at her expression either. She'll just think I'm being rude.

I tore my attention from Ayase-san and tried my best to not look at her while we boarded the train.

After roughly twenty minutes, we finally reached Ikebukuro station. After walking down the stairs from the platform, we briefly traversed through the underground path and slipped through the ticket gate. We walked past the famous stone statue at the east entrance that was frequently used as a rendezvous point, up the stairs again, and left to the surface. As we walked down Sunshine Street, we were greeted by the sight of crepe stalls, cafes, shoe stores, antique fashion shops, apparel shops, a game center, a movie cinema, and many other establishments.

The city's entertainment district certainly didn't bring any shame to its name, which explained why it was filled with people, ranging from normal groups of friends to couples. You could see all sorts of people no matter where you looked.

"Woah..."

At the corner of the street, I could see a couple sharing a passionate kiss with their bodies glued together, which made me subconsciously blurt out a baffled voice. This of course earned me a light jab to my side by Ayase-san.

"It's rude to stare like that."

"Sorry. I just spoke before I thought."

"I understand how you feel... You're shocked when you see that out of the blue."

We both made wry smiles to each other and reprimanded ourselves. A human being's feelings are truly complicated and odd. It's each person's freedom what they do and where, and an outsider's perspective shouldn't influence their actions. That's the principle I'd like to live by. And despite that, once I'm met with the sight of a kiss being displayed right in front of me, I bite my own philosophy in the neck.

If I were asked 'If a couple kissed in front of you, how would you feel?' in a survey, I'd normally answer bluntly 'I wouldn't feel anything,' and yet in that one moment, my judgment was clouded because of the unexpected scene in front of me. Part of me probably upheld my philosophy, whereas the other part gave in to my instincts. The values as part of my philosophy that I had built up for years with experience and knowledge now had crumbled to pieces as

my brain cells froze in place, allowing me to see beyond the facade I had been relying on.

“Is that something you’d like to do, Ayase-san?”

“Not really, no. And I’d be a bit taken aback if someone asked if I wanted to.”

“Agreed. There’s no need to adjust in that regard, I guess.”

“It’s fine. That was also an important question.”

Kissing in front of others isn’t something we want to do, nor is it something we see as desirable. As a matter of fact, if siblings did that in public it’d create an uproar, so it shouldn’t be something even worth considering, but the devil is in the details, as they say. After I had regained my composure, Ayase-san and I kept on walking down the street, making our way into a smaller one. Soon after, a giant blue billboard greeted us from above. It was so flashy that it stood out even in the center of Sunshine Street, and there was a crowd of people at its entrance.

“Oh? Is this...”

“A store for anime merchandise. It’s pretty famous, and it stocks a lot of different things.”

I know this one. Another branch is located in Shibuya, and Maru had dragged me to it several times before. I was a bit taken aback because of everything that filled my mind, so it took me a moment to remember why we had even come here in the first place.

“Err, Ayase-san?”

“Hm?” She looked at me.

“We... are buying a present for Narasaka-san, correct?”

“Yep.”

“...We’re going to buy one from *here*? ”

I feel like the things on sale here couldn’t be further from the usual presents you’d get a high school girl in her prime.

“She’s actually into this kinda stuff.” Ayase-san pointed at an anime character on a poster hanging in front of the store.

I was baffled. Since I’m the guy who reads light novels in my spare time, I don’t have any prejudice toward that particular hobby. I’m just not the type of person who’d run around buying merch for anything, but I guess I probably look the same when I’m rummaging through the new book sales... but my case doesn’t matter right now. More focus should go toward the fact that such an outgoing and normie kinda girl would be interested in anime—and this isn’t prejudice. It just didn’t feel that way whenever we’ve talked up to this point, hence my surprise.

“She’s got a group of younger brothers at home, remember?”

“Now that you mention it...”

“She says she watches anime with her brothers on some kind of streaming service she’s subscribed to, which is why she’s pretty knowledgeable about new anime and all that. And she can watch it while doing chores, which is also a plus for her.”

“So she’s influenced by her siblings, huh?”

“At first, yeah. Now she herself has gotten addicted to it, she told me.”

Thus, Ayase-san came up with the idea of buying anime goods to make Narasaka-san happy, which made perfect sense to me. We somehow managed to slip past the crowd in front of the shop and entered inside.

“It’s huge. I don’t even know where to start looking.”

“Just walking around and looking at whatever strikes your fancy should get us somewhere. I don’t know where they display which products either, nor do I know what Narasaka-san is into.”

“It’s fine, you can leave that last part to me.”

In our quest for the perfect birthday present, Ayase-san and I slowly trotted through the store from one corner to another. While we did so, I learned how modern anime goods are handled when it came to each sex. The area for goods targeted at women isn’t like the full-blown ‘**ABSOLUTE ANIME GOODS**’ type of place you’d normally see. Instead, they offer particular goods for favorite characters, mostly in the form of student badges, keychains, or notebooks. Since they only had the designs engraved in the corner, they looked like completely normal accessories at a glance.

“This is pretty normal...”

“Yep, it’s stylish.”

“That’s how it looks to you?”

“Over here is—” Ayase-san said and pointed at a bookshelf next to us.

It contained plush toys and keychains from characters even I knew from anime I watched when I was still a child.

“...These might be a bit harder to use.”

“I see, I see.”

In other words, the commercialization of anime goods has been increasing? Now that I think about it, Maru mentioned something similar to me once before. The growth of the otaku goods market is brought about by the generalization of otaku culture, which leads to a greater diversification of goods. That being said, since I never had the perception that being an otaku and looking stylish were ideas that could co-exist, I was slightly surprised at this discovery.

I looked around in shock, witnessing that the majority of customers in the shop were all dressed up perfectly normal to even stylish. I could even see an equal number of male and female people... No, there are more women than men at this moment. Oh yeah, a while back, Ayase-san mentioned that she was jealous of the shape of my eyebrows despite not doing anything about it. Many of the men around me looked the same in that regard, not just the women. And if their genes didn't do them a favor, they most likely tried to tidy them up.

I see. That's why Ayase-san nonchalantly assumed that I tend to my eyebrows. Maru mentioned that more and more otakus have been taking greater care of their outer appearance as of late, so it must be part of that.

“Since we're dealing with someone as socially open as Maaya, I'm pretty sure she won't particularly care either way.”

“Makes sense...”

No matter what we get for her, anything feels fine since it's Narasaka-san, after all. Although I can't tell if that's a good or bad thing. In the end, we still have to choose something for her. As a bit of a reward, I'd at least like to see her smile. I periodically listened to Ayase-san's opinion on things, and we eventually ended up with a mug from an anime she's recently gotten into (whose target demographic is primarily children, which explains why I hadn't heard of it before). In this case, it had the emblem of the anime engraved on the cup.

With a large family like Narasaka-san's, she should be fine with some more tableware at her disposal, and since it's from an anime her brothers might watch, she can always let them use it in case she didn't want to.

"Phew. Thanks for helping me out, Ayase-san. You gave me some great pointers."

"Really? I'm glad I could help."

With the plastic bag containing the wrapped present in hand, we declared our business here finished and left the shop behind us. The time of day had already started to turn to evening, as the sky was turning dark despite it only being past 5 pm.

"Now that I think about it, you didn't buy anything, right, Ayase-san? Do you already have something?"

"I changed my plan of action, actually. I'll go buy something tomorrow."

Or so she said, but she never told me what exactly she was planning on buying in the end.

We made our way home, gently shaken left to right inside the moving train. Thinking back on it, today really didn't feel like a date at all. Walking around the store while exchanging opinions and cracking a few jokes was fun for sure, but we didn't even hold hands. When evaluating the location we went to, it wasn't particularly a date spot for boys and girls to go together. Rather, it was a place people like Maru would visit frequently. Now that I think about it, there were both game centers and apparel shops at our disposal, but Ayase-san showed no interest in either of these, which is why we didn't bother making a pit stop... Even though they were all prime date spots.

And right after I finished buying my present for Narasaka-san, we just both decided we'd head home for the day. It was supposed to be a date between just the two of us, but I feel like something is lacking. Now that I think about it, we could have stopped by a fast food place to take a quick break. Well, there's dinner waiting at home anyway, so I guess there was no need.

I also realized that, although Ayase-san had been smiling today from start to finish, something felt awkward about her. Of course, I had no way of knowing what exactly that was. I was simply plagued by this vague discomfort I couldn't directly put into words. If I just knew what it was, I could adjust to it with her. But instead, I'm over here brooding over it...

Just like the traincar we were seated in, my inner feelings were shaken left and right. After spending minutes upon minutes counting the sporadic street lights flashing by as we passed them, I decided to jump over my own shadow and ask her. We exchanged a few idle works and then I brought it up.

“Is there something weird about my outfit?”

“Huh? No, not at all. Why do you ask?” Ayase-san seemed bewildered by my question, which made me feel relieved—or so I’d like to say, but I’m not nearly confident enough in myself to do so.

“Compared to you, I’m pretty inattentive when it comes to my outfit and hairstyle, right? I’m pretty insecure when it comes to my own fashion sense, see.” I blurted out my genuine feelings.

“I think it’s good. It fits you best.”

“Mhm, thanks. But—” I expected her to say that, so I continued. “Your outfit is coordinated so well that it’d make people comment on how stylish it is, right?”

“I guess?”

“So, after carefully considering the matter, the clothes you’re wearing are the ones you think are the best for the given circumstance, no?”

“Most likely.”

“I also think you look great in that, you know.”

The second I said that, Ayase-san’s expression shattered, and I thought I heard a faint ‘Wha...’ coming from her.

“...Thanks.”

When she thanked me, it felt like her smile froze up in an awfully awkward way, but my head was full with way too many other things, so I couldn’t trace her change in expression back to its origin.

“But, you know, I don’t even know what kind of outfits would look good on me. I don’t have the knowledge to judge that. And since I have about zero confidence in my own style, I can’t follow at all when somebody says it’s ‘very much like me’.”

“Erm... So in other words, you’d like to try and dress up in a way that’d make you look stylish in the eyes of the world? You don’t seem the type of person who’d particularly care about that.”

“I feel like it’d be an important lesson to go through at least once. Whether I eventually come to like it or not, I’d like to know the formal dress code for these kinds of occasions.”

“Ahh...I see, I see. That sounds like something you’d be concerned about.”

I think it’s just my insecurity playing a huge role in all of it.

“Basically, you lack the knowledge for a... regular date outfit, or clothes in general, and although you’d like to learn more about it, you lack the confidence in your own judgment?”

That’s Ayase-san for you. She catches on quickly.

“Exactly.”

“Hmmm...” She cast her head downward and started thinking.

After passing one train station during our ride, she suddenly raised her head once more.

“We could take a quick detour on the way home.”

“Wait, right now?”

“If you’re fine with my tastes and what it means to look stylish, then I don’t mind helping you pick out something.”

I didn’t even think of that. If it’s Ayase-san’s personal choice, then I can definitely put my faith in that, and I can even find out her personal tastes in clothing and outfits, so this scenario would kill two birds with one stone.

“Then please do.”

“Don’t get your hopes up too much. I’ll just go with my own preferences.”

That’s exactly what I’m hoping for.

“So where do you have in mind?”

“Daikanyama is pretty close by, so that’d be my first choice.”

“True... But I’m really sorry about this. If I’d just brought this up sooner, we could have gone to a place in Ikebukuro.” I spoke with an apologetic tone, but Ayase-san responded with a pleasant smile.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. Both of us miss the right time to speak up all the time.”

“Ahaha, that is true. Thanks.”

And with that decided, we hopped onto another train at the Shibuya train station and made our way to Daikanyama. Trusting Ayase-san’s sense of direction, we walked down the street to the store in question. The lights of the stores around us had yet to turn off, and the dazzling light from the

windows illuminated the asphalt ahead of us. After a brief walk from the train station, we entered a men's fashion shop.

Immediately upon entering, I was reminded that this couldn't be compared to nonchalantly visiting a supermarket or convenience store. I looked for a shopping basket or shopping cart but found absolutely none. I was still looking around in confusion when a female employee smoothly approached me.

"Can I help you, Sir?"

"Ah, um."

"We'd like to look around a bit first." Ayase-san appeared from behind me, offering me a helping hand.

The employee faintly smiled, looked at both Ayase-san and I with a quick glance, and lowered her head.

"Very well. Don't hesitate to call me in the event you need help with something." She left these words behind and walked away without creating any noise.

"That scared me..."

"Maybe she thought you were here alone?"

For some reason, Ayase-san's tone sounded faintly aggravated. Is that because my outfit didn't match hers at all, which made us look like separate customers? I was starting to feel nervous and quite frankly almost felt stranded in a foreign world. I knew I was the only person putting this much pressure on myself, but there was nothing that could be done about it. In contrast to how flustered I was, Ayase-san couldn't have been any more confident. She

walked ahead of me with an attitude that'd make you think she owned the place.

“Do you come here often?”

“Huh? No way.”

“Oh...”

“They mainly sell men’s clothes here, remember?”

Well, I guess that makes sense.

“I mean, wearing an outfit coordinated with men’s clothing is more than doable, but Asamura-kun... do you really think that would look good on me?”

Her question intrigued me, so I gave it some thought. Last night, before heading off to sleep, I took some time to check through the fashion magazine I bought the other day. But despite that, I still felt like I was lacking reference material, so I looked up “men’s clothing” and “matching”, but I only got photos of female models as a result. When I looked at some of the sites in the search results, I found that it was some kind of genre that focused on men’s fashion targeted at women.

They weren’t clothes a man would wear, but rather outfits that had male “vibes,” so many of the outfits looked a lot more relaxing and chill rather than stylish outfits with high heels and such. I do remember seeing suits and jackets in there, too. There should be something similar here that can answer Ayase-san’s question...

A lightly-colored denim jacket that emphasizes her shoulders... Yeah, something like that one over there. I spotted a mannequin wearing a black jacket with a thick

men's belt and imagined it on Ayase-san. It felt like I had bought currency for a mobile game to dress up my in-game character. I'm still completely lost in terms of fashion sense, but thanks to the mannequin being dressed up properly presumably thanks to the store's employees, I could easily picture it with the actual Ayase-san standing in front of me. Using my imagination, I dressed up Ayase-san the way I imagined. Her black jacket was hanging from her shoulder, she was stretching out her back as she posed like a model on a catwalk.

"I think you'd look handsome."

Immediately after I said that, I heard a sound like a cat getting stepped on, and I quickly glanced in that direction. At that exact moment, I saw Ayase-san turning her head away.

"I-I don't wear stuff like that."

"Huh? Ah, yeah, of course. I'm sure you won't. But if you asked me if you looked good in it or not... then I'm sure you'd look stunning. Particularly in something like that—" I pointed at the mannequin wearing the black jacket while continuing. "I bet you could easily pull off something like that... Wait, what's wrong?"

Ayase-san frantically waved her hands in front of me.

"Enough. Enough, okay? We came here to pick out an outfit for you, Asamura-kun. Not to talk about my own outfits!"

"Right, right. So do you have any recommendations right off the bat?" I remembered our initial reason we came here.

"Geez, you're just... Um, let me think."

Ayase-san grabbed a random piece of clothing and its hanger, raised it in front of me, and compared it against my current attire. She then made me turn her back towards her, and she checked the shoulder width as well as the length.

“Hmmm. Asamura-kun, this way.”

“Mmm, hm? You’re already done there?”

“I’m done checking.”

“R-Right...”

That was one piece of clothing, right? After that initial event, Ayase-san dragged me around the store, stopping at certain intervals to grab a piece of clothing or two, checking it against my body. This was repeated over and over. Maybe she’s trying to check what kind of outfit looks good on me. She’d grab the clothes with the hanger, hold them against my chest, then pull them away again in an endless cycle. Each time her fist bumped into my chest, I was assaulted by a tickling sensation.

“Hey, don’t move.”

“Ah, my bad.”

“Hmm? Not this. This isn’t it. Ah, stand still just like that.”

“Y-Yes.”

Following the orders of Ayase-san, I seemed to have turned into a mannequin myself. The other customers walking past us were all grinning for some reason. Ayase-san was so focused on picking out clothes that she didn’t even realize, though. I was starting to feel like this was a lot more like a date.

Shopping in Ikebukuro was great, the place we visited was fine, the atmosphere we had going was good, and yet it differed greatly from the classic image of a date I had in mind. Yet this current scenario that had reached a point where we were close enough to sometimes bump into each other... this very moment felt much more like something you could categorize as a date.

...But is that really true? Shinjou's relationship with his sister came back to mind once more. They also would go out shopping together, with his sister picking out clothes for him, I'm sure. The point is, that's the exact same thing Ayase-san and I are doing right now. It's something that even normal siblings would do. We decided that this course of action would be best for now, and yet it felt like a small bone had gotten stuck in my throat, leaving me restless.

Am I satisfied with just staying as siblings who get along with each other, or am I secretly wishing for something that goes beyond what we currently have? More than anything, what do I want to *do* with Ayase-san? How far would I like to go with her?

...And why exactly am I constantly thinking about her like this? If people knew what I was thinking at this exact moment, they would probably think I'm a creep. Realizing that I had been caught in my own labyrinth of thoughts, the blood throughout my body started boiling, rushing to my head. I was starting to sweat despite it being fairly cold outside, so I'm sure the heater in this place is running way too hot.

"Okay, got it," Ayase-san spoke up, grabbing two pieces of clothing. "I'd go with this."

"Um... What am I looking at?"

“The jacket you’re wearing right now is perfectly fine, but this tailored one seems like a good match, too.”

Met with this unfamiliar vocabulary, I subconsciously found myself taking a step backward.

“Tailor... what now?”

“You don’t know? It’s a type of tailored jacket.”

“Ahh, tailored at a tailor.”

“So you *do* know?”

“I read about it in a book before.”

I read a novel that took place in England during the 1870s, basically during the Victorian age. It was the story of a girl who worked as a dressmaker. That was why I had heard that word before. The tailored jacket Ayase-san was holding was a light grey color, and its collar seemed rather thin. If you compared it to a normal jacket you’d wear over a suit, it emphasized the shoulders a lot more, while also providing a pleasant atmosphere thanks to its light colors.

“I kept it plain so it’s easier to match.”

“Isn’t staying plain bad?”

“When you’ve got one with a pattern or peculiar design, you’ve got to match it with the rest, and... Oh, I guess I’ve already reached the point where an explanation is needed.”

“My sincerest apologies.”

“And this is what you’ll be wearing underneath that. I wouldn’t recommend wearing this during the deepest parts of winter, but it should be just fine for November.” She said,

handing me a simple white t-shirt she had been carrying over her arm.

That one, like the jacket, looked plain and simple with no designs or drawings or anything on it. The chest pocket was so small and uninteresting that I had to look twice to even spot it. Along with the jacket, the shirt also had sloping shoulders as part of its design. It was very simple, but since it cost at least twice as much as the regular t-shirts I own, the quality and design must be on an entirely different level. I just wouldn't know, I guess...

"As for your jeans, you can just go with the ones you're currently wearing. Not to mention that you'll go overbudget if you bought a new pair of those."

"Thanks."

"Good. Do you want to try them on? Then you can decide if you like them or not."

"Got it."

I accepted the clothes from Ayase-san and gave her the plastic bag with Narasaka-san's present. After that, I made my way to a changing room and checked out my new look in the mirror. I'm still lacking the vocabulary to describe it properly, but it did feel like I looked pretty good with these new clothes. It felt like a chill yet stylish fall outfit. Since it doesn't emphasize my broad shoulders, it created a much more peaceful impression, one that I didn't have before. The jacket's fabric felt great and seemed like it'd be solid against any breeze. Now I should be prepared for the current season.

However, despite everything previously mentioned, I still failed to see any significant difference compared to what I

usually wear. Is this... good enough? I can't tell. When it comes to any field you're not extremely proficient in, it's practically impossible to tell the small differences apart. Instead, it's decreasing my resolve. It's like a parent in the older generation telling their child not to use their phone, because they lump mobile games, music, LINE, and learning apps all into the same category. They just don't know any better. I might have improved upon my previous look, but I don't see enough of a difference to be able to confidently say yes or no.

"How does it look?" I stepped out of the changing room and showed her my current appearance.

"Yep, I think it looks good."

"Umm... Is this enough? Like, maybe I should dye my hair while I'm at it?" I spoke with a worried tone.

Since Shinjou's sister called my previous look "normal", I couldn't help but think that this small bit of tampering probably wouldn't change much. Maybe a more drastic change was necessary. However, Ayase-san surprised me by speaking like a kindergarten teacher would when reprimanding a small child.

"Hey, whose impression do you need to be satisfied?"

"Huh?"

"If you want to show off to random strangers on the street, then my own fashion sense should make you worried. I totally get that. Is that the kind of stylish look you want to achieve, though?"

"No, not at all..."

"That's a relief," Ayase-san said with a smile. "Then maybe you could just believe in me? I chose them for you, and I think you look great in them."

"I see... Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry, that was rude to ask."

"No, you're completely in the right. Everyone would be worried about how they look in the eyes of a stranger."

She most likely agreed with me from the bottom of her heart, and when I saw her gentle expression, something finally clicked in my head. I was trapped in an endless circle of my own thoughts and my own standards. My own personal desire to become a man who can proudly stand next to Ayase-san isn't anything close to caring about someone else's feelings. Trying not to fall into an abyss of self-loathing, I built up a mental barricade to protect my mind, only relying on a third party's judgment instead of my own.

I don't even know how Shinjou's sister looks or acts, and yet I had every intent to gratefully accept her opinion, most likely because my true desire had always been to get an opinion from someone close enough to get an opinion from, but also far enough from me to not be dejected at their response. Yomiuri-senpai has already told me something like this before, hasn't she?

'That aside, there's no need for him to dress up excessively. Just knowing that he's trying to make me happy by giving me an easier time would be enough to give me a sense of being treated right.'

The impression, in that case, isn't from some third party I barely care about, it's from my own partner. Maru and Shinjou also brought that up. What's important is the intention of trying to look stylish. The actual result is

secondary. The people around me kept pointing me in the right direction, yet I went off-road for so long that now I feel embarrassed. It doesn't matter what anybody else thinks as long as Ayase-san likes the way I dress. That's the best kind of fashion that exists.

I paid for the clothes and the two of us left the store behind us. On the way back to the train station, Ayase-san suddenly spoke up.

"Asamura-kun, can we make a quick stop at the convenience store on the way home?"

"I don't mind."

"The supermarket might be cheaper, and has a larger assortment, but it'd be too much of a detour. I just have to buy some mustard since we ran out a while ago."

"Why mustard?"

"I was thinking of making *oden*¹ tonight."

"Ahhh... Well, it's been awfully chilly these past few days, so that makes sense."

"I've been in a hot pot kind of mood since yesterday. We do have the ingredients, but it'll be more of a vegetarian hot pot than anything."

"Which makes it healthier, so I'm down. But if there's anything else we need to buy, just let me know. I'll carry the stuff."

"Thanks..... Um, did I say something weird just now?"
Ayase-san blinked at me in confusion.

Probably because I had snickered a second before.

"No no, not at all. Sorry." I apologized and explained myself. "Up to this point, fashion and matching of outfits and all that shtick felt like an entirely different dimension. Like I had been transported to a different world."

"It wasn't *that* bad, right?"

"I'm serious. That's how it felt to me. And yet we're now suddenly talking about today's dinner. It made me feel like I came back to the reality I know best."

"Dwelling in the aftertaste?"

"Not really. I've had enough of that different world for today. Right now, I just wanna go home and eat some steaming hot *oden*. To be honest, I'm a bit tired."

"No wonder. But I hope you get lots of chances to wear your new outfit."

"You bet. As often as possible, considering you're the one who picked it out for me."

To my demise, I only realized what I had said after the fact. That statement made it sound like I was hoping that we would go on lots more dates from now on, didn't it? I was panicking internally, but Ayase-san flashed me her usual awkward smile with a brief 'You're right,' so I was most likely just worried for nothing. And with that embarrassing statement as the finale, my first date with Ayase-san ended.

At roughly 7 pm, we finished our shopping trip at the nearest convenience store and made our way back to our house. We slipped through the illuminated entrance and pressed the button to call the elevator.

“By the way, how did I do today?”

Ayase-san muttered these words so quietly that at first I failed to realize this question was directed at me.

“For what?”

“Was I easier to talk to, easier to have around, or did you notice anything else that was different about me?”

I stopped in my tracks and turned towards her. Thanks to the LED lights from the ceiling, I could easily make out her entire appearance. Just to make sure, I once again observed her from head to toe. She’s still wearing the same outfit from before: A knitted top with a moss green jacket. Since it’s gotten a lot more chilly the past few hours, she had kept her jacket buttoned up. In other words, she probably isn’t talking about the accessory she had on her chest.

Her hairstyle’s the same as always, too. She didn’t change it at all, nor did she tie it up with a hair tie. I couldn’t make out any extensions either, so she shouldn’t be asking about her hair. But she’s making it sound like there’s something different about her today... Where? Her nails? Perfume? I had that marked down when we first left the apartment. Her pale pink nails looked great on her, but that seemed to have no connection to her hint of ‘Easier to talk to,’ so I could rule those out.

As for her perfume... No, hold on. There’s no way I could just scooch closer to her and get a good whiff. Her fragrance may have been more of a soothing type today, but considering Ayase-san’s personality, it seemed a bit too far-fetched to bet on that. Also, I don’t remember Ayase-san being the type of person who’d ask me a “Find the difference” kind of question. What’s going on?

Something that's different... Ah. Could it possibly be the thing that was bothering me all day?

"Your expression, maybe?"

"Exactly."

"You were holding back your laughter, right?" I asked.

"I tried to be more amiable." She said at the same time.

We both spoke at the same time, yet said two entirely different things. Our gazes shot towards each other. What did she just say?

"I was worried the entire time, thinking that something about my outfit was off. Your expression seemed like you were trying to hold yourself back from laughing." I explained.

Trying to cover up my emotions and thoughts would only tip the scales of the situation in the wrong direction. The alarm sirens in my head were ringing like a fire had broken out. A shiver crept up my back, urging me to immediately discuss this before a terrible misunderstanding could befall us. My previous exchanges with Ayase-san were the basis of experience for that.

"That's not... I told you, right? You're fine the way you are."

"Sorry, but I just didn't have enough confidence in myself."

"So that's what it seemed like to you..." Ayase-san slumped her shoulders in defeat, filling me with inexplicable guilt. "I was trying to seem more approachable... to be more fun to have around..."

“Oh, that... Sorry.”

“I guess this sort of stuff is too hard for me... And now we’ve both said something that isn’t much like us, huh?” Ayase-san said and returned her expression to the one I was used to.

The elevator arrived at our floor. The lights turned on and the doors opened. Ayase-san stepped into it first, with me following after her since I was carrying everything we had bought in both hands. She pressed the button for our floor, and I spoke up as the doors slid closed.

“But I think you’re fine the way you usually act. It’s who you are, after all.”

“Wha...?”

The way she holds her expression and her attitude are all things she’s worked hard for, so it’d be a waste to try to change that. With no response forthcoming from Ayase-san, the elevator slowly moved upwards.

That night, while I was working on some math problems I had previously struggled with, I received a LINE message from Shinjou. Content-wise, it seemed to be a continuation of the exchange we had this afternoon.

‘I talked to her again during dinner, and she actually thought pretty highly of the outfit you were wearing. She said that most of my friends try to dress up to the point that it only bites them in the ass, and she liked that you didn’t do any of that.’

It appeared as if the word ‘normal’ in her vocabulary didn’t mean ‘cringe’ or ‘lame,’ and that it instead held more of a positive meaning. Part of me wished that she’d made that

clear from the very beginning, as it could have saved me from a lot of pain and agony, but I kept my complaints to myself and sent him a brief ‘*Thanks.*’ I think this result is something I’ve obtained thanks to being lost and taking detours. Sometimes that’s better than taking the direct path.

¹ Japanese winter dish consisting of several ingredients such as boiled eggs, daikon radish, konnyaku, and processed fish cakes stewed in a light, soy-flavored dashi broth.

Chapter 4

20th of October (Tuesday) - Ayase Saki

Today's the day Asamura-kun and I are heading out shopping. Just thinking about it makes me feel incredibly anxious. I couldn't even focus on my classes. Once lunch break passed and the more lethargic classes began, I simply sat at my desk and continued to lose myself in thought without writing down anything that was on the blackboard.

I was thinking about my attitude and what would make a boy more happy. I was thinking about what it exactly meant to be more than siblings yet less than lovers. I never would have imagined a day would come when I would worry about these sorts of things. Actually, that's not quite right. It's not just any boy. I don't care about any of the other guys around me. I just don't want the one boy I care for to hate me.

While my mind was wandering off in the clouds, fifth period came to an end. Recess greeted me, and so did Maaya, who came from one end of the classroom over to my seat.

“What’s wrong?”

“Huh...? Nothing, why?”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire! You were spacing out the whole time during class.”

“Focus on class yourself!”

How does she know about that? If you’ve got time to stare at me then focus on class instead. Well, it’s not like I could actually make that argument since she had ranked higher than me during the last standardized test... I’d better change the topic.

“You’re as popular as ever, huh? It’s not just the girls; even the boys like you. It’s crazy.”

“Hm? Well, well, well... I don’t really get it myself, but people say I’m pretty amiable!”

“Amiable, huh?”

I feel like she just dropped a difficult math problem on me... What does “amiable” mean again? I searched through the void in my mind trying to find an answer, but Maaya brought her face closer to me, whispering into my ear.

“If you smiled some more, you’d be able to capture Asamura-kun’s heart in a flash!”

“Can you stop bringing everything back to Asamura-kun?”

“Oh, was I off the mark? Since you emphasized the whole ‘boys’ part, I figured there was a boy you had the hots for, a boy you want to think well of you.”

She’s not wrong, of course.

“Don’t try to make up something out of thin air.”

“Mhmmm?”

Okay, I get it, you don't trust me at all. That's fine. The bell had rung already, so I used my notebook to shoo away the evil apparition that was Maaya. Amiability, huh? Being amiable means... to smile more? I'm not very good with that sort of thing, but if it makes Asamura-kun happy, I could give it a go. Or so I thought excitedly for a moment, but it turned out to be a lot more complicated than I had initially assumed.

Classes ended and I returned home. After changing into the clothes I had previously picked out for the day, I stood in front of the round mirror standing on top of my desk to practice my facial expressions. Pulling here, stretching there, relaxing my cheeks again... It felt like my facial muscles weren't used to this much exercise, and they started to feel exhausted after just a few minutes. What kind of expression was a smile, anyway?

Since I usually wore a poker face that does a good enough job at hiding my emotions, seeing the face I was currently making reflected in the mirror filled me with discomfort. Why am I even doing this in the first place? ...No, you'll lose this battle if you regain your senses, Saki. It's not like I would know who I'm losing to, though. After glaring at the mirror for a bit longer, I decided that this was the best smile I could muster, and made up my mind to just roll with it. I stepped out of my room with newfound motivation filling my body and gently knocked on Asamura-kun's door.

"Are you ready to head out?"

I sat down on the sofa in the living room while I waited for Asamura-kun, and soon the door to this room opened. I got up from the sofa, but as soon as our eyes met, I immediately averted my gaze. I could feel my heart racing. And I also suddenly became worried about my own outfit,

since I had spent most of my time practicing my expressions instead.

“Then let’s go.” I didn’t even wait for this response and practically stormed towards the front entrance.

We quickly decided where we’d go: Ikebukuro. I know how much Maaya is actually into anime, manga, and all that stuff. She keeps talking to me about it, after all. Or rather, whenever any merch comes out that she’s interested in, she keeps pestering me about it over LINE. Should I buy them, too? Why does she tell me that, anyway?

In order to take the Yamanote line leading to our destination, we first headed to Shibuya station. I took some time to sneak a few glances at Asamura-kun while we waited for the next train to arrive. He was wearing a grey knitted sweater with a black coach jacket on top. It had the same vibe as how he usually dressed, which I didn’t dislike at all. It’s not too flashy, it’s more prim and proper. I had no better way of explaining his outfit than saying it was very much like him. It all looked better because it suited him quite well.

In the end, looking good in something is all that matters when it comes to fashion. Or hold on, is it just that everything looks stylish if Asamura-kun’s wearing it? Well, either way is fine, really. But when I compared myself to Asamura-kun’s calm style, I realized that I looked a lot more flashy, almost. It’s not like I’m showing an excessive amount of skin or anything like that, but the colors of my outfit were vibrant red and green.

I had basically gone with a Christmas color palette, so the wrong combination could have turned me into a bit of a clown, but I knew how to match properly. I could see that

just fine in front of the mirror at home, but I was curious how Asamura-kun felt about my current outfit.

I've been trying to be a lot more reserved. Attempting to look cute instead of charming was one thing, but this was my limit. Most of the clothes I own are more feminine than innocent, so that was already a lost cause. That sort of clothing and attitude was not meant for someone like me, since I always just say whatever I want without thinking much about the circumstances. During our ride on the train, I tried my best to act as amiable and friendly as possible while talking to Asamura-kun, but I didn't know at all if I had actually succeeded or not.

Upon arriving at Ikebukuro, I relied on the GPS app on my phone to guide us to our destination. I've rarely visited this town before, but thanks to the advancements in technology, we found our way there safely. If you compared the streets here to Shibuya, you wouldn't see much of a difference. If there was one difference that was worth pointing out, it'd be that high school and university students like us were a lot more numerous.

Then again, that all stemmed from the fact that a lot of establishments along the eastern entrance of Sunshine street were targeted at younger people like us, whereas the western part focused more on adult establishments like bars and restaurants. Along with that, it felt like I could especially see quite a lot of boy and girl pairs—namely, couples—around us. Or maybe I've just gotten more sensitive to that sort of thing because of everything that's been happening lately.

"Woah..." I heard Asamura-kun's voice from next to me.

I followed his gaze and almost had the same verbal reaction. On the corner of the street were a couple, their bodies glued to each other, sharing a passionate kiss. I just barely managed to not gasp audibly. Even though I had nothing to do with that kiss, my own body felt like it was bursting into flames. Though it was subconsciously, I pictured myself and Asamura-kun overlapping with that couple. I couldn't believe what I was thinking. This wasn't like me at all. I looked to my side and saw Asamura-kun's gaze practically glued to them. For some reason I couldn't explain, I suddenly became anxious that he may very well be able to read my thoughts, so I quickly jabbed my elbow into his side.

"It's rude to stare like that."

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking."

He actually apologized to me. I was just trying to hide my own shame and embarrassment, so getting an honest apology in response made me feel even more guilty, so I added a few more words to show my sympathy.

"I understand how you feel. It's shocking to see that out of the blue."

That is genuinely how I felt. Asamura-kun agreed to my statement with a bitter smile, which allowed me to sigh in relief. I'm glad I didn't make him angry or anything like that. After that, we entered the shop in question. As for the present, I was thinking about getting some merch from the anime Maaya had previously told me about. I figured a design she could use during her everyday life would be best, so I started looking for merch along that vein.

As we went through the shelves of merchandise, we debated back and forth whether each item would be a good

gift for Maaya or not. How about this one? It's a bit childish, but it'd be a good match for her...and so on. This allowed me to understand how Asamura-kun felt in regards to Maaya, and I was filled with an odd sense of joy whenever our opinions aligned.

Once I thought about it, this was the first time just Asamura-kun and I traveled somewhere far away by train to enjoy a shopping trip together. We had gone to the pool before, but that was in a larger group. Just because it was only the two of us, I started feeling a lot more nervous, and my heart was beating faster, too.

Once we finished buying what we wanted, we decided to head home for the day. I had originally been planning on getting a present, myself, but then I realized that'd make it really obvious that we had bought the presents together. Then again, Maaya already knows that we're siblings, so it shouldn't matter too much. Still, I might as well go buy something else tomorrow before heading to school.

Either way, our first date ended, and we hopped on the train home. I felt relieved and lonely at the same time, but then Asamura-kun suddenly dropped a bombshell on me.

“Is there something weird about my outfit?”

I had to take a moment to process what I had just been told since it was so out of the blue. Not to mention that I don't see anything wrong with his outfit. I think he's fine exactly the way he is. But after a bit of thinking, I decided on something.

“If you're fine with my tastes and what I think is stylish, then I don't mind helping you pick something out.”

In the end, we decided to take a quick detour to the nearest men's clothing store that I could think of. Along the way, I started thinking to myself. I decided to do my best to style up Asamura-kun in a way I like. After that, I'll have him compare it to his current look so that he can get a feeling for his own type of preferred style and outfit. It's another type of adjusting to each other, in a sense.

I don't know if we can find something worth the label of a formal date outfit, but that's for himself to decide. I have no true role to play in that. Plus, I'd rather not see him change into someone that isn't true to himself... Maybe this is just me being selfish again?

From the Daikanyama train station, it was a straight walk to the men's clothing store. When I confidently entered the place, Asamura-kun bluntly asked me if I came here on a regular basis. Why would I? This place has the exact same kind of stuff as any expensive place, so it's easy to find my way around even if I'm not a regular. I mean, you might pass through here if you're interested in men's styles, I guess. Which I am not, of course.

We talked for a moment when Asamura-kun suddenly pointed at a mannequin, saying that kind of outfit would suit me well. *That* really made me feel quite anxious, and I wondered just how exactly he saw me. It was a black leather jacket with a thick belt. I may not like it when people look down on me, but I don't want to look like some gang leader, either.

"I think you'd look handsome."

What is he even saying? We came here so that *I* could pick out an outfit for *him*, so why are we talking about an outfit for me? Geez, what is this? My face feels hot. They've really

turned up the heater in this place, huh? After walking around some more, I started picking out any clothes I found interesting and comparing them to Asamura-kun's body. It's like I'm playing with my very own dress-up doll. It's so much fun. At the same time, I couldn't help imagining us coming here to shop for clothes as a married couple.

...Wait, hold on. Not as a married couple, but as siblings, right? Jumping to calling us a married couple is a bit of a leap, to say the least. I do enjoy spending time with Asamura-kun very much, but it makes me feel like I'm the only one getting excited. I have to calm myself down so that I don't rush blindly ahead.

We walked around inside the shop some more, and I finally chose a jacket and a shirt for Asamura-kun. Both of these I had spotted immediately, and I couldn't shake off their first impression.

We returned from our detour and started making our way back home for good. Far off in the distance, I could see the familiar light of our flat, which allowed me to sigh in relief. And I was surprised by that sigh, too. I hadn't even realized it, but this flat has now become my image of home. Once we pass through the door to our apartment, I'll go back to spending my days as a step-sister.

Now that I think about it, how did I do today? I had no idea that Asamura-kun was concerned about his own appearance and looks. Did Asamura-kun notice that I was trying to act more amiable and friendly?

“By the way, how did I do today?”

It took a few seconds before I got a response. But the fact that Asamura-kun guessed it correctly by asking ‘Your

expression maybe?' made me feel happy. I did it! I was excited to hear him continue, only for him to say...

"You were trying to hold back your laughter, right?"

What?

"Your expression looked like you were trying to hold yourself back from laughing."

It felt like my knees were about to give in just upon hearing those words. What even...?

"So that's how it seemed to you..."

I was trying hard to smile to make Asamura-kun happy, and yet it didn't get across at all. Argh, how embarrassing. The more I thought about it, the more my cheeks started to burn up. I want to dig a hole and hide in there for the rest of my life. Or be reduced to atoms and vanish from the world forever. Do I have a self-destruct button anywhere on me? I felt so ashamed that I couldn't even look at his face anymore. All I could do was stiffen my expression and act like I hadn't been affected at all. I'm calm. This doesn't hurt. I'm not going to cry.

That's what I get for doing something I'm not used to. My punishment for trying to put on an expression I can't make. I can't be as friendly and amicable as Maaya. I just wish I'd lose the ability to show any kind of emotion. It was all because I had done something I normally wouldn't. That's enough, honestly. After all, Ayase Saki is a boring woman who can never show any friendliness to anybody. That's just how it is.

"I think you're fine the way you usually act," Asamura-kun said as the elevator doors closed. "It's who you are, after

all."

"Wha...?"

I played deaf and acted like I hadn't heard him. What is this...? Even though it was just a small side remark, my chest feels so warm and fuzzy all of a sudden. This is why Asamura-kun is dangerous. He'll shake me from left to right, making me lose sight of my feelings and where I should direct them. Are we fine to just be siblings who get along really well, or are we better suited to be lovers?

What relationship do I want?

What relationship does *he* want?

On that day, we both agreed to keep our relationship the way it was, and yet now I'm hearing the devil whispering into my ear.

—*Are you truly satisfied with just this?*

Whenever he tells me such kind and encouraging words, I find myself thinking. Wishing, even. I want to touch his cheeks, pull on them, and squeeze them together as punishment for always making me happy with whatever he says. Of course, not in hostility. I just want to... touch him. That's the desire burning deep inside of me. It's what I felt back when I passionately hugged him in that locked room. But I can't. I'd just surprise him. Not knowing when the right moment for that would be, I found myself unable to act at all.

I should use my favorite bath salts tonight. I need to melt away amidst that fragrance I like so much, waiting for my turbulent feelings to calm down.

Chapter 5

21st of October (Wednesday) - Asamura Yuuta

The cold morning air snuggled up to me under my blanket, making me rub my legs together after I woke up. Since we'll be getting closer to the full-blown winter season from now on, waking up in the morning will only get more painful from here. I immediately began missing the warmth of my blanket after I kicked it into the air to force myself up from bed. At roughly the same time, my alarm rang. I didn't for a moment, slamming my hand against it to silence the ear-piercing alarm.

"I won."

Of course, there's absolutely no benefit to me winning this imaginary battle, but small victories help in shaping my mood for the day... Well, I guess that's a bit of an overstatement. Either way, today is Narasaka-san's birthday party. I was assaulted with an odd feeling of pressure because of that, trying my best to ignore it while preparing for school. I'm just a tad bit worried that I won't get along with the other people she's going to invite.

After finishing my preparations, I made my way to the living room. It seemed that Ayase-san had already finished her

breakfast, as she was now cleaning the dishes she used and putting them into the drying rack.

“Morning. You’re up early, huh?”

“I’ve gotta stop by the train station to buy a present.”

When I called out to her, she immediately grabbed her bag. I see. She’d mentioned that she was going to buy a present this morning. I remember now.

“I’m heading out.”

“Yeah. Take care, Saki-chan.”

“See you later, Nii-san.”

“Yep. Later, Ayase-san.”

“Mhm.” Ayase-san nodded and stepped outside.

“You’re fine taking your time, Dad?”

“Yep. I’ve got no need to rush today.”

I guess he’s had a lot less work forced onto him lately? I opened the rice cooker and a bit of steamy air hit my face, greeting me with the sweet scent of golden-yellow rice tickling my nose.

“This is...”

“Chestnut rice. It’s quite delicious, you know. Saki-chan is so good at making rice that it’s almost unfair.”

If Ayase-san was still us, she’d probably just say something like “All I did was add a few other ingredients in with the rice.” But, just as he said...

“It looks delicious.”

I put some of it in a small rice bowl and took a seat on an open chair. What else...? Pickled daikon radish with eel, and some plums. And you can't forget the usual miso soup, either. And there's even some onions on top today. The rice bowl in front of my old man was already empty.

“Want another serving, Dad?”

“No, I'm okay. I have to leave soon anyway.”

“Gotcha.”

The chestnuts mixed into the rice were about the size of my thumb. I picked one up with my chopsticks and stuffed it into my mouth.

“Hot!”

I chewed on the steaming chestnut, which quickly broke apart and filled my mouth with a sweet taste. This truly is the taste of fall.

“Yep, it's delicious.”

“Right?”

“I could eat this all day.”

Ah, that's why she had kept the side dishes to a minimum. My old man eventually headed off to work, and I proceeded to clean my own dishes and put them into the dishwasher. I even had two extra servings today. I feel a bit bloated now. Ayase-san left the house quite a while ago, too. Thankfully, if I take my bike today, I'll still make it in time before classes start. I ended up being fairly uncomfortable because of the

cold air making my hands hurt as they clung to the handles. It wasn't cold enough to see my own breath, but it also wasn't warm enough to make for a pleasant ride to school. It's about to be winter for real, after all.

I managed to make it to the classroom three minutes before the bell rang.

Classes ended in a flash.

"I'll catch you tomorrow, Asamura," Maru gave a brief goodbye and made his way off to his club.

Now then, it's time for the birthday party.

Ayase-san had sent me a message this afternoon that read: '*I'll travel there separately, so you can leave first.*'

Ayase-san wearing casual clothes, huh? I would have used to feel tense and awkward when heading out while wearing my own clothes, but things are different now. I just have to walk confidently and trust Ayase-san's fashion decision. I made my way to the front entrance and changed into my outdoor shoes. There I spotted a boy running around while wearing a jersey. Since he wasn't holding his student bag, he probably wasn't heading home anytime soon. He's probably headed out for a sports club or something similar.

It's hard to tell from the back, but...That's Shinjou, isn't it? Wait, is he not going to Narasaka-san's birthday party? I totally expected to see him there. Or is he going to join us after his club practice is over? I didn't know that he was that passionate about tennis practice, to be honest. Either way, I pedaled my way back to the flat on my bike. Ayase-san wasn't anywhere to be seen. She had probably left already after changing into her casual clothes, or she hadn't made it home yet in the first place. Well, we're meeting up at the

actual place anyway, so there's nothing to really worry about.

All I knew is that I didn't have to worry about my outfit anymore. Trusting in Ayase-san's skilled and discerning eye was all I needed. I changed into the jacket I had just bought and booted up my LINE app. A few moments after I asked Narasaka-san for her address, she sent me a response with a map attached to it.

"Around there, huh?"

It was close to the prep school, and I had happened to run into Ayase-san before when she was headed to Narasaka-san's place, so I had a vague idea already. And it has a small area to keep my bike safe and secured, as well. After hopping on it, it didn't take me much time to reach the area close to Narasaka-san's home. I opened up the map and zoomed in. After looking to my left and right, I spotted the name of a company on a large green billboard that matched up with the map I had on me. Thanks to that, I managed to pinpoint my location.

From that point onwards, I continued to push my bike instead of riding it. The sidewalk alongside this narrow street was so bumpy that my bike bounced up and down the entire way. Thankfully, it only took me a few minutes to reach the flat in question. I parked my bike at the designated location she had mentioned in her message and headed inside.

Before ringing the doorbell, however, I instead opted to first send her a LINE message. I'm hoping that she's home right now, but I'd be genuinely lost if someone else from her family answered the intercom. Luckily, there was no need to worry in that regard. Before I got a response on LINE, I

spotted Ayase-san and Narasaka-san walking toward the building from the opposite side of the street. The door of the front entrance opened and they approached me.

Ayase-san was wearing a denim skirt with a fluffy cardigan and a loose knitted sweater that hung off one shoulder below that. It was an outfit very much like Ayase-san. I did feel a bit worried she'd be cold during this cold weather. She spotted me and gently waved her hand. Narasaka-san went above and beyond as always, waving her hands like those people who direct planes across the airport. All of her gestures look so much like...I don't know, a small animal.

“Did you wait long~?”

“Nope, I just got here.” I also waved my hand and looked around.

As far as I could see, the two of them were the only ones who had showed up so far.

“Now, let’s get this started! Into the elevator with you two!”

Huh? Hold on. Something isn’t right.

“Where’s everybody else?”

“Hm?”

Why are you looking at me with a confused expression that practically says ‘What are you talking about~?’, huh? I’m the one who’s baffled here.

“The other people you invited...”

“Nobody else is coming~ I just invited the two of you.”

“Just the two of... Ayase-san and I? Why?”

“Err, cause I felt like it?”

I’m not accepting that as an answer. What kind of explanation is that?

“Come on, come on, we shouldn’t be talking out here, it’s cold.”

“R-Right...” I was unsure of what to even say, so I looked over at Ayase-san in a plea for help, but she just looked away.

Wait, did she...know about this? I was so focused on Ayase-san’s expression that I completely missed the short murmur from Narasaka-san that quickly vanished into empty air.

We got off the elevator and arrived in front of a door with a welcome mat greeting us. She took out a key from her pocket and opened the door.

“Okay, come on in. There’s no need to be polite. Make yourselves at home.”

“Maaya, can I use these slippers here?”

“Ah, yeah. You can have these, Asamura-kun.”

I nodded and slipped into the slippers that had a bear motif on them. After we walked through the narrow hallway leading up from the entrance, we reached the living room and kitchen. My first impression was that it was quite spacious. It’s built like the average apartment, mostly the same as my own home.

“We’re heading over here today!” Narasaka-san said, opening up a door with her left hand.

"We're not staying in the living room?" Ayase-san asked, sounding oddly confused.

"It's just us three, after all," Narasaka-san nonchalantly responded.

Wait, so we'll be in Narasaka-san's room? I was more than just bewildered. When I thought about a girl's room, I felt cold sweat running down my back. Ever since Ayase-san and I became step-siblings, I've tried my hardest to not be conscious of her room at home, even looking away from the door when it was closed.

And yet, Narasaka-san showed virtually no hesitation as she guided us into her room. Right as she opened the door to storm inside, Ayase-san grabbed her sleeve to stop her, closing the door once more.

"Maaya, this isn't going to bite you back later, is it?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Well...I'm fine with it, but Asamura-kun's with us, remember? Are you okay with him just waltzing inside?"

"Erm..." Narasaka-san put one finger on her chin, staring up at the ceiling as she delved into the realm of thought. "I was a good girl and made sure to hide all of the adult books I could find in the drawer, I cleaned up any fresh underwear I had lying around, and I put my uniform into the closet, so it should be fine."

With this large number of bombshells dropped on me, I immediately opted to empty my mind and thoughts. I am nothingness. Void. The void is me, and I am the void. I didn't hear anything just now. How does any of that make you a 'good girl,' though?

“Y-You dummy! Keep your voice down!”

“I’m not saying it in front of my brothers, so no sweat.”

“That’s the least amount of common sense I expect from you!”

“So what’s the problem, then?”

“Like...is it safe?”

“You’re such a worrywart, really! It’ll be totes fine. There’s no need to be scared.”

“That line alone has only made me more terrified!” Ayase-san sighed and removed her hand from the door, allowing Narasaka-san to open it once more. “Sorry for intruding...” Ayase-san mumbled and stepped inside, with me following closely behind.

The room was about 10 square meters with a bed next to the window. Along the left side of her wall was what seemed to be her studying desk. That much I could tell without having to ogle at every small detail. I simply minded my own business and attempted not to stare too much in the advent that something was still poking out from anywhere. Absit omen! I chanted an ancient proverb to calm my flustered self. This particular one was against snow, as I’d rather not see Ayase-san getting buried by a mountain of snow. Well, I have no confirmation if this chant actually works with a massive avalanche that could bury a person alive.

“Wow.” Ayase-san let out a voice of admiration. “So you *do* keep it clean.”

“If I don’t, my brothers will just have a bad example to live by.”

That makes sense. She really is an older sister at heart.

“Come on, have a seat.”

She placed three cushions around a round low table, urging Ayase-san and I to enter the room. She was the first to sit down, with the two of us following suit. Ah, Narasaka-san sat on the cushion closest to the door. Right as Ayase-san and I had taken a seat, she immediately shot up again, saying “I’ll go grab some drinks,” and leaving the room instantly. As I thought, she chose this position to best treat her visitors. At this rate, we’ll be the ones taken care of, even though this is her special day.

“It doesn’t really feel like a birthday party, huh?” Ayase-san commented.

“Then again, it’s not like we can just walk around like we own the place...”

“Yep...”

We were both a bit bewildered and unsure of what to do. Narasaka-san swiftly returned with a 1.5-liter bottle of tea, as well as three cups.

“All right, then let’s get this party started!”

“Again, stop trying to worry about hospitality and have a seat.” Ayase-san grabbed the girl’s hand and shoved her down onto the cushion.

“But it’s the host’s job to look after their visitors, right?”

“At least for today, that logic doesn’t work. It’s your birthday, so relax a bit!”

Narasaka-san made a dissatisfied pout, but Ayase-san was clearly in the right here. That being said, I’m in no position to press my own opinion, I should just leave this to Ayase-san.

“Stuff like this happens all the time. It’s not a big deal~”

“It is! Here.” Ayase-san slid a plastic bag across the table.

“Hm? Wazzat? It’s not a present, is it?”

“We haven’t eaten dinner yet, so it’s just a small snack.”

Narasaka-san opened the plastic bag and pulled out a white box that contained three small cakes. Ayase-san had apparently bought them at the cake shop near the train station. She hadn’t planned on this at first, but coming with nothing at all would’ve made her uncomfortable, so she bought them in a hurry. At least that’s what she said. I see. That’s what she went off to do before coming here. I should pay for my share later. The slices were a shortcake, a mont blanc, and a cheesecake. It was a clever idea so that everybody could eat one slice without having to sit one out.

“Ohh, it looks delish!”

“Of course. Sadly, I don’t have any candles.”

“Cool, I’ll grab some plates and forks!”

“Again, stay down. There’s no need to go overboard with the hospitality.”

“Hmph.”

Narasaka-san sat back down again, and her birthday party truly began. I know I grumbled about this before, but... it really is just the three of us, huh?

Before we started eating the cake slices, we decided to give her our presents. I gave her the mug from the anime she liked so much. It didn't have a giant picture of a character imprinted on it, so it should be just fine to use at home. She accepted the mug gladly. Seems like she's happy, at least. Ayase-san followed up with a teaspoon and cake fork set. They had flower motifs on the handles, and the tip looked like a crown.

"Ooo, it's so cute!"

"Sadly it isn't genuine silver."

"This is more than enough! Thanks, Saki! Now we can eat the cakes properly!"

"I didn't think that far ahead. There are only two pairs, too."

"Ah, I'm fine. I'll use the one they sent with the box." I grabbed the plastic fork from inside the cake box.

"I'd like to eat with the new fork," Narasaka-san said and picked up the fork.

"You should probably wash them first, no?"

"Good idea. I'll do that real quick. You'll allow me to do that much, right?"

"Well..."

"Okie-dokie! Be right back!"

Narasaka-san left the room to wash the tableware, quickly returning after a minute or two. In the end, she's still the person caring for us...Well, old habits must die hard, I guess. She's been an older sister for basically her whole life, I guess. We filled our cups with tea and made a toast. As we started eating the cake, Narasaka-san's mother came in to greet us with some sweets in hand. She really resembled Narasaka-san a lot, and she seemed like a gentle and caring mother. Of course, we had no reason to turn down said sweets, and I started getting slightly worried we wouldn't leave room for dinner later.

That reminds me, my old man mentioned he'd be coming home late after eating dinner with his coworkers. And Akiko-san won't be coming home until late at night, so we won't have to worry about preparing dinner for tonight. At the very least, my old man seems to have survived another crunch at his workplace.

Once we finished eating everything, Ayase-san and Narasaka-san started talking about that one time we went to the pool together. I was a bit nervous at first, but I finally managed to relax a bit, and I placed my hands behind the cushion, simply listening to their conversation... only for my back to bump into something, which made me jolt forward. The room was pretty small, and it had a bed, a study desk, a low table, bookcases, and so on, so I didn't have much room to stretch out.

I took a glance at the small box I had bumped into, which looked like it was just a container for holding things. I was relieved to see I didn't just break something super expensive. I looked around some more and spotted some familiar-looking anime figurines. That supported Ayase-san's statement that Narasaka-san was actually into anime quite a lot. Though I guess those aren't technically figurines.

They're more like robots, right? That thought helped me remember instantly. Last summer, Maru mentioned he'd be sending the same type of stuff to his online friend. I guess this must be pretty popular, after all.

"On the topic of birthdays, yours is coming up next in December, right Saki?" Narasaka-san's voice brought me back to reality.

I didn't even begin to notice the topic changing like that.

"Hey, hey, Asamura-kun, when's your b-day? Since you're technically her older brother, it should be before Saki's, yeah?" Narasaka-san shoved her face towards me as she asked.

"Also in December."

"Huh? You both have birthdays in the same month?"

"Mine's a week after his," Ayase-san said.

"Oh, really? So you're the older brother by a week?"

Now that she mentioned it, I guess that's right. A week after me, she'll turn the same age. Then again, we're not in grade school anymore, so I won't feel much more like an adult just because of one week. Nor would I want to be treated that way.

"Well, on paper," I said.

"But I bet you must be happy to have a cute girl like Saki call you 'Onii-chan', right?"

"Maaya, drop it already," Ayase-san grumbled with a straight face.

“There’s no need to be embarrassed~”

“I’m telling you to stop because it makes me uncomfortable.”

“Then...what about ‘Onii-san’?”

“That’s no different from before.”

“Then, then...as my final guess... ‘Nii-san’?”

This isn’t a guessing game—is what Ayase-san and I probably wanted to retort with—but we had no chance to do so. Instead, we both froze up. The mannerism and tone Narasaka-san used made it sound like it had come straight out of Ayase-san’s mouth. For a moment, I thought I was hearing things. As things are now, Ayase-san only calls me Nii-san in front of our parents, so Narasaka-san bringing that up now really shook my composure.

“Sto...p...”

“Huuuh? That much should be fine, no? You’re his actual sister. Or... do you already call him that?”

“Asamura-kun is Asamura-kun. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“But that’s so boring~”

“And what does that matter? Enough about this, already!”

CLAP, Ayase-san clapped her hands together. Narasaka-san seemed evidently perturbed and annoyed that she didn’t get to have her fun, only to immediately flash a bright smile that made it look like she had already forgotten.

“Since you’re here celebrating my birthday with me, we’ve got to plan a huge party for the both of you in December!”

What does ‘huge party’ even entail? I’m starting to feel a bit worried over here. I’m really not too fond of the idea of holding a birthday party in the first place. After all...

“When your birthday is in December, you tend to just combine it with Christmas.”

I spoke from my own experience up to this point, and Ayase-san quickly agreed. I had a hunch that that would be the case. As for the situation of my family at that time, a birthday was something I looked forward to. After all, at least on that day, my parents wouldn’t fight. So if my birthday was combined with Christmas, I would have no complaints... However, I now admitted that it felt like a bit of a waste. Ayase-san nodded, showing that she probably had gone through something similar.

While we were discussing that, I heard a faint creak from the door. When I looked over, I spotted a young boy, probably still in kindergarten, peeking inside the room. Narasaka-san turned around at about the same time.

“Hey, I told you I’d be spending time with my friends. Go play with Mom for a while!”

She said, but the boy kept staring at us. Or more accurately, when you followed his gaze, he seemed to be looking at the sweets on the table. Narasaka-san seemed to notice this as well, and she calmly shook her head.

“Nope. We’re going to have dinner soon.”

“Not fair...”

“Oh, come on!” Narasaka-san got up and trotted towards the boy. “You’ll get your own share later, but dinner comes first, okay?”

“Buuuuuut!”

Despite him throwing a temper tantrum, Narasaka-san remained calm and spoke with a gentle voice. Her younger brother still didn't seem too satisfied, but after being patted on the back several times, he reluctantly left.

“Off you go.”

“Snaaacks!”

“After you've had dinner.”

“It's not fair that only you get them, Maa-neechan!”

“Hey now! Is this the mouth that keeps on complaining, huuuh?”

“Oufies!”

Narasaka-san dragged the boy out of the room while indulging in some casual sibling banter. After that, I heard a few other complaints from outside the room. How many brothers does she even have? At least it's gotten a lot quieter now.

“Sorry about that. I thought he was busy with other stuff.”

“No worries.” Ayase-san shook her head at Narasaka-san's apology, and I nodded along.

“He's got energy, all right,” I said.

“He's one of the smaller ones. He's basically the youngest.”

From the sounds of it, there was quite an age gap between Narasaka-san and her younger brothers.

“It’s tough work taking care of so many brothers~”

So she said, but she clearly seemed to be enjoying herself. It’s obvious that she deeply cares for her brothers, and I think that’s important for a healthy family relationship. That reminds me, siblings that are close in age usually have some kind of rivalry for who can get more affection from their parents, but when the age gap is far greater, like in this case, it turns rivals more into family members that need protection. Basically, she’s treating them almost like her own child.

“I bet you’ll be a great mother in the future, Narasaka-san.”

She definitely wouldn’t neglect her children to run off somewhere. I had meant my words as nothing but praise, but Narasaka-san gave me an exhausted look for whatever reason.

“Asamura-kun, you should only say that to Saki, okay?”

“Maaya, what are you talking about?”

Huh? Only towards Ayase-san...? It took me a moment to realize how my words could be twisted from ‘You’ll be a great mother’ to mean ‘I’d be lucky to have you as my wife.’ I guess I really shouldn’t be saying that to Narasaka-san, and instead... Wait, no.

“Huh? You don’t want him to say that?”

That’s not the problem here.

“That’s clearly not the problem here.”

It seemed as if Ayase-san agreed with me.

“You don’t want to be a mother? You could become a father instead, too.” Narasaka-san asked Ayase-san.

“I have nothing but respect for my mother, but that’s not the point here. I’ve never once even thought about that. Also, there’s no way I can become a father.”

I mean, it depends if you look at it from a biological standpoint or from the social construct of what being a father entails.

“Ah, understand.”

“...What is it this time?”

“You wanna be the son-in-law!”

“How would you even reach that conclusion?” Narasaka-san was met with a voice cold as ice, along with a stern gaze.

I have no idea how much she knows that she’s able to tease us this way. Ayase-san shook her head and sighed.

“Why am I being tortured on Maaya’s birthday?”

Isn’t that because Narasaka-san is continuing this comedy skit? Narasaka-san noticed my gaze and started sulking.

“Keep staring some more and you’ll start to drill holes into my body, Asamura-oniichan. See? I’m not scary at all~” She said, pointing her small index finger towards me.

What exactly am I supposed to do with this?

“It’s okay, I won’t feel a thing even if you bite it.”

“I won’t, so there’s no need to worry.”

“Right, because Saki’s with us.”

“I wouldn’t do it even without her around.”

“What are you on about, Maaya?”

It seemed like Ayase-san was blissfully unaware. I dodged a bullet right there. This, however, wasn’t the end of Narasaka-san’s teasing. I’m genuinely impressed Ayase-san managed to keep her poker face during the entire afternoon.

Since it was about time for Narasaka-san’s father to come home, Ayase-san and I decided to depart from the Narasaka household. From what she said, she’ll be celebrating with her family after this. He’d probably prepared a huge cake with candles on top, which will be complemented by her mother’s cooking to make it a merry celebration. And with her younger brothers sitting around her, I can only imagine them being all smiles and happiness.

“You’ve got such a happy family. Everyone’s on such good terms.” Ayase-san commented as we left the flat.

Narasaka-san seemed slightly bewildered by this comment, though.

“What are you talking about?”

“Huh?”

“Saki, that’s my line.” Narasaka-san formed her hand into the shape of a gun, pointing it at Ayase-san.

Then she slightly moved her hand to point it at me, next. Without creating a sound, she fired an imaginary bullet as her hand recoiled.

“You’re pretty close, right?”

“Seriously, what is it now?”

“Oh? Maybe you don’t want me to say it? That you’re **siblings** on such good terms?”

“Wait, wha...?”

“I see, I get it. You’d rather have me say ‘lovey-dovey married couple,’ yeah?”

“W-Who’s a married couple...?!”

“Your mom and Asamura-kun’s dad, right?”

“Ack...”

I think this may have been the first time I’ve seen Ayase-san truly defeated like that.

“But they are, right? You mentioned it before.”

“I-I guess so.”

The reason Ayase-san’s cheeks looked a bit pink most likely wasn’t because of the cold breeze blowing against us after we stepped outside. Especially when you looked at Narasaka-san, who couldn’t hide her bright grin.



“Hmmmm? Who'd you think I was talking about?”

“I'm going home. See you tomorrow.”

“Okieees! Bye-bye! Escort her home, Asamura-kun!”

Seeing that Narasaka-san knew when to stop herself from teasing made it clear that she valued her friendship with Ayase-san. The wise royal clown knows how to make the jokes hit home without letting his head roll, as they say.

“Have a great rest of your birthday, then.” I bowed slightly towards Narasaka-san and trotted after Ayase-san.

“Geez, all that girl knows how to do is tease people,” Ayase-san grumbled to herself.

“But, you know...”

Ayase-san looked toward me.

“If we looked like a good pair of siblings, maybe our current distance is perfect?”

“That... makes sense, but...”

On the way home, Ayase-san did some more grumbling, complaining, being flustered, and all of it was related to the conversations she had with her good friend. It was an endless loop of ‘curse that Maaya’ until we got home. To me, they just looked like really good friends. How beautiful it is to have good friends, as Muyanokouji Saneatsu once said. He’s an influential author of Japanese literary history, but I haven’t read much of his work, to be honest.

It’s not like that mattered right now, though, because I myself was happy that Ayase-san and Narasaka-san got along so well. It’s the kind of joy you feel when you see someone you care about getting along with others. The same goes for best friends, good friends, and even when looking at married couples. I thought about my old man and

Akiko-san, and then glanced at Ayase-san's profile. They're getting along more than well enough to not fight in front of their children.

I thought about all the possibilities that could happen in the distant future. However, an average high school student like me didn't have any particular future in mind. My body involuntarily shuddered from the cold, and I heard the leaves of the trees above us rustling in the wind.

Chapter 6

21st of October (Wednesday) - Ayase Saki

I stayed in my room and prepared everything for tomorrow's classes after coming home from Maaya's birthday party. I had my headphones on, listening to some pleasant tunes and music. My gaze may have been looking down at my textbook, but I had been unable to focus for the past few minutes, simply wandering around in my thoughts. I'm just reading sentences, only to forget what I read a moment later. I would be hard-pressed to call this a true study session.

Well, it's Japanese history, so there's technically no need for me to go through the questions before the actual class... Stop, Saki. You shouldn't make excuses like that. My focus was completely gone, so I raised my head. The digital clock next to me read 23:33. Ah, matching digits... Yeah, I don't think I'll be doing any more studying today. It'll only have the opposite effect. I should go take a bath instead.

I gave up on studying and headed to the bath. I drank a glass of water so I didn't have to worry about dehydration and sank into the hot water. When I stretched my arms and legs out, I could feel all the exhaustion slowly melting away

from my body. I sighed for the umpteenth time and started grumbling to myself.

“Maaya is just...”

When we met up with Asamura-kun in front of her flat, she whispered some words into my ear. Every time I remember them, my cheeks start to burn up.

‘If anything, I wouldn’t mind leaving you two youngsters to yourselves, you know?’

I just hope Asamura-kun didn’t hear any of that. What kind of birthday party is it if the person being celebrated vanishes midway through, anyway? Geez. I wonder just how much she actually knows or presumes to know. Does she know about my relationship with Asamura-kun? I mean, we are siblings. So it should be a compliment if somebody sees us as being on good terms, and she can keep teasing me about it as much as she wants. She’s just as close with her brothers, right?

It’s the same principle. It’s part of perfectly normal physical contact. If Asamura-kun were the same age as Maaya’s younger brother, I could interact with him the same way. I wonder what he was like back then? I’m sure he was just as adorable. I’d squeeze his cheeks and pull on them whenever he gave me a cheeky look... Whose cheeks? Asamura-kun’s —Wait, I’m getting lost in my fantasies here.

I shook my head to rid myself of my foul thoughts. What am I thinking? Next topic, next topic. His birthday is in December. Well, so is mine, but his is earlier. Oh, yeah...I need to get a birthday present for him. But my timer rang before I could come up with anything. I usually take baths for 20 minutes, getting out right before I start sweating. The

longer I stay in, the more it could dehydrate my skin, after all.

Skincare after drying myself off is just as important. If I leave my skin as-is right after taking a bath, it'll dry out. I finished changing, grabbed all my dirty laundry to put it in my room(since I couldn't keep it in the laundry basket for everyone to see), put a thin jacket on over my nightwear, and went to the living room. I opened up the fridge to grab a cup of cold barley tea and gulped it down.

I heard the sound of the door opening. It turned out to be Mom just getting home from work.

“Oh, you’re back early. That’s rare.”

Since she works as a bartender, she usually only makes it home late at night or in the early morning. In that regard, she’s early today.

“Yes, well...”

“Are you not feeling well?”

“Hehe, I’m fine. I’m not sick and don’t have a cold, it’s just the *usual*. A bit on the heavy side today,” she said and sat on a chair in the living room.

“Ahhh.” I guessed what she was referring to and nodded. “It must have been cold, right? Would you like some warm tea?”

“Yes, that would be wonderful.”

I turned on the electronic kettle and sat down across from her.

“So you’re finally taking a rest when you need it?”

Up to this point, she had continued to work no matter how exhausted or sick she felt. But as of late, she’d always come home early whenever she didn’t feel too well. ‘Up to this point’ is, of course, referring to before she got remarried.

“With Taichi-san, I’m able to get the rest I need.” She said while glancing over at the bedroom.

“Because of him?”

“Yes. And I also have you, and you can take care of yourself,” She said with a smile.

My inexperience and inability to support her properly had caused her health to deteriorate. If I think about it that way, I couldn’t feel more apologetic. But even so, there was no need for that anymore. Now she had the option to rest. She has faith in her family that somebody could support her even if she collapsed. Having somebody to rely on really gives you mental strength, after all.

The kettle notified me that the water was boiling, so I poured some of it into a cup with some caffeine-free black tea and placed it in front of Mom.

“It’s not just him. You can always rely on me if something happens.”

“Thank you, Saki.”

I shook my head. There’s still nothing I can do for her. I can’t do what step-dad does for her...

“What about dinner?”

"I ate something before coming home, so I'm fine." She smiled and turned on the TV.



I heard some random noise, probably from a variety show. A bit after that, I looked over, and orange lights were flickering everywhere in the stores shown in the footage, and there was some sort of performer walking around. It seems to be a special report on Halloween.

“Oh yeah, about Halloween...”

“Yeah?”

Watching TV seemed to have jogged something in Mom’s memory, and she spoke up.

“At first, Taichi-san and I were planning on heading out somewhere and having dinner together. It technically is a festival, after all.”

Only in the West, though. However, with Halloween going on, Mom said she probably wouldn’t be back until morning since she’ll be busy at work.

“Is Halloween that important of an event?”

I just saw it as an opportunity for all the costume lovers to go all out at least once a year.

“Taichi-san wants us to celebrate together. But with December coming up, I said we’d be better off celebrating then. We plan on taking time off for Christmas, so we can celebrate that and your birthdays together.”

“Okay, got it.” I nodded in understanding.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing at all.”

So we'll be together for Christmas. That thought alone made me smile. I can't deny it. But it's not just that. Finally, from this year on, we can celebrate it as an actual family.

Chapter 7

29th of October (Thursday) - Asamura Yuuta

Roughly a week has passed since Narasaka-san's birthday party. After I woke up in the morning, I changed into my uniform and headed over to the bathroom. We've reached the season that makes your feet cold whenever you walk on the floor. I thankfully possessed enough drowsy willpower to keep walking, and I shaved in front of the mirror and put on face lotion. After that, I combed my hair to keep it fresh. 'Keeping it fresh' in this case just meant removing any traces of bed hair and calling it a day.

Ever since the cultural festival, I've learned from Ayase-san and made it a routine to take proper care of myself in the morning. After doing that for a while, I realized that I was practically the only one not following through with proper skincare.

"I never would have imagined that *that* would be Dad's."

The blue and transparent bottle standing on the washbasin was men's face lotion. I was utterly baffled. Not to mention that it had been standing there long before he met Akiko-san. I remember him saying that he has to deal with customers from time to time. I really can't underestimate

him. And similarly, I realized that I was actually the type of person to not care about things that weren't directly related to me.

I should probably show more care to the stuff around me. Or rather, my desire to evoke affection from others has been far too low up to this point. Ayase-san said I was perfectly fine the way I am right now, but I don't want to make any compromises when it comes to my feelings for Ayase-san. I want to work harder, even if it's just at my own pace and in my own ways.

As a comment in that regard, the side of the washbasin was now crowded with other bottles and cups that were now not just from me and my old man, but also from Ayase-san and Akiko-san. It's one of the things that made the realization that my family had grown really set in. When there's two more people living with you, the number of objects in your vicinity grows similarly. Even more so since it's not just two men living here. Seeing all the cosmetic goods I'd never even heard of left me baffled. Let alone the fact that, according to Ayase-san, she doesn't even keep most of her makeup and skincare products here in the bathroom. Honestly, what else could they even be using?

After we finished breakfast, Ayase-san left the house before me, and I followed afterwards, leaving a significant distance between us. I pedaled my bike through Shibuya. It's the time of year when the breeze blowing against me isn't comfortable and soothing anymore. Instead, it's quite chilly. One more month and that chilly breeze will change to a freezing wind. I parked my bike at the usual place, arriving at my classroom exactly five minutes before classes started. I started preparing for my classes. Maru walked into the room, probably having finished his morning practice, and sat down on the chair in front of me.

“Morning, Maru. Finished with morning practice?”

“Yep. Well, same business as usual, no biggie.”

“Gotcha.”

“You get used to it. Think of it as special training. If you use something every single day, you stop caring about it.”

The way he worded that sounded slightly suggestive, but isn’t getting used to regular training to such an extent pretty amazing in itself? A few moments later, our homeroom teacher walked into the room, and our morning homeroom started. However, something out of the ordinary happened. Namely, the teacher handed out copies of a document.

‘*Looking for Volunteers.*’ It read at the top. I quickly scanned through the document. It seemed like they were looking for people to help with trash collection the morning after Halloween.

“Shibuya’s famous for the Halloween evening, but the trash on the morning after is atrocious,” Maru whispered with a quiet voice, and I nodded.

I’ve heard about that for years now. I’m happy that my hometown is getting the attention it deserves, but I don’t like the district ending up looking like a garbage dump. And if that weren’t bad enough, the poor crows are going to start eating anything they can get, and rats will patrol through the streets. The big and round ones, too. Let alone the stench...

“Shibuya’s one of Japan’s important cities, but after a night of partying like that, it’s a sorry sight, to be honest,” Maru said.

“Have you seen it?” I asked.

“During morning practice.”

He and his teammates had apparently passed through Shibuya during their route, which was why he’d seen Shibuya the morning before. He even furrowed his eyebrows, so it must have been a sorry sight. Our homeroom teacher finally left the classroom after urging everybody interested to participate.

“This sure is early in the morning. What do you think?” I asked Maru.

“Why would I have to clean up after somebody else’s mess?”

“Welp, that’s fair.”

This singular incident robbed me of almost all of my excitement for the upcoming Halloween night in a matter of minutes.

Today was another day of prep school. Ever since my supplementary summer classes, I’ve been regularly attending the prep school. Thanks to that, and as a result of my continued effort, my grades have gone up quite a bit since last spring. I also felt like my motivation to study had increased. Not too long ago, I had just been studying with no particular goal in mind except getting into a prestigious university, but now I have something to actually work towards. Getting into a renowned university isn’t the final objective, it’s the means to reach the destination I have in mind—my employment. I want to get into a company that pays well enough to secure myself a pleasant future.

In order to achieve that, I need to acquire the knowledge and academic skills necessary to get into a top-class university that's prestigious on the national level. I'm not being forced into this by anybody, nor am I working towards this goal with someone. It's the goal I've made for myself. I haven't even told Ayase-san. Or rather, I don't think I can tell her.

After all, this is my way of trying to make up. To make up for the fact that, despite receiving delicious cooked food from Ayase-san every day, I'm not fulfilling my end of the bargain. I couldn't find her a well-paid and lucrative part-time job that didn't steal too much of her time. I couldn't find a job that would allow her to become independent from us, but I can at least attempt to obtain the ability to provide for her while giving her enough breathing space to not force her into dependence. I'm worried that, if I tell her about my plans, it'd make her feel like she owes me something because I'm going out of my way to help her. Not help her directly, but in a way that puts more work on my plate, which is why I've opted to keep quiet about it.

As I reached my prep school's perimeter, I received a LINE message from Ayase-san herself.

'Once you're done, could we go shopping at the supermarket? I want to get the ingredients for breakfast tomorrow.'

I had no objections to that, so I told her the time when my prep school would end, and we decided to meet up in front of the prep school after I was done. Yep, I can't wait. Full of excitement, I opened the door to the classroom, and my eyes spotted a familiar tall girl—Fujinami-san. The seat next to her seemed to be open, so I greeted her and sat down.

Prep school classes usually go from 6:30 pm to 9:30 pm. However, since I had only picked two slots out of three, mine would be over after two hours, which would be at 8:20 pm. And ten minutes later, I would get to see Ayase-san. During the classes and the breaks, Fujinami-san and I barely talked with each other, but once it was time for me to pack up, she suddenly called out to me.

“You’ve changed a bit, haven’t you?”

While I put my pencils and workbooks I had used back into my bag, I glanced over at Fujinami-san.

“Have I?”

“Yes. Did you get yourself a girlfriend?”

“A girlfriend...? Not quite, I’m not even sure how to explain it.”

“I see. Congratulations.”

“You accepted it that easily, huh? Even though I kept it purposefully vague.”

“I figured you must have a reason for doing so.” Fujinami-san removed her glasses, wiping them with the microfiber cloth in her other hand. “If your relationship with the person you have feelings for progresses in a favorable way, then whether it’s as a girlfriend, a sex friend, or anything of that sort, I would personally argue that is a favorable result.”

“It’s thanks to you for giving me a push, Fujinami-san. I’m really thankful for what you did.”

“I’m glad I was able to help. That being said, are you sure about acting this friendly with another girl?” She smiled and

spoke with a teasing tone.

“Err...I've always thought of you as a friend, so...”

“I see. So we've been friends? Then there's no problem.”

I'm glad she agreed with me. And while I was talking with her, I came up with another thought.

“That reminds me, you're quite familiar with Shibuya, aren't you?”

I've lived close to the city center and the surrounding area for many years now, so it's not like I'm a tourist who barely knows my way around Shibuya, but I also don't have much experience just taking strolls around town or enjoying the nightlife like Fujinami-san would. The best I know is the different bookstore locations to the point I could draw a map, but that's about it.

“I imagine you're well-informed about Shibuya during Halloween.”

“Yes, you could say that.”

“Do you usually check it out?”

“Yes. I quite enjoy the atmosphere and partying.”

When I heard that, I was a bit surprised. She didn't seem like the type of outgoing person who'd be fond of partying.

“I didn't expect that,” I said.

“Really? I personally feel like, during those times, it's surprising to see how low people can fall in terms of intelligence and rationality, which makes me think that

human beings are fine even if they're hopeless." Fujinami-san finished her comment with an archaic smile.

It was the exact opposite of Maru's smile when he spoke against the entire idea of partying, but also felt like part of the same reasoning.

"It's fine if they're hopeless, huh?"

"Yes. After all, we're not much different from monkeys."

"So you're the type of person who usually has higher expectations of other people?"

The girl blinked at me in confusion. I guess I said something surprising.

"Is...that so?"

"You expect something from the people around you, which is why you're disappointed. When you find yourself expecting too much, you then admonish yourself to keep the balance."

"I see... I'd never even thought about it that way before."

I felt my smartphone vibrate inside of my bag, so I quickly grabbed it to check the screen. I'd received a message from Ayase-san.

'I'm here.'

I stuffed my phone back into my pocket and slung my bag over my shoulder. It's just a shopping trip, something you'd struggle to call a "date," and yet as soon as it came to spending time with Ayase-san, having her by my side—that alone made my heart race with excitement.

"Is it that girl you mentioned?"

“Yep, she’s waiting outside, and... Oh, I guess looking at my phone while we were talking wasn’t very polite of me, sorry.”

“I’m not bothered by that sort of thing, so don’t worry.”

That answer was very much like her. The way she didn’t intend to force people to do or not do particular things while she was around resembled Ayase-san quite a bit.

“I’ll be heading out now.”

“Yes, see you soon.”

“Bye.” Fujinami-san waved her hand and she left the classroom.

Just then, the bell rang, signaling the start of the third class of the day. I used this as my signal to hurry out of the room. When I stepped out of the building, I saw that the sky had already turned black. A little ways away from the entrance, I could see Ayase-san standing beneath a street light. Thanks to the light shining on her bright hair and illuminating her face, I could easily make her out from a distance. Our gazes met and she showed a faint smile. Even though it’s barely been half a day, it felt like we hadn’t seen each other for a much longer time.

“Were you waiting long?” I approached her with that question.

“Just got here,” she said as she shook her head.

She had changed from her uniform to a casual outfit with a cardigan on top. Considering the time, she most likely had gone home first to change into something more comfortable before she came here. It’s just a simple shopping trip, but

she showed no opening whatsoever. In contrast, I was, obviously, still wearing my uniform, so I felt a bit embarrassed to be walking next to her. As planned, we stopped by the supermarket on the way home.

I'd never really given it much attention up to this point, but the entire world was looking like it was preparing for the incoming Halloween mood. Right after entering the supermarket, I spotted lots of shelves filled with seasonal sweets.

"All of this Halloween stuff is hurting my eyes," I said with a wry smile, which made Ayase-san think for a moment.

"Because of all the orange-colored things around us?"

"Exactly."

Even all the packages were colored with bright orange colors. It's the color of the familiar Western pumpkin. That wasn't originally the case; the lantern from Jack was white. However, when it traveled around the world and reached America, it changed to the image of a pumpkin. It didn't take long for this image to make its way even over to the sheltered island we live on. Even the bucket which had the sweets in it was shaped like a pumpkin. My eyes started to hurt from this bright color all around me.

"The special area of the department store is the same," Ayase-san said.

"Ohhh, you're right. I saw it when we bought the present for Narasaka-san."

"That too, but they're hanging up lights all around town."

Now that I thought about it, one corner of the business district even looked like a *Tanabata* festival with how many Halloween goods I saw.

“Now that you mention it, yeah.”

“But even this season is going to end eventually and we’ll be greeted by another one.”

I nodded in response to Ayase-san’s statement. Once this event was over, they’d stop selling these goods the next day. And the next thing that would fill all of these shelves would be Christmas items. They’re dead-set on getting us in the mood as quickly as possible.

“Well, at least Christmas stuff has some green in it, which is a lot nicer on the eyes.”

“You have the funniest outlooks on these kinds of events, Asamura-kun.”

“Oh, you think so?”

“I’ve never seen somebody judge a holiday by the color compositions of the sales areas.”

Or you could say that I’m bothered by whatever people don’t care about. Ayase-san and I passed by the shelf for the limited goods and started our shopping for real. The general layout is pretty much the same in every supermarket, but the order which the customers walk really shows their personality. It’s the same system I’ve witnessed while working at the bookstore. And even if the establishment creates a general path the customers should take, there’s always exceptions.

“Do we still have all the consumable stuff at home?” Ayase-san asked me as I placed a basket inside the cart.

Since I’ve been out shopping with her countless times before, I’ve realized that she likes to construct a route from the very start, most likely to keep efficiency to a max. It matches well with her personality to take the quickest route to the goal. It was the same when we went shopping for clothes. She seemed to immediately start deciding the perfect route inside her head. She knew exactly where she wanted to go without hesitation.

“Hmm... anything we might need...” I ran through my memories to check for anything we might need to buy.

We still had plenty of toilet paper and boxed tissues, for sure. We also have more than enough garbage bags at home if I remember correctly. We should also have several types of detergent and fabric conditioner left. Ayase-san spoke up before I could.

“I don’t think we’re missing anything.”

“As far as I can remember, we should be fine.”

At least over the past few days, I don’t remember missing anything... I see, I guess I should be making notes for these kinds of situations. It’s a bit of a pain to walk around with a piece of paper in my hand, but I can make notes on my phone instead.

“As for condiments... Ah, we might need some sweet rice wine. I think we have some pepper left, but not ground pepper,” Ayase-san said.

“I guess we can buy some of that, then.”

“Got it.” She said and walked ahead. I pushed the cart after her.

We walked through the vegetable aisle, with Ayase-san checking the prices of everything as we went past. She’d comment about how cheap something was, mumble about another product’s price, and even compare the radishes and cabbages with each other.

“Green vegetables are a bit expensive across the board.”

“Oh, I see.”

I get what she’s referring to, but I don’t pay nearly enough attention to the price to know when something is more expensive or not.

“It’s roughly 20 yen more than yesterday.”

“I’m surprised you remember that.”

“Really? I think this much should be expected.”

Once again, I have to admire Ayase-san. I don’t remember what it cost yesterday, nor do I even bother checking the prices of vegetables on a daily basis. We moved past the vegetables once she finished checking all the prices, and we moved on to the meat aisle. I could see chicken, pork, beef, and so on. Beyond that, I could see racks of fish, and although Ayase-san looked through all of the prices, she never once picked up a package.

“Are we not buying anything today?”

“I haven’t quite decided on the menu just yet. If I were shopping alone, I’d buy enough for myself to carry, but with you, I figured I could buy some more in advance.”

So her horizon of options had broadened because she had two more hands that could help carry everything?

“Okay, just let me know what to carry.”

“It might end up getting a bit heavy, though.”

“You’re always doing so much for me, this much is nothing. Just let me know. I’ll always be here to help.” I told her.

She responded with a quiet “Thanks.”

From her profile, it looked like she was blushing ever so slightly, which made me stop and think. Even if it’s just heading out to shop like this while we talk back and forth, this sort of thing doesn’t feel too bad.

“Okay, I’ve decided what I need. I need several slices of chicken and packs of vegetables. But before that, we should stock up on seasonings.”

“Roger.”

I think it was sweet rice wine and black pepper, right? Wait, where was the rice wine again?

“Over there. You can see tags for soy sauce and other sauces.”

I moved my feet in the direction where she had pointed. After grabbing the sweet wine in question and putting it into the cart, Ayase-san suddenly put it back in its place and went for a larger bottle right below.

“Is that one better?”

“Yeah, I think I’ve been using it a lot lately, so I figured I might as well get a larger bottle.”

“I see... Yeah, that makes sense. You’d only been using half the amount before you moved in with us.”

“I’m still shopping with that kind of intuition, so I really should be getting used to it now.” Ayase-san flashed a wry smile.

“Okay, then next up is the black pepper.”

The opposite side of this aisle held items like salt, sugar, and pepper. I spotted the black pepper up on the highest shelf and put it into the basket after getting Ayase-san’s go-ahead. We walked back to the meat aisle, and Ayase-san put the chicken and the vegetables into the basket. As we made our way to the checkout, Ayase-san suddenly stopped in her tracks.

“It’s pretty cheap, huh?”

“Hm? The pumpkins?”

“Yep. I figured I might as well buy one.”

Near the checkout was a special corner for all things Halloween. Mostly pumpkins, though. The sign even read “Sale,” but they were all the green type of Japanese pumpkin, with no Halloween vibe to them.

“A single one would be a bit too much, but if we cut it in half we might be able to eat all of it... Can you carry it?”

I picked up one of the half-cut pumpkins she mentioned. It wasn’t particularly light, but not impossible to carry.

“I should be fine. I’ve also got my bike’s basket to help me.”

We lined up at the checkout, bought points with the app, and finished the payment. Once we left the building, we were greeted by the dark of night. While we walked through Shibuya center on our way home, we even spotted a group of costumed people. There are still two days left until the actual day, so I'm a bit worried that they're getting ahead of themselves. Being excited is fine and all, but blocking the sidewalk is a bit insensitive to the people around them. I'm pushing my bike with a basket full of groceries here, can't you see that?

By the time we got home, it was already 9 pm.

"The food for tonight is already done, I just have to warm it up," Ayase-san said.

"Thanks, but I can do that myself. I don't want to take up too much of your studying time."

"Don't mind me. I can study while I'm cooking," she said and took out a small English memory book from her pocket, seeming proud of herself.

I wouldn't go so far as to call it a smile, but I could see a small change in her expression that gave her a childish impression. This difference from her usual attitude almost made me break out into a smile myself. I didn't want to be rude by thinking that she's cute that way, so I opened the fridge and stowed away all the fresh produce we had bought. Ayase-san started warming up our dinner in the microwave and a pleasant scent drifted over in my direction.

"This smells great. What is it?"

"Teriyaki chicken. Wait just a moment."

Since she didn't let me help warm up the vegetable-laden miso soup, I instead opted to wash the dishes that were waiting in the sink. It seemed like my old man and Ayase-san had already eaten, which explained where the dishes were from.

"Ah."

"Hm? What's wrong?"

Ayase-san stared at my soap-suds-laden hands.

"You could have let me wash the dishes."

"Come on, you don't have to do *everything*. There's nothing else for me to give back, so at least let me have this."

"Nothing you can give back, huh? That's really not true."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you think I wouldn't notice? You've been secretly trying to help our household finances, haven't you?"

"Wha...?"

I guess I'm not made out for gambling, huh? I really didn't think she'd see through me that easily.

"Well, you didn't manage to find a lucrative part-time job, so you're probably trying to help our parents and I in a different way. The reason you've been attending prep school more is probably because you're thinking about the future and investing more time now. It seems that you want to make the most out of the money that's been paid for the prep school."

"Amazing... You completely saw through me."

“Considering the timing when you decided to take more classes, it makes sense. Not to mention...” She poured some miso soup into a small bowl, taking a sip to check the temperature before continuing. “—I’m always thinking about you, Asamura-kun. Of course I’d notice something like that.”

“...!”

I suddenly started to sweat profusely. It must have been because of the microwave and heater that were running. Despite the water from the sink constantly splashing onto my wrists, it didn’t feel like my body was cooling down anytime soon. I repeatedly told my mind to focus on cleaning the dishes, which only barely allowed me to keep my composure. I checked Ayase-san’s expression from the corner of my eye, but she was hanging her head downwards, not allowing me to figure out how she felt.

I heard a door opening right as an awkward atmosphere started falling between the two of us, which made me jolt upwards in shock. My old man appeared in the kitchen, grabbing a piece of chicken. He stuffed it into his cheek with a grin. “Tasty!” he said and disappeared to the bathroom. Had he ignored his already-brushed teeth to grab another piece? Geez, I was far too startled to even reprimand him for it.

My belated dinner consisted of miso soup, white rice, and some delicious teriyaki chicken for the main course. As for the salad, I put some larger slices of lettuce on the side of my plate. Eating that along with the chicken was pretty good. Once I finished my dinner, I took some time to relax. I let my stomach get some rest by washing down the food with some tea and exchanged a few words with Ayase-san, who was seated across the table.

Right now, we were discussing the costumed brigade we had encountered on the way home. More specifically, our sentiments about the entire ordeal, considering it wasn't even Halloween yet. And how both of us regretted that we had shifts on the 31st.

"I've never gone out during Halloween, so I'd completely forgotten about it." Ayase-san said.

I nodded in response. "I bet everywhere will be crowded. They're already going crazy."

"There's bound to be people who will shop at our bookstore while wearing costumes."

"Even so, our job doesn't change. Well, we might get jumpscared now and again. By zombies or mummies... Ayase-san, are you bad with scary stuff?"

"...I don't handle it too well," she said. "But...if I have you with me, I should be fine."

Maybe having the same shift on that day won't be such a bad thing after all.

Chapter 8

29th of October (Thursday) - Ayase Saki

There were only two days until Halloween. First thing in the morning, I received a document from our homeroom teacher.

'Searching for Volunteers.'

That's what it said at the top. They're looking for volunteers to help with cleaning up after Halloween. The large crowd creates an even larger amount of waste, or so my teacher said. That reminds me, I talked with Yomiuri-senpai about Halloween around a week ago. She said we might as well wear costumes, considering the occasion. She even talked about cat ears adding the right amount of cuteness into the mix, which left me thinking for a moment.

My *armament* isn't designed to increase how cute I am. Dressing up and looking cute may have similar threads woven behind them, but are definitely not the same thing. The only reason I'd never thought about it more up to this point was because I hadn't found anybody I wanted to look cute in front of. Actually... before I graduated from grade school, I think I always felt happy whenever Mom called me cute. However, I don't think I misunderstood what that word

meant. I think I was fine with ‘handsome’, ‘beautiful’, ‘stylish’, or everything along those lines. Rather than the accurate meaning of the word, as long as a child understands it as affirmation from their parents, they’ll be happy about anything.

However, my father was different. Whenever I wore the clothes Mom chose for me and received praise for it, my father didn’t like it. The more I was praised for my looks, the more my grades rose, the more the people around me thought of me, and the less he would give me attention and appreciate my existence.

“You’re just like her, making me suffer.”

He kept mumbling these curses under his breath, which probably made me feel so resentful and confused when it came to the word ‘cute.’ But even so, I continued to choose my clothes carefully and care for my looks. All so that I would show absolutely no opening in the eyes of the world around me. Not in order to draw attention and interest. And yet—

“Sakiii!”

Maaya’s voice caused me to raise my head. It seemed like morning homeroom had already ended while I was lost in thought, and Maaya was now standing in front of me.

“Maaya, classes are going to start soon.” I said.

“Heh, heh, heh. Trick or treat! Gimme sweets!”

“Yes, yes, you can play pranks on me all you want, I’m not giving you any.”

Maaya's innocent smile quickly changed into an ominous grin.

"Then... you'll have to dress up as a maid wearing cat ears, singing idol songs next time we're at a karaoke box!"

"I'm not doing that either."

Also, that's not a prank. You're just using me to satisfy your own desires, aren't you?

"Welp, jokes aside, Halloween's on a Saturday this year, right?"

"It seems like it."

"We're thinking of holding a karaoke party on said Saturday."

"I can't. I've got work."

"Between friendship and money, which is more important?!"

"Money."

What a foolish question. A job's a job. I can't just say no.

"Makes sense," Maaya grumbled.

"Indeed."

"Mhm, okay. Good luck with that. I'll let everyone know."

"Everyone?"

Who might she be talking about?

“From our class? You helped with the preparations for the cultural festival, remember?”

“Ahhh... I guess I did.”

I figured it would be a lot better than being forced to work as a waitress during the actual festival, that's about it.

“You helped behind the scenes without complaining once, so everyone is pretty thankful.”

“No need, I just did what I was tasked with.”

I didn't even know that I did something that could warrant gratitude. But now that I think about it, that would mean that everybody else really wanted to work as a waitress. Wearing such flashy and frilly clothes, saying things like ‘Welcome back, dear master, meow!... You're kidding, right? But on that subject, Asamura-kun's friend... Maru-kun, was it? He had apparently visited all the different cafes that the festival had to offer. Maybe a boy really thinks that clothes like those are cute? Would Asamura-kun have called me cute if I had worn that in front of him?

“And now you're thinking about Asamura-kun again, huh?”

“Wha... what are you talking about?”

Maaya didn't give me any response. She just returned to her seat with the biggest grin ever on her face. Lately, it really feels like she can read my thoughts.

Classes ended for the day, and since I had no work to worry about today, I quickly made my way home to work on my studies. Once I made some progress on that, I remembered that Asamura-kun had prep school classes today. He mentioned a girl he'd gotten to know there, and that they'd

been getting along pretty well. Does he usually sit next to her while they take the class together?

I felt the sudden urge to see Asamura-kun as quickly as possible. I mean... she gets to look at his face the entire time... Ahh, what a pathetic emotion this is. I can guess why he's suddenly been so passionate about prep school. I shouldn't be having such conflicted feelings about it. It's just plain rude.

In exchange for me cooking for him every day, he was going to find a lucrative part-time job for me—that was our initial contract, our promise to each other. I personally consider that contract invalid at this point, but knowing Asamura-kun, he's not as accepting of this result. He's trying to give back to me for the cooking I'm doing for him every day. In that context, it's obvious that the reason he's taking more classes at his prep school around the end of summer break is that he's working harder with the future in mind, and all of this as part of his goal to repay me with trust and gratitude.

As a matter of fact, Asamura-kun's grades have been getting better. That alone shows that he isn't just fooling around with that girl he met and instead is diligently working on his studies. However, although my head might understand this logic and is totally fine with it, my heart wouldn't listen to me. Instead, it's filling me with feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. I booted up my LINE app and sent him a message.

'Once you're done, could we go shopping at the supermarket? I want to get ingredients for breakfast tomorrow.'

I was a bit worried that he might be dubious since I had brought that up out of nowhere. Normally I simply work with what I have to make breakfast, so voicing my desire to go shopping this late might seem unnatural. However, he immediately agreed to it and suggested that we could meet up in front of the prep school. A sigh of relief escaped my lips.

I put my headphones back on, and I was immediately greeted with pleasant music like I was drifting in the ocean. I indulged myself in the all-familiar lofi beats I enjoyed listening to, which allowed my focus to increase again. With my motivation high, I set a timer for 25 minutes on my phone.

I calmly ran my eyes through the notes in front of me. Like I was being pulled down into the deepest ocean, all noise and distractions around me vanished. Even the sound entering my ears started to sound much more distant. By the time I solved seven questions, an electronic beeping sound disrupted my focus. All right, it's time for a break. I set another timer for 5 minutes and relaxed my stiff body. This is a new studying method I've discovered recently: The Pomodoro Technique. It combines a 25-minute interval of studying paired with a five-minute break to relax the body.

At first, I was a bit concerned that the amount of time I'd be studying at a time would be a bit low. It sounded like I wouldn't be able to finish anything like that. However, after testing it out, I realized I made just as much progress as before. The idea is that a human being manages to shift into full focus mode when they're on a deadline. By setting a much shorter deadline than usual with only 25 minutes, your brain is trained to feel rushed by the approaching time limit, thus you focus more intensely on the task at hand.

Needless to say, everyone has their own study methods that work best for them, but I'm doing just fine with this one. I probably should tell Asamura-kun about this when I get the chance. But then he might go even more out of his way to try and equalize our give and take relationship. After repeating another round of 25 minutes and relaxing for 5 minutes, I decided that I should probably start preparing dinner right about now. I stopped studying and took a small English vocabulary notebook with me to the kitchen.

Tonight, it'll just be Step-dad and I at home for dinner. Asamura-kun will be home late because of prep school, and Mom won't be needing any either. My plan was some rice, miso soup, and teriyaki chicken. It's easy to make and won't take much of my time. Around the time I finished most of my preparations, I heard the front door open.

"I'm home. Oh, that smells great."

"It's teriyaki chicken. It'll be ready in a bit. Would you like to eat right away?"

"I might as well, yeah."

"Okay."

Step-dad waltzed into his room to change. I went ahead and prepared his share as well as my own. Once he returned, we started eating dinner together. After he and Mom got married, we've had several times like this when both Mom and Asamura-kun aren't home, which makes it just him and I. Since this had also happened with my father before, I was incredibly nervous at first. And I doubt I had managed to hide it.

I imagine he must have had his own share of trouble trying to gauge the distance he should keep from a girl who had

now suddenly become his daughter. That became obvious to me from the way he talked with me, a bit awkwardly but different from when I would talk with Asamura-kun. He may have heard about my past from Mom, too. I remember him being very careful with me around, like he was trying to not hurt or scare me. But as of right now, we're doing just fine. I'm thankful to both him and Asamura-kun.

But to be perfectly honest, the fact that he is an adult man still somehow hinders me from completely putting my trust in him. He's not at fault for that at all, but the memories from the things I went through as a child now make me have an automated response. Maybe it's thanks to the upcoming Halloween season, which only made it easier for me to remember my distant past. And yet I found myself asking a question I normally wouldn't.

“Dad, what do you dislike about Mom?”

“Huh?! **Cough cough!**”

I must've blindsided him with my question, as he suddenly started choking on a piece of chicken. I'm glad it landed back on his plate, at least.

“That came out of nowhere. What I *dislike*? Wouldn't you usually ask the opposite?”

“It's painfully obvious how much you like each other from the way you act when you're together.” I smiled and continued. “I don't think a marriage can continue for long if you only look at a person's good side. For as long as people stay together, they'll always find something negative about the other person... and since it's been several months since you started to live together, I was curious if there was anything.”

“Hmmm, I see.” He wiped his mouth with a tissue and started thinking.

I don’t know why, but I suddenly felt nervous. I was worried that I might have overstepped my boundaries. But right now, I want both of them to be happy in their new marriage. I don’t want to experience the same things I did with my actual father, so if I hear any complaints from him now, I might be able to help prevent something later.

“It’s not strictly something I dislike, but when it’s something I don’t particularly like either... Usually, she acts like she’s so hardworking and stable, but she’s actually pretty lousy at being a functioning adult.”

“Yeah, that is true.”

“Also, when I’m trying to be strict with Yuuta about something, she’ll scold me about it later.”

“Oh?”

That’s unexpected. I never imagined that they would disagree with their methods of raising Asamura-kun. And I’m sure they’ve been talking about me, as well.

“Also, she tends to grumble a lot about her work.”

“Huh? She does that?”

“From time to time. Once she gets riled up, it’s hard to get her to stop.”

“I had no idea...”

Even though we’ve been living together with my whole life, she’s never shown me that side of her.

“I mean, it’s all the sorts of things you’d expect from a bar. The customers get drunk and pour their hearts out. I don’t think she wants you to worry about that. Before the two of you moved in with us, she apparently relied on her coworkers to listen to her complaints.”

Ahhh, so that’s why she’d come home later than usual every now and then. One of the reasons my father became unable to trust Mom was because she came home at different times. That led to him accusing her of cheating. But if he had instead been able to accept her and tend to Mom’s mental exhaustion, she wouldn’t have had to vent all that stress at work, and then she would’ve been able to get home on time. Well, it’s not like I had any way to confirm or deny this hypothesis now. It’s already too late.

“Um... If all that grumbling ends up being too much for you, then let me know. I can always lend her an ear myself,” I said.

Even though I shouldn’t, I was worried that even these small complaints could eventually tear this family apart as well. However, he just calmly met my gaze, letting out a gentle laugh.

“Haha. There’s no need to worry about that, Saki-chan.”

“But...”

“As I said, Akiko-san’s got sides to her that are hopeless. But compared to me, all that stuff just looks cute, honestly.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t think I’m any less lousy than her. I’m not nearly as good at scolding Yuuta as she is with you, and I complain a lot when I’m exhausted or annoyed. When I think about how

we're both similar in that way, I can't really blame her for anything, and that goes both ways." He narrowed his eyes as he spoke, reminding me of Asamura-kun's gentle gaze, which made me realize that he was serious. "Not to mention... both Akiko-san and I have gone through a lot before, which also plays a big part in this."

"...Yes."

"I think that being married means you're able to accept even the other person's bad traits."

"Bad traits..."

It felt like I had woken up from a long slumber. It took me a while, but I've finally come to realize that... maybe I really can leave Mom to him. And... not just Mom.



“So... for example, what if Nii-san or I became a delinquent?
Would you be able to accept that about us?”

“Of course.” He answered without hesitation. “...But, err, where did that come from? Are you interested in that sort of thing, by any chance?”

“No, not at all. It was just an example.”

“As long as you don’t violate the law... No, that’s not right. Even if you break the law, and you’re dealt severe punishment with no room for you to claim innocence, **I won’t ever deny that you’re part of my family. No matter what it may be.**”

“...I see.”

I think I like Asamura-kun. Not as an older brother, but as a man.

Of course, I didn’t have the courage to drop that bombshell of a statement. But I had a feeling that even if I did, he might accept my feelings and my desires. We could hug like we did on that day, like that couple in Ikebukuro... Well, maybe not in front of other people, but kiss in general. The devil is whispering in my tear, saying that he wants to try that sort of perfectly normal physical contact between a boy and a girl, and I’m slowly getting swayed.

...No, I’m getting ahead of myself. I’m jumping several steps ahead here, and all of my logic and reason are collapsing as a result. While I was lost in thought, both of us fell silent and just finished our dinner in tranquility. I checked the time again, and it looked like I should be preparing to head out and meet Asamura-kun.

“I’m heading out.”

“You’re going shopping now? It’s gotten awfully late.”

“It’s fine. I’m meeting up with Nii-san.”

“But I can’t let a girl walk around alone this late...”

“I’ll take a detour through the business district and avoid any dangerous streets, so you don’t have to worry. When just Mom and I lived together, I’d always go out late for the last-minute sales.”

“Hmmm, if you say so.”

He didn’t seem fully convinced just yet, but I at least got permission. I’m sorry, but after talking with you, my desires have only grown stronger. I really want to see Asamura-kun right now. And since the time we agreed to meet was at 8 pm, I left the house.

I arrived at the main building of the prep school and checked the time. Since his classes should be done right about now, I went ahead and sent him a message.

‘I’m here.’

I leaned against a street lamp and browsed the internet on my phone. I checked through some articles and materials for the university entrance exams while taking glances at the entrance of the prep school. While I did, I spotted a tall girl leaving the building. For a moment, I was captivated. She had such great looks and figure that I thought I was looking at a model. Even her hips were high. Though subconsciously, I closely inspected her from head to toe. She was wearing a knitted sweater that hid her proportions and skinny jeans below.

It might look plain at first, but the hoodie she was wearing was colored and styled like the latest trends. If she wore a

skirt that showed her bare legs, I'm sure she'd get a lot of attention from the boys.

"No, I shouldn't be staring like this." I reprimanded myself in a quiet voice.



I sighed and looked back down at my phone again, but my gaze immediately drifted back towards the entrance. Finally, a dark silhouette appeared from the inside of the building—

Asamura-kun. Once he stepped into the light, I could make out his face much clearer, which caused me to sigh in relief. We greeted each other and headed to the nearby supermarket.

During our shopping trip, I was once again reminded of Asamura-kun's blunt attitude, as well as his kindness that wasn't limited to one person only. He probably isn't even aware of it himself, but he would grab the black pepper high up on the shelf for me and ask "Is this it?" He was also polite with the lady handing out free samples. He's trying not to show prejudice or bias towards people. In that regard, he may be the same as me, but I don't think I can ever reach his level. It's like I'm unable to create an inviting air around me... Which is most likely because of my real father's violent behavior. Since then, it's felt like I've been at a standstill.

We finished buying everything we'd needed and passed through the Shibuya city center. There we encountered a large group of people who were wearing costumes despite the fact that it wasn't even Halloween yet. When they brushed by closely enough for our shoulders to touch, I felt dizzy and sick from the crowd, once again realizing that I felt the most secure whenever I kept a safe distance from others. A few of the people were staggering left and right with a tipsy attitude and reddened cheeks, reeking of alcohol even from a distance.

I almost bumped into a man who came staggering toward me, but Asamura-kun thankfully got between us to act as a shield. He even decided it'd be best for us to take a smaller street, away from this crowd. I glanced at him as he pushed his bike with the basket full of the food we had bought and pondered silently to myself. Would it be okay for me to be honest with my wishes and ask us to hold hands? The one

more step I needed to take was obstructed by the fact that both of Asamura-kun's hands were holding his bike, so he didn't have any hand open for me to hold. At the time, I couldn't tell if that was a blessing in disguise or not.

We made it home at around 9 pm. I went ahead and warmed up the leftovers from dinner I had prepared for Asamura-kun. I figured he must've been tired from prep school, and yet he just started cleaning the dishes that Step-dad and I had left from earlier.

"You could have let me wash the dishes."

"Come on, you don't have to do *everything*. There's nothing else for me to give back, so at least let me have this."

I couldn't quite accept that statement.

"Nothing you can give back, huh? That's really not the case."

I wouldn't have said that under any normal circumstances. The reason he hasn't told me about his current motives and motivation behind his hard work is most likely so I wouldn't feel guilty about it. He probably planned to confess to all of it once he achieved his goals. Silence is golden, as they say. I might end up hurting his pride by saying this. He might end up hating me all the same, but I still want to tell him how I really feel.

"Did you think I wouldn't notice? You've been secretly trying to help our household finances, haven't you?"

"Wha...?"

"Well, you didn't manage to find a lucrative part-time job, so you're probably trying to help our parents and me in a

different way. The reason you've been attending prep school more is probably that you're thinking about the future and investing more time now. It seems that you want to make the most out of the money that's been paid for the prep school."

"Amazing...You completely saw through me."

"Considering the timing when you decided to take more classes, it makes sense. Not to mention..."

I was so nervous that my throat felt dry. I used the miso soup as an excuse to pause, tasting how warm it was by taking a sip. As I expected, it was still a bit lukewarm. Come on, say it. I can do it. I can tell him how I genuinely feel.

"—I'm always thinking about you, Asamura-kun. Of course I'd notice something like that."

I started sweating profusely. It must have been because of the microwave and heater we had running. After I hugged him on that day, I've always had this sensation filling my chest. Ever since that incident, I've never openly voiced my affection, nor have I made any request to repeat what I did. I didn't want to force my desires and wishes onto him. I've just been waiting for him to realize his feelings and confess them to me. We kept our relationship vague, calling ourselves siblings that are closer than average, but that left us with no point of reference at all, only making it harder for us to decide when and where we'd cross which line.

I glanced over at Asamura-kun. He was putting his heart and soul into washing the plates. Maybe he didn't hear me after all? That'd make all of the courage I had mustered go to waste. Blood rushed to my head, and the only thing I could do was avert my gaze. The white wall in front of me was so oddly calming. What now? Should I go for it again? Turn

around, take his hand, and voice my desire to touch him? That thought was still busy crossing my mind when I heard the sound of a door opening. After that, Step-dad stepped out of his bedroom with a drowsy expression on his face. The shock of it all made my back straighten.

Not now. I can't brazenly flirt with Asamura-kun with him around. He may be a nice enough person to accept my feelings, but there's still an order to things. He poked his head into the kitchen, grabbed a warm piece of chicken, and disappeared into the bathroom.

He just ate, didn't he? But when he grinned and said "Tasty!", I realized something. I imagine he must have been worried. Although he had let me go out earlier, he was probably still concerned about me going out this late. He had probably been waiting until I came back with Asamura-kun. Now that he has verified that we're safe, I'm sure he'll get some proper sleep. My selfishness cost me a piece of chicken. Not to mention Asamura-kun's share. I'm sorry, Asamura-kun. I'm sorry, Step-dad. Seeing how you two accept me this much, and show how you worry about me, I can't help but feel at peace. It gives me courage about my relationship with Asamura-kun.

Chapter 9

30th of October (Friday) - Asamura Yuuta

We'll be getting a day off school tomorrow, and that also lines up with Halloween. In light of that, you could feel the excitement filling the classroom when lunch break rolled around. Some people prefer Christmas Eve in terms of festivals, and I've even seen an anime where the last day before the cultural festival is repeated over and over. That probably explained why my classmates were brimming with anticipation. It's not like I don't get where they're coming from. Once the day of the festival arrives, you can't help but think that the end is approaching.

That being said, I'm surprised that my classmates are looking forward to Halloween this much. I could hear conversations about it here and there. 'What costumes should we wear? Where should we party?' Many more questions like these floated around me. Only the radius of 30cm around my desk was free from this mood.

"Yuuta. Got a minute?"

"Err... what's up? You're scaring me."

Shinjou entered the classroom with a serious expression on his face that I hadn't seen him make before. Something told me that this wouldn't end well.

"I'd like to talk about something. Can we step out on the balcony?"

"You want to talk with me?"

"Yep."

"Hold your horses, Shinjou. You're not planning something bad, are you?"

"Not at all. I'm dead serious. Please, Tomokazu."

"Hmph... Well, if Asamura's okay with it, then I'm not going to stop you."

"I'm fine, let's go." I got up from my seat and headed to the balcony with Shinjou.

Because of how cold the season was, no other students bothered to step out during our lunch break. I could only see a few students below me, so my first thought was that maybe we didn't have to come all the way out here to talk in secret.

"The thing is..." Shinjou spoke up. "After the Halloween party our class is going to hold, I want to go to a second party with just Ayase."

"...Oh, really?"

Since we both had a shift that day, I already knew she wouldn't be able to participate, but I pretended that I was

unaware of that. I didn't want anybody else to know where she was working.

"But there's one thing I'd like to check before that."

"Which is?"

"Yuuta, you like Ayase, right?"

For a moment, I wasn't even sure if I kept my mouth shut, or if he heard me going 'Huh?'. It felt like all of the noise around me vanished. All I could look at was Shinjou as he held onto the guardrail. I could see the veins on his wrist, so I knew he must be asking that in genuine sincerity. I imagine that he's nervous. And I was surprised by how serious he was. The way I saw him, Shinjou Keisuke is a smart guy. He's popular for a reason. All his approaches toward girls are brimming with confidence, giving me the feeling that he wasn't focused on a single girl. Even his act of wanting to be friends with me, albeit with an ulterior motive, seemed like a top-of-the-mind decision, something he'd do on a whim just because it seemed interesting. I had forced my views and misconceptions onto him.

Yet his gaze right now was straightforward, with no hesitation. He wasn't making fun of me, and he didn't attempt to deceive me either.

"As a sister?"

"You know what I mean. I didn't come here to ask you about that, and you should know that much, right?"

"Let's say I give you an answer to that question. What will you do then, Shinjou?"

"Depends on the answer."

He showed no intention of backing down or running away. Even if I ignored his conviction, though, I didn't know how to respond. Ayase-san and I had never clearly defined if our feelings were of romantic origin or simply part of familial love. It's such a vague concept in my mind that there's no way I could explain it to somebody else. It made me realize how convenient labels such as 'lovers' or 'siblings' truly were. Can I confidently declare that I like Ayase-san? Right here to Shinjou?

When she embraced me on that day, the relationship that was born, and the definition that originated from it, was that of siblings who simply get along quite well. It shouldn't be any different than what Shinjou and his little sister have. And despite that, can I really confess my feelings right here, and act like we're a couple already?

...Is that really what's important right now? My thoughts ground to a halt. I don't know how Ayase-san feels about all of this. But what about me? Let's go through this with an example. Depending on my answer, Shinjou is going to continue his approach with Ayase-san. Is that what I want? Would I be happy for them if he invited her on a date, and I watched her walk away with him?

Do I like Ayase-san or not? If I didn't know it any better, it almost seemed like this was Shinjou's way of giving me a push. Our vague relationship may not be a thing that can be categorized with terms or ideas, but I could give it many names as long as it was just part of my world and hers. That being said, when somebody else questions me about it, just like Shinjou is right now, I can't rely on our vague definition. I'm sure he expects an expression that both of us can understand.

In reality, I have nothing definite that would allow me to declare if what I feel for her is romantic affection or just care for a little sister. But if somebody forced me to give them a definite answer between the two of these, then there's one I'd rather choose.

"Shinjou, I don't mind giving you my answer, but I want you to promise me something."

"What is it?"

"This is just my own personal answer, and it has nothing to do with how Ayase-san feels. The relationship we have can't easily be put into words, so I don't want you to jump to some kind of conclusion."

"R-Right... I don't fully understand, but sure."

Even if either Ayase-san or I came to the realization that we were romantically attracted to each other, this is nothing more than our own individual perception, something that shouldn't be publicly declared. We're just siblings, not lovers. All we can do is continue to express ourselves that way, and Ayase-san does not acknowledge me as her boyfriend. At least, not at this very moment. However, there is something I can say myself.

"I know for myself—"

If I can't make him give up on Ayase-san without defining my vague feelings, then I have to use his own words to make them clear for him.

“—that I like Ayase-san. Is that answer enough to satisfy you?"

Now that I had put it into words, everything clicked. I wanted Shinjou to give up on her. That was how I genuinely felt. The instant I became aware of that, I realized that I had a desire to form a relationship with Ayase-san that went one step beyond what we currently had.

I suddenly became worried about how Shinjou would react and glanced at his face. Since I'd never had a rival in love up to this point, I couldn't even fathom what attitude he'd have towards me. Would he be angry or sad? Would he start sulking? ...Lots of possible situations floated around in my head, but none of them ended up being close.

"I see."

His expression was oddly...neutral. Even the tone of his voice made it sound like he had expected this answer from the get-go, or that he had played it out this way in his head earlier. It was just...eerily calm.

"Thanks for the answer, Yuuta."

"No problem."

"I'll catch you later."

"Gotcha."

Shinjou stretched, turned his back towards me, and started walking. After I watched him walk off back to his own class, I pondered for a bit and looked outside once more. What did he feel when I said that? How will he act from now on? These are things only he will know. But his words of gratitude felt genuine to me. I'm sure that we'll make it through this in some way or another. Or...am I acting too self-important by just assuming that? At the very least, by

openly stating my feelings for Ayase-san, it felt like I had gotten stronger and gained confidence.

Upon returning to the classroom, Maru raised his gaze from the textbook on his desk and spoke to me with a concerned tone.

“What were you talking about?”

“Just some stuff. I can’t give you the details, but things should be cleared up now.”

“Hm...Well, if you say so.” Maru still didn’t seem fully convinced, but also didn’t question me further.

The silence in our conversation allowed me to hear our other classmates talking with each other. Something about a party in Shibuya tomorrow. Trying to ignore that topic, I decided to ask Maru about something.

“Do you have any plans, Maru?”

“On Halloween?”

“Yep.”

“I’m not going to some kind of gathering of party-goers.”

So he said, but when I asked him if he had any plans in general, he mentioned that he had been invited out to karaoke.

“Do you want to come too, Asamura?”

“I’ve got a shift at work so I can’t, sadly.”

“Gotcha,” Maru commented and didn’t even try to invite me.

The reason we've been friends for so long despite me not actively trying to make acquaintances is most likely because he knew when to back off. He's the opposite of Shinjou in that sense. I guess I've grown as a person, though, since everything worked out with Shinjou, too. That being said... a lot of my classmates have plans in Shibuya tomorrow, huh? Yet Ayase-san and I have work at the bookstore near the train station both today and tomorrow. I know I'm probably worrying about it a few minutes too late, but the way Shinjou acted makes me hope he at least won't tell Ayase-san about what I said.

And even more than that, I wouldn't want any weird rumors to start going around. I'd rather not be seen by our classmates. Considering the size of the crowd, it'll be hard to make out the faces of the people around you. But since we're both working at the same time, I'll have to escort Ayase-san home once our shifts are over. In other words, we'll still have to pass through the crowd. I wonder how we'd look to others in that scenario. We should probably be careful during that time.

Once classes ended, I went home for a quick stop and then made my way to my work. Considering the crowds that were building up near the train station, I really didn't want to bother using my bike. The closer I got to the train station, the more people I saw wearing costumes. There was a witch wearing a black, gothic dress while holding a broom and a zombie with an axe sticking out of his head. I thought I saw a normal group of women, but they had bandages all over with blood dripping from their mouths...

Halloween is supposed to be tomorrow, right? If this were the intro festival for All Saints Day, then Halloween is like Christmas Eve. And yet the majority of people had already started the festival today...or is it just me? Well, whenever

customs are adapted to new regions, their original intent and ideas are usually twisted into something else. It happens a lot, really. However, seeing it happen in front of your own eyes never ceases to be surprising. It's almost like Shibuya itself had turned into a giant haunted house. It's like a parade of a hundred demons over here.

I arrived at the bookstore and immediately mentally prepared myself the moment I entered. I could see several customers loitering around that were wearing similar costumes to the people I had encountered outside. Do I have to live through this even though it's the day before? And if that weren't enough, after I changed into my uniform, the manager handed me some weird kind of hat.

"Here you go, Asamura-kun."

"What...is this?"

"A hat."

It was a crown with what looked like peeled bananas hanging down from the sides, that was meant to be as comical-looking as possible. It's what you'd call a jester cap.

"...I have to wear this?"

"Yep. It's Halloween, after all, so at least for today and tomorrow. It's part of our customer service."

Can you...really call this service? When I looked around, I saw the manager and all the other part-time and full-time employees were also wearing this cap. It was quite a surreal sight. Maybe taking both shifts for today or tomorrow was my first mistake. I realized I had no other option but to put on the cap and make my way to the back of the store. Since it's Saturday and Sunday, we didn't have any new releases

coming in. Most of them had been delivered on Friday, and even if we opened up space on the shelves, there's no way they would all fit in there. And since we also couldn't pile up the thick magazines to create large mountains, we can only slowly work on filling the shelves whenever we find space. Basically, refilling the stock whenever something is sold.

"Coming in!" I called out and entered the storage room with the leftover stock.

"You're late, Junior-kun."

"Hello there, Asamura-ku-san."

"Oh, you two are here already."

The two people already in the storage room, filling the cardboard boxes on the cart, were Yomiuri-senpai and Ayase-san. It seemed like they had gotten here well before me. When I looked at Ayase-san's face, my heart skipped a beat, my body stiffening. I was reminded of my conversation with Shinjou, which made the blood rush to my head. I've already started thinking of Ayase-san as a lover in my head. There's no use in reflecting or agonizing over my actions.

"Junior-kun, you're late! Late, late, late!"

"Wha...?"

That's impossible...!

"You still have five minutes, Asamura-san. Don't worry."

"Oh thank goodness."

I checked the time on the click inside the storage room, which proved Ayase-san correct. Yomiuri-senpai was just

playing pranks on me again, huh? Yomiuri-senpai had been crouching down while filling the cardboard box with new magazines, but she stood up, stretching her arms as she did so. She made it seem like she had been working for hours, but I'm pretty sure her shift had just started, like mine.

"Getting old, Senpai?" I teased her a bit as revenge.

"Gaaaah! Did you hear that, Saki-chan? He's treating me like some kind of grandma!"

"You did say that you were tired before he came in, so I don't blame him."

"Y-You backstabbing...Waaah, waaaaaaah! You're so cruel! Whose side are you on, Saki-chan?!"

"Crying doesn't work too well when you look like that," Ayase-san said.

She's not wrong. Fake crying while wearing a jester cap really doesn't have much of an impact. She looks like a genuine clown now.

"My oh my, haven't you gotten used to work, Saki-chan. I see, I see. I guess I need to change my attack strategy, then."

"I believe you have the choice of just not attacking at all?" Ayase-san said.

"I don't. That'd be boring as heck, so it's time for an all-out offense!" She seemed to think she was a warrior heading off to war. She turned her back toward Ayase-san, walking in my direction.

She held both her arms forward, wriggling her fingers like tentacles.

"Hehe! Junior-kun, trick or treat! If you don't give me candy, I'll play a prank on you!" She said, approaching me like a zombie.

Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle went the grapplers.

"Halloween is tomorrow, remember?"

"How naive! With a festival like this one, you can't let down your guard even the day before! Otherwise, you'll be haunted by something sinister! Now bless me with your sweets!"

"You're just saying that because you want some candy, right? Also, I don't particularly like the idea of a festival where zombies crawl up on me."

"You still intend to disobey meeee?!" She suddenly turned around and started clinging to Ayase-san from behind her back. "Feast your eyes upon this! I have taken her hostage! If you don't give me anything... I'll have my way with your little sister!"

"Wha, hey. Um, you're t-tickling me..."

"Heh, heh, heh. This is what bad girls get if they don't offer me candy!"

Yomiuri-senpai, you sound like a balding middle-aged man.



"Let's stop it right there, shall we? You're treading dangerous ground when it comes to workplace harassment. I understand already. You just want some candy, right?"

The instant I finished my sentence, her movement stopped.
What a greedy little...

“Good, good, my dear Junior-kun. You’d better remember this. Whenever you see me with your adorable sister, you are to always keep some candy in your pocket.”

What kind of older brother would do that? Ever since she found out that Ayase-san and I are step-siblings, she’s been teasing us like this. Fine, then. You’ll get your candy.

“Okay, I’ll bring some to work tomorrow, then.”

“Oh, that’s a promise! And if you break that promise...”

Yomiuri-senpai freed Ayase-san from her grasp, only to stagger toward me again with her hands up in the air.

“Today was just a preview! You’ll see something even crazier tomorrow!”

“Sure, sure, I get it.”

With these jokes out of the way, the clock in the room signaled that our shift had begun.

“Ah, it’s time. Break time’s over! Junior-kun, Saki-chan, back to work! Hup, hup!”

“You’re the person who did the least amount of work, remember...?”

That being said, once she actually started working, the difference in experience between her and us really showed. Not to mention that she had already checked the shelves and bookcases, stuffing the magazines that were sold more frequently into the cardboard box. We moved between the

storage room and the main bookstore several times, filling up the shelves when it was time for us to take a break. While drinking a cup of water in the office and talking about this and that, we naturally ended up discussing Halloween tomorrow.

Since it's on a Saturday, you'd normally go out and about or stay at home having fun, but for us three and our shifts, we can only do that sort of thing before and after work. Yomiuri-senpai mentioned that she'd be meeting up with her friends from the university after work to take a stroll around Shibuya in costumes and go out for karaoke after that. As you'd expect from a university girl, she's totally cool with hanging around at night. Apparently, even the assistant professor she studies under will be participating. Said professor apparently wanted to see the youngsters loose from up-close.

"She said 'This is academic research, my dear Yomiuri-kun,' but I feel like she just wants to party and needs an excuse to do so."

"Is that the same professor from before?" Ayase-san asked with an expression like she knew who it was that Senpai was talking about.

"Good guess. That's Kudou-sensei, all right."

"Ah... Okay, I see."

When Ayase-san heard that name, her attitude changed. Yomiuri-senpai made a bitter smile which made me think that they knew something I didn't.

"I guess she left quite the impression?"

"Are all professors like that?"

"Hmmm... I think she's an exception. She's famous for acting outside the range of common sense and careful thinking. She's that crazy-genius kind of type."

"Well, she's definitely no angel, that I agree with."

Just listening from the sidelines made me feel terrified of that professor. Also, wait a second...

"Is that the professor you had tea with before? At that pancake shop, I mean."

"Oh right, you were eavesdropping on us back then. Yeah."

I really wish she wouldn't paint me in a negative light like that in front of Ayase-san. I just happened to pass by and had heard their conversation.

"Either way, I'm worried we'll get fewer students applying to our university if she keeps up that act~!" Yomiuri-senpai sighed.

Meanwhile, Ayase-san muttered something under her breath.

"Maybe not that much, I guess."

I'm not quite sure if Yomiuri-senpai heard her, to be honest.

"Really, she's such a troublesome professor," she said, but she was smiling nonetheless.

Chapter 10

30th of October (Friday) - Ayase Saki

The classroom was excited first thing in the morning. All I could hear were my classmates making plans for Halloween. Asking what costumes they should wear was one of the most prominent questions. Others talked about where they should meet up for a Halloween party. There was even a large group building around Maaya's seat. They planned to meet up tomorrow to hold a costume party.

"Are you really not coming, Saki?" Maaya asked one last time to make sure.

"I've got other plans, sorry."

I have a work shift on that day, and I can't just skip it. I purposefully had kept the fact that I had a part-time job a secret. If I'm not careful, they might figure out where I'm working. And I also can't really handle that kind of atmosphere too much. However...that also got me thinking. If it's with the people I appreciate and feel comfortable around, then maybe spending the day together could be pretty fun. Someone I'm fine with having around... like Asamura-kun. Walking around Shibuya wearing a costume suddenly doesn't sound so bad. I may not be good with that

sort of stuff, but I want to treasure the time with Asamura-kun—the memories I create with him.

Once classes ended, I made my way to the Shibuya train station for my upcoming shift at work. The sun had moved towards the West, as the sky had started turning dark blue. The shadow of the Shibuya 109 was stretching along across the ground, even reaching down to my feet. The eastern sky that was visible through the gaps of the buildings slowly changed to the color of the night, and the breeze blowing against my cheeks smelled like fallen leaves. It wouldn't take long until I would be able to see my own breath.

Upon entering the bookstore, I ran into Yomiuri-senpai, who had already been there before me, walking between the bookshelves. I bowed politely when our eyes met and headed over towards the girls' changing room.

"Morning, Saki-chan!" She stormed into the room right behind me like she had chased after me.

"...Hello."

For some reason, she always greeted me like it was morning. Even though it was turning dark outside. Maybe it's just a habit of hers. I don't think anyone has ever commented on it.

"Saki-chan, we're supposed to fill the shelves today~"

"Okay."

Asamura-kun arrived roughly five minutes before our shift started, and we all worked on filling the empty spaces in the shelves. Our break arrived, so we went back to the office. Yomiuri-senpai kept fawning over Asamura-kun at every given chance, and I had no way of telling what she really

thought. He agreed to bring sweets to work tomorrow or something along those lines. Maybe I should also say that to Asamura-kun. ‘Trick or treat...’ No, what am I thinking? That’s not like me at all.

After that, we started talking about Halloween tomorrow. Yomiuri-senpai mentioned she’d be having fun with some friends after our shift and going out in a costume. Asamura-kun seemed to be impressed by the kind of mature vibe she showed through that. And apparently with the professor from her ethics department—Assistant Professor Kudou Eiha. Just remembering what happened on the day of the open campus made me feel exhausted.

Yomiuri-senpai called her the top genius of the department who also had the mind of a demon. And to be perfectly honest, I could picture her with demon horns. I think she’s a chore to have around. She’s probably the kind of person who’d grind my gears the easiest. I’m not good at talking with strangers to begin with. There aren’t many people like Asamura-kun that I can feel relaxed around.

“Either way, I’m worried we’ll get fewer students applying to our university if she keeps up that act~!”

That’s how Yomiuri-senpai feels about that wildcard of an assistant professor? Well, she’s absolutely right. She’d have a verbal debate on the level of a full-blown war with a person she’s literally just met, with absolutely no common sense involved. Not to mention that, if a discussion like that actually takes place, she’ll show no remorse to steamroll over the other person’s feelings, like it’s her only goal in life. It feels like she only sees the people around her as guinea pigs and test subjects. I’d really love for her to learn some common sense and restraint. That’s what I think, at least—

“Maybe not that much, I guess.”

I practically blurted that out without any intention of doing so. I’d never had such an experience before then. I’d used all of what my brain had to offer to come up with arguments and counter-arguments in an endless ethical debate. I was exhausted, to say the least, but even so—The study of ethics is a lifestyle, nothing more. If you live as a human being, there are only two options when it comes to being around other people: You either get accepted or rejected. If this is her only way of living, isn’t she just a clumsy and unfortunate person who doesn’t know any better? I don’t think I dislike that type of person. After all, I’m the exact same way.

After our break ended, Asamura-kun was the first one to leave the office. After he left, Yomiuri-senpai called out to me.

“So about tomorrow. Did you decide if you’re gonna dress up for your shift?”

“Again with that?”

During our last shift together, she asked if I was interested in wearing a costume for our shift on Halloween, saying that if I did she would do it too.

“I wanna see you with cat ears, Saki-chan. It’ll heal my exhausted eyes.”

“Why am I your medical treatment?”

“I’ll tell you about some great cosplay~ And you could join us after our shift, too.”

Um, she does remember that I’m still in high school, right?

“I can’t participate in any parties that involve alcohol, you know.”

“There’s no need to worry about that. We still have some minors in our group, so we keep the option open. And Professor Kudou is with us too as a chaperone.”

“I feel like you put way too much trust in the wrong people.”

Yomiuri-senpai flashed a wry smile.

“I guess she played a bit too much with you that last time, huh? But I still wanna have you around for some fun. I can tell you about some great makeup techniques and cosmetic brands. You’re bound to be curious about that sorta stuff, yeah?”

To be perfectly honest, that single offer was quite tempting. I’ve tried to learn more about makeup and fashion as the years have gone on, but I lack the crucial experience of an average high school student. A mature woman is to be expected to have really great makeup, so I might as well use this chance to learn about this early on, since I’m eventually going to reach that stage—No, this is much less complicated than that. I think I’m interested, that’s all.

“Oh, do I have a bite on the hook?”

“I’m not doing it.”

“Hmmm... There’s still more valuable information I can exchange for that, I think~ Have you ever gone to a nail salon before? As a high school student, you’ve probably never visited a beauty salon, I bet.”

“I don’t have that sort of money, after all.”

“But there’s nothing lost if you at least learn about those kinds of places, right? And you can’t forget about the diet foods and meal plans from the girls who are licensed nutritionists. It gets harder to lose fat as you get older, you know. Aren’t you worried about that sort of thing, Saki-chan?”

“...Is that all you talk about?”

“When all you do is read through tedious research papers and psychological debates, it’ll eventually make your brain rot. Some girls’ talk is crucial to give your mind a break. You know that, right?”

“I’ve never done any girls’ talk, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Even more of a reason to join us. It’ll be the first time for you. Also... it wouldn’t hurt to learn about techniques for attracting attention through fashion or a psychological approach to what outfits will help you win over your Prince Charming. Whether you want to be handsome or cool or cute.”

“Know your enemy, know thyself?”

“Exactly.”

“I may be curious about that, but I really can’t. My parents would worry about me.”

“So you say, but I bet you’ve got a date planned with your beloved Junior-kun, right?”

“O-Of course not!”

I tried to protest as best as I could, but she just grinned at me.

After finishing my homework and my bath, all that waited for me was to head to sleep. I slid my body under my covers, the slightly cold sheets making me almost shiver. I'll probably need to invest in some bed warmers sometime soon. Once I had checked the time I needed to get up, I turned off the lights and closed my eyes. Right as my mind was drifting off into a deep slumber, a distant memory of Halloween from when I was a child came to mind.

I think it was from when I was in grade school. Probably in my third or fourth year. Mom promised me that we'd hold a Halloween party, but because of her job, that plan had to fall through. My father also headed out somewhere, leaving me all alone at home. Feeling lonely, amidst the darkness around me, I lit a single candle I had bought with Mom. We were a lot poorer than now, and our place wasn't nearly as big. The dining room was roughly 7.5 square meters, with nothing in it but a small low table like you'd see in a traditional Japanese residence.

In the dead center of this table stood a candle in the shape of a pumpkin. I used a match to light it, which at least gave the otherwise dark room some light. I remembered the story *A Little Match Girl* and started imagining fantasies amidst the light in front of me. Mom and my father (though I replaced his face with the face of a random actor) were with me, as well as a large cake in the center of the table. Since I was a child back then, I had probably confused Halloween with Christmas. After all, I imagined that I was talking to a reindeer.

In my fantasy, I was having lots of fun talking and telling stories to my parents, who were smiling as they listened to me. I knew it was all just fabricated, but it was my ideal type of night. Shortly after that, I fell asleep. I woke up to the sensation of somebody gently shaking my shoulder, who

turned out to be Mom. She scolded me for falling asleep while letting the candle burn. She then apologized for leaving me alone with a tight hug.

I remember thinking about how hard Mom must have had it. The inside of my blanket had finally started to warm up a bit by then, and I was slowly drifting away into a peaceful slumber, unable to resist the drowsiness. I still can't forget that dim light from the candle back then. It's the absolute symbol of my solitude. A simple candle in the shape of a pumpkin...

I wonder if they still sell something like that. I thought as I fell asleep.

Chapter 11

31st of October (Saturday) - Asamura Yuuta

The final day of October was upon us. Since I had no school today, I slept in a bit longer, enjoying a relaxing morning. Once 4 pm rolled around, it was time for me to steel my resolve and head to work. I decided against using my bike, considering the enormous crowd I'd have to fight against, and opted to make my way there on foot. I left the house a bit earlier than usual because of that. Ayase-san did as well, taking a different route to the bookstore than mine.

Once I reached the area around the train station, I was yet again fully reminded of just what day it was today. Tomorrow is the day we thank the saints—All Saints Day. And the day before it is the introduction—Halloween. The streets of Shibuya were crowded with people dressed up as monsters. I saw zombies, vampires, mummies, werewolves...From standard costumes to cosplays of anime characters, the number of people who were dressed up had increased tenfold over yesterday.

“I’m starting to feel dizzy...”

I tried my hardest to avoid the crowd as that mutter escaped my lips. The street was full to the point my

shoulder would constantly bump into somebody else's. I think we'll be awfully busy at the bookstore today. After passing through these groups of people for a while, I finally made it to the store. Upon entering, I could already see the chaos unfolding. Around 30% of the people shopping here were wearing costumes. I snuck past all of them, entered the office, and greeted the others.

"Ah, Asamura-kun. You'll be at the cash register today."

The manager handed me the same jester cap as yesterday. He gave me a quick rundown of today's procedure and told me to be mindful of the cash register in particular. I finished changing into my uniform and stepped out to the main store. I spotted a special corner next to the cash register. There were small discount goods there like costumes, candlelights, and even penlights.

They had probably set this up after the store closed yesterday. Basically, that discount section will be here only for today, and will be removed once tomorrow rolls around. Our main business revolved around books, of course, but the store manager's mentality was that the more we sold, the better. This naturally would make handling the cash register a lot more troublesome. Even more so thanks to the wonderful jester cap I was wearing at this very moment.

It ended up being a lot worse than I had anticipated. Murphy's Law was in full force today as well. We were so busy that there wasn't any time for idle talk at the cash register. Shibuya is known as the crowded city that never sleeps, and because Halloween was on the weekend this year, it felt like every single person in Shibuya decided to go out today, which created an endless line in front of my checkout counter.

The flourishing of a business has its pros and cons, but I'd had no experience with the checkout line being this busy before, so I was completely exhausted by the time my shift ended. My legs were hurting from standing at the checkout counter the entire time. I can already tell they'll be killing me tomorrow. For the first time ever, I was genuinely jealous of Maru and his trained body. Then again, I wouldn't know how much training would be necessary to not get muscle pains like this, so I can imagine the world just being unreasonable again if I did.

Even worse was that, right before this hellish shift ended, somebody threw up right in front of the store. It was probably some moron who got drunk early into the evening, but we also couldn't leave it there since it'd just make our store look bad. Somebody would have to clean it up, and since the store manager was irreplaceable during this busy time, I was elected as the lucky guy for the job.

I grabbed a bucket with water and a mop, making my way to the next layer of hell with heavy steps. I passed through the automatic door and was immediately greeted by the crime scene. Naturally, the perpetrator had long vanished, leaving only the evidence behind in the form of gross-looking vomit. These kinds of people only know how to make trouble for people who are trying hard. As the chilly fall breeze blew through my thin clothes, I spent my time gazing at the passersby in their costumes, scrubbing with the mop emotionlessly like a well-oiled machine.

I didn't feel particularly jealous of them and their partying. I've always been bad with that sort of thing. However, when I spotted a boy and girl walking next to each other, my curiosity got the better of me. I saw a couple of what looked like university students standing in front of the movie advertisement on the side of our bookstore, looking at each

other with their bodies intertwined. They didn't pay much attention to the gazes of other people around them, instead brazenly making out with each other. It was similar to the sight I'd seen back in Ikebukuro. I guess being a couple means that you have to kiss each other in front of strangers.

"Hm?"

Suddenly, something felt off. Someone crouched down right in front of the couple, staring at them from a close distance. My first impression of that individual was that they were a devil. She had the eyes of a devil. Her hairband had two horns growing from it, and there was a small tail showing from her back. Her black skirt and long sleeves with a matching robe were those of a witch, but it was most likely a costume that was a mixture of the two. On any regular day, she'd stand out pretty conspicuously.

However, call it the magic of Halloween if you will, the only person who paid this woman any mind at this point was me. It was like she only existed in my reality. Even the couple she was staring at had entered their own world, continuing their passionate kiss.

"Hmm. Do you two have a moment?" The devil called out to them.

Only then did the couple notice that they were being watched, and they quickly pulled their heads apart. Thank goodness she wasn't some sort of hallucination my mind had come up with to make this shift a bit more interesting.

"W-What do you want?" The man stepped in front of his girlfriend.

The devil continued without so much as batting an eye.

“You’re fully prepared to commit illicit acts in front of random strangers, I see. Do you two always have your foreplay while being watched by others?”

“Wha...?”

The boyfriend was utterly baffled. I don’t blame him. I had trouble following what that weirdo was on about.

“There’s no need to give it that much of a thought. I am simply interested to see how much the environment of Halloween urges you to ignore any sort of social and ethical morals, or if this occasion simply gathers those who lack the kind of ethical views to even see problems with their illicit behavior in the first place. Put simply, I am curious about your mindset.”

“W-What the hell are you talking about?”

“Come on, let’s just go.” The girlfriend tugged on the man’s arm, urging him to walk away.

“Hold on. Maybe you gain greater excitement by showing yourselves in front of others? If so, shouldn’t you be thanking me for assisting you in that regard?”

“We’re going. Please don’t follow us!”

“Can’t you at least answer one question of mine? Were you flirting around like that because of today’s magic, or because you are into that sort of stuff? A side comment is fine, just give me some kind of information to record.”

“We won’t!” The girlfriend grabbed her boyfriend’s hand and rushed towards the city center, disappearing into the crowd.

"Much obliged for the precious sample. It will certainly assist my future research." She waved her hand and watched the couple off. "Now then, it's time to look for my next target of observation.....Hm?"

"Ah."



Our eyes met. When her eyes, shining like stained gemstones, entered my line of sight, part of my memories were stimulated. Her slightly pigmented skin, her unkempt

hair that made it look like she had just woken up, her slumped shoulders, and her dogmatic method of questioning people... There was only one person who came to mind. It's the professor whom Yomiuri-senpai was having a passionate discussion with back at that cafe. I think she called her 'Professor Kudou.'

That reminds me, Yomiuri-senpai mentioned that she'd be meeting up with people from her university after her shift was over. I guess she's part of that group, which is why she came here to our bookstore.

"Have we met before?"

"Ah, I'm sorry for staring."

"Don't fret. I don't mean to reproach you. Many studies begin only after you've been staring at something for too long."

"R-Right..."

"You must have seen that couple's behavior, no? How do you feel about that?"

She's asking me for my opinion now? It was an unexpected answer, but I didn't have to think much.

"I felt embarrassed, to be honest."

"Oh?"

"Intuitively, that is."

"I see. Because you envisioned yourself being seen by total strangers while doing something along those lines, yes?"

“Th-That’s not what I...”

“Are you certain? You managed to give me, someone who asked you out of the blue about it, an immediate answer. You must have been having your own feelings towards their behavior way before I asked. And your answer reflected the genuine emotions that you felt. If you didn’t care much for it, you would have just called it annoying or an eyesore, but you said it was embarrassing. That’s the feeling that you would call *fremdschämen* in German. You pictured yourself in their situation and suffered from second-hand embarrassment as a result.”

Despite her creepy attitude, she managed to accurately guess how I felt. As you’d expect from the person who had bested Yomiuri-senpai, she’s skilled with words.

“Most people have a certain level of resistance towards kissing in front of others, and the statistics around that have varying results that depend on the people asked, namely their sex, marital status, and so forth. However, only approximately 8% of those surveyed have no problem kissing their significant other in public. Interestingly enough, only 20% of those asked have actually had the experience of kissing their significant other in public.”

“So what does that mean?”

“Statistics say that the majority of people questioned felt hesitant to share a kiss in public, and only a small portion did so. If so, when and under what circumstances did they indulge in an activity that is considered off-limits? There sadly isn’t much research that took this idea and conducted proper investigations from that perspective. I am looking for the conditions during which people deem it to be worth

ignoring societal standards and morals that would otherwise prevent them from committing this seemingly illicit activity.”

“...I see.”

What a profound thought process. And at the same time, what a terrifying one. A single word, or even a sound, is enough to suck me in, wrapped up in her net. Her costume was accurate. I started feeling like I was talking with the actual Mephistopheles.

“Halloween in Shibuya is especially famous for youngsters making mistakes and the like, is it not?”

“Well, I guess.”

“By ‘making mistakes,’ I’m referring to deeds that deviate from society’s norms. I am looking into this phenomenon with the hypothesis that this operates in a similar way when it comes to relationships between men and women.”

“So you’re basically doing a field study? As expected of a university professor. You seem quite passionate about your research.”

“Oh? So you do know me after all?”

Ah, crap. All of her high-brow talk must have numbed my thought process. It’s true that I know about her, but that’s mostly because I listened in on her conversation with Yomiuri-senpai, and I’d rather not reveal that. While I was wondering how I could fumble my way through this, the devil scanned me over from my head to toe.

“I see, so you work here? You’re Yomiuri-kun’s Junior-kun, I believe.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Might you be Asamura-kun?”

“Err, you even know my name?”

“I just remembered.”

She couldn’t have said it any more politely.

“My name is Kudou Eiha. I’m an assistant professor at Tsukinomiya Womens’ University, which Yomiuri-kun is attending. I’ve met your little sister before.”

“So I’ve heard.”

She specifically mentioned how she was practically interrogated by a suspicious professor on the day of the open campus. We’ve only talked for a few minutes, yet I can already sympathize with Ayase-san for what she went through.

“I shouldn’t be getting in the way of your work, so I’ll be excusing myself now.”

“...That’s unexpected.”

“What exactly?”

“I had figured you’d continue to question me.”

“Hahaha. I’m not particularly fond of obstructing someone else’s activities or work. Nor do I have any interest in things that aren’t strictly related to my research.”

I’m shocked she’s got the guts to say that. What terrified me the most was the fact that this Professor Kudou had

absolutely no doubts or concerns about how she acted and presented herself to others.

"Then, if you'd excuse me," she said, turning her back towards me.

I felt relieved and returned back to cleaning.

"Ah, that reminds me." She stopped and spoke again. "Let me act like a devil one last time and put a curse on you."

"A curse? That sounds a bit aggressive of you."

"Why would couples that usually hold back in front of others lose their sense of shame on a day like this? The key lies with their short-term loss of IQ."

"...The Halloween mood turns people stupid, is what you're saying?"

"Exactly. And the more we humans turn back into primates, the greater our primitive desires grow... In other words, they seek out sexual contact with a partner."

"You're as blunt and to the point as ever, huh?"

"It's the truth, after all. ...However, turning into an idiot isn't all bad."

"What would be a good side effect of turning into one?"

"You'll be happy."

"What a change of subject. Are we talking about the spiritual level now?"

Weren't we just talking about morals and ethical dilemmas?

“Humans have always coexisted with the spiritual. It’s something inseparable from the human society.” Professor Kudou pointed off in a direction.

When I looked over, I saw a parade of costumes completely filling an intersection. It reminded me of the night I had walked around with Fujinami-san. Back then, the streets were full of people who made excuses to themselves to get absolutely plastered. They relied on the power of alcohol to forget. Right now, Halloween provided the power of this event, which caused all of these normal human beings to forget that they are supposed to be cognisant.

“So, since you folks are too clever for your own good, I shall put a curse on you that will cause you to turn into monkeys: Happy Halloween.”

“Turn into monkeys? I’m not too fond of jokes like that.”

Ayase-san and I are supposed to be acting like them? There’s no way. I was getting annoyed with Professor Kudou’s nonsense, so I turned toward her to tell her off, but she was nowhere to be found. She had said what she wanted to say and had just vanished afterwards.

“She’s not... actually the devil, right?”

There’s no way, yeah? Haha... With the feeling that I had experienced something supernatural, I returned to cleaning the ground and headed back inside once I was done.

Finally, my shift ended. I entered the office and ran into the manager, who handed me a plastic bag with a ribbon on it.

“Here’s one for you, Asamura-kun. Thanks for helping us on this busy day,” he said as he handed me the plastic bag, which seemed to be full of sweets.

It seems to be an extra reward to the people who had offered to work during the busy Halloween period. Naturally, I accepted it with gratitude.

"And here you go, Ayase-san."

"Thank you very much."

Ayase-san showed up a bit later, receiving a bag of her own. Same for Yomiuri-senpai who came in behind her. All three of us had finished our shift at around the same time, which was fairly rare for us. After this, Yomiuri-senpai will be going to a costume party with friends from her university. When I told her that I ran into her professor, she seemed really worried, being all "Are you okay?! She didn't do anything weird to you, right?!", which was oddly amusing to me. I said I was fine, but that she had apparently cursed me. That made Yomiuri-senpai stare at me in shock.

I headed to the men's changing room and changed out of my uniform. When I stepped back into the office, I met up with Ayase-san and Yomiuri-senpai. Ayase-san was wearing the same casual outfit as earlier, but Senpai had already changed into her costume. She was wearing a large witch's hat and a matching black witch dress. It looked terrifically good on her, to the point I forgot she was normally dressed in Japanese-style fashion.

It wasn't the revealing type of witch costume either. It was more like one you'd encounter deep in the forest, hidden from society. The brooch on her chest was made from a special stone that had runes engraved on it, which made her costume all that much more genuine. She wasn't carrying a broom, opting instead for a small wand she had apparently bought at an amusement park.

"He he he he! What do you think of this, hm?" She flashed me an arrogant grin as she showed off her appearance.

"I think it looks great on you. If I didn't know any better, I'd think I had run into an actual witch."

Since she clearly wanted my impression, I didn't bother hiding how I truly felt. I can tell she's looking forward to partying some more after this.

"Though I bet you would have preferred to see Saki-chan cosplaying, right?"

I won't deny that, but I know she'd never do it.

"I won't," said Ayase-san bluntly as she stood next to me.

See, told ya.

"It'll feel pretty good once you get used to it, you know?"

"No thank you."

"Just a bit. C'mon. It isn't anything major." She looked through her bag which apparently had her costume in it. "Cat ears, appear!" She spoke with the tone of a certain blue robot. "Try 'em on."

"Again, I'd rather not."

"So dry! Boring! I know you'll look cute! And Junior-kun will be happy! Right?"

"Don't drag me into this."

She may look different now, but on the inside, it's the same old Yomiuri-senpai. She's like a middle-aged man. Go any

further and Ayase-san will sue you for workplace harassment.

“I think it’s for the best if we just head home.”

“Huuuuuh? ...Well, fine. I’ll have plenty more chances, after all.”

You will?

“You won’t.”

“But you’d love to dress up to look cute, right?”

Ayase-san hesitated for a second.

“Anyway, that’s enough for today.” She looked away.

“Awww. Okay, Junior-kun. It’s pretty late, so I’m counting on you to be her escort.”

“Yes, yes, leave it to me.”

The witch of the forest waved at us and slung the sports bag over her shoulder. What a surreal sight. She’s probably going to put that in a public locker so that she won’t have to carry it around all night. Will she even be able to find any open this late? Or maybe she already has another place secured. Knowing how resourceful she is, I wouldn’t be surprised if she has everything prepared to the last detail.

“Catch you later~”

“Ah, Senpai.” I stopped her right as she was about to leave the office.

“Hmmm? Wassup, wassup?”

“Here you go.” I placed a small object wrapped in plastic on her palm.

“What’s this?”

“Candy. Throat candy, to be exact. You said you’d be heading off to some karaoke later, right?”

“Oh, I didn’t expect you to remember. Good boy!”

“I’d rather not have you play tricks on me.”

“Hehe, much appreciated.” She pressed the candy against her cheek and grinned. “As thanks, I shall grant you with my magic that will make you happy! Huah!” She waved her wand. “Happy Halloween! Catch you around!” She said and left the office.

“Bye~”

“Be careful.” Ayase-san waved as Yomiuri-senpai left.

“I guess it’s time for us to head out as well,” I said. Ayase-san nodded and grabbed her bag.

I took a step toward her and offered her something from my own bag. Ayase-san’s eyes opened wide.

“What’s this?”

“For you.”

It was another small wrapper.

“Candy?”

“No...this one’s chocolate.”

“But I didn’t get you anything.”

“There’s no need to worry about it. It’s just a small piece of kindness. Happy Halloween.”

“Happy Halloween, and thanks.”

Before we left the store, Ayase-san asked me to wait a moment and ran back inside. I wonder what that was about? Maybe she forgot something? I moved a bit away from the entrance so that I wouldn’t block the front door, waiting for Ayase-san. After a few minutes, she jogged back toward me, but I didn’t see her holding anything in particular.

“Sorry for making you wait.”

“Forget something?”

“Something like that,” she said and started walking next to me.

“All right... then let’s head home.”

“Yep.”

When we stepped out onto the street, both Ayase-san and I were bewildered. Everywhere we looked, we saw people wearing costumes. There was practically no room to walk. I knew it’d end up this way. Thankfully, my decision to not take my bike was the right one.

“I didn’t think it’d be *this* bad...”

“This is quite a crowd.”

“Yeah. At least we won’t have to worry about anybody from school seeing us.”

It's practically impossible to recognize anybody in this sea of endless costumes. I feel like it'll take us quite a while to make our way through this dense crowd of foreigners and university party-goers. We're not that far from the train station, and yet this feels like Meiji Shrine... That might be a bit much of a comparison, but that's just how messy this is.

"Eeek!"

Ayase-san let out a shriek, presumably after bumping into someone. I immediately went to support her. This is pretty bad.

"The sidewalk along the roadway should be less crowded. Let's walk there."

"O-Okay."

I thought we had chosen a corner of the street with fewer people, and yet the wave was so dangerous that it seemed we might get separated at any second. Since we're heading in the same direction, there's no danger of either of us getting lost, especially since we're old enough, but...

"Here, Ayase-san." I offered her my hand, and she took it immediately.

The warmth being conveyed on my palm made my heart race faster. Her hand was quite a bit smaller than mine, making me fear that I might hurt her if I gripped it too strongly. But even so, letting go and losing her terrified me even more, so I held onto it tightly.

"Be careful where you step."

"I'm fine." She said and moved closer toward me so that the crowd wouldn't carry her away.

It feels like it's been ages since we confirmed each other's warmth like this. When I looked up ahead, I saw what felt like an iron wall of flesh that not even an ant could fit through, all walking up the Dogenzaka. Beyond that, I could see a cluster of buildings shining brightly against the dark sky. It felt like the dark of night had covered Shibuya like a velvet curtain. And there were the two of us, trying to weave our way through the sea of costumes.



We made it through the twilight, which was already well past nightfall. The night had progressed quite a bit, and all of the young children were most likely asleep by now. The

ones dancing through the night were the clowns with their excessive makeup, the witches holding brooms in their hands, and the vampires with their extended canines. Along with them was the sound of pop music.

It was like a group of monsters. Even if a real creature hid in this crowd, nobody would know. Each time a street light switched from red to green, the mass of monsters moved in one direction, like wild beasts that were cursed to move following someone else's will. A red balloon floated through the air, disappearing up into the sky. Car horns blared in one corner, a boy and a girl wrapped up in bandages laughing like idiots in another. The bright red lights of cars passed us. The welcome tone played each time the door to a convenience store opened. All of this filled my ears.

It felt like I was walking on top of the clouds. Amidst this supernatural scenery, I was holding hands with a single girl, my little sister—or step-sister. And we had both confirmed that we held a certain level of affection for each other. This felt more distanced from reality than anything. Is this actually happening? All I knew for sure was the warmth coming from her palm. We passed by a man wearing a wolf mask, and it felt like he was smiling at us from beneath it. Maybe he was one of our classmates and had just seen Ayase-san and I holding hands, shoulder to shoulder. The possibility was astronomically slim, but that didn't mean it was zero.

We made our way away from the train station, and the closer we got to our flat, the fewer people we encountered. The number of street lights we passed by grew fewer in number, as well. By the time we saw the building in the distance, it was just Ayase-san and I. After we made it through a nearby park, walking along the wide road, we both let go of each other's hands. One of us sighed.

“If...”

“Huh?”

“If we both had been wearing costumes, we could have gone home without having to worry about the eyes of the people around us.”

“I guess you’re right.”

At first, we didn’t plan on holding hands all the way home like that. However, now that we had tasted the warmth of that sensation, we both couldn’t let go until we reached our home. We both craved each other’s presence. If we had joined everyone around us and dressed up in some way, we surely would’ve been able to hold hands the entire time without a worry in the world. However, to her, costumes and makeup are two different things, and I doubt we would’ve been able to actually go through with that sort of plan.

“Someday,” I said.

Will we be able to stop thinking about every small little detail and simply hold hands because we want to? Like lovers would? But it isn’t just us two. For the sake of other people precious to us, we couldn’t afford to destroy our relationship as siblings.

“Someday what?”

“No... it’s nothing.”

Where we stood beneath a streetlight, our silhouettes were still holding hands. I want to keep having more fun like this. To chase after her shadow like a small child would. However, the lights in the apartment buildings were still on, each of them belonging to a family. And I’m sure some of them must

be new families, too. We just stayed silent and walked back home, neither of us able to ask to hold hands once more.

I opened the front door and turned on the lights.

“We’re back~”

We both called out at the same time, but no response came. Weird. I knew that Akiko-san would be at work, but my old man should be home at least. Ayase-san stepped inside the living room ahead of me, raising a surprised voice.

“Oh?”

“What’s wrong?”

“This.” She held up a small written note.

It was a note from my old man. *‘I’m heading over to visit Akiko-san.’*

I took out my phone and checked my messages. I hadn’t even realized that I’d gotten a LINE message from him. When I checked it, I saw that he mentioned that since tomorrow is Sunday, they’d be eating dinner at a fancy restaurant tonight. He probably left this note since I didn’t respond or read the message.

“It seems like the two of them are going to come home together.”

“Apparently so.”

Ayase-san checked Akiko-san’s LINE message while responding. It’s funny how neither of us had checked our messages up to this point. But that means both of them will be getting home late at night. I expected him to be here and

hungry, which was why we had hurried home. But it looks like it'll be a few more hours until they get back.

"Well, he's been incredibly busy until a while ago..."

Despite being newlyweds, their differences in working hours meant that they didn't get much time to spend together, and I totally understood their desire to have a few hours to themselves. However, that would mean...

"So it's just us until they get home?"

"Seems like it."

"I see. What should we do about dinner? I wanted to make hot pot since I thought it'd be the four of us... but if it's just us two, I ought to make it something a bit more simple and light. Any requests?"

I started thinking. That question came out of nowhere. However, saying 'Anything is fine' would not be appropriate here, that much I knew.

"Well..."

Hmm, what should I ask for?

"Sorry, I guess that was too abrupt of a question," Ayase-san commented after seeing me think for a moment.

It showed that she herself wasn't too sure what to eat, either. After all, she wouldn't have had any need to ask me if she did. She would have decided to make something she herself wanted to eat.

"I just wouldn't want to waste too much money on something like this. I'm sorry that I couldn't be of much

help.”

However, it’s true that I don’t think about menus and dishes enough to come up with anything right away. That’s why I came up with another idea.

“There’s a trick you can use for situations like these.”

“What kind of trick?”

“When humans are put in situations where they can choose from anything they can think of, they usually struggle to come up with something.”

It’s similar to the problem with streaming services and the huge libraries they have which leave people unsure of what to watch. The same goes for menus in restaurants. Giving the customer the ability to choose too freely is limiting, as ironic as that may sound. You might be hungry and want to eat something, but you can’t think of exactly what you want to eat. It’s a normal reaction.

“We should do it with a process of elimination. Since it’s food, we should decide what we *don’t* want to eat right now.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“It’s simple. That makes it easier to choose. Or at least that’s how I usually do it. Eating the same thing over and over again will make you tired of it pretty quickly, right? That’s why I usually think about what I’ve recently eaten.”

“We had a classic Japanese breakfast, and at lunchtime I made instant ramen to save myself some work.”

“Then those two are out of the picture. Now we can say that you’ve already had Japanese style so you’d rather not have it again. If you had ramen, too, then that’s out, as well. Easy as that.”

“What about western food, then?”

“Now our choice has become a lot easier to make, right?”

“Now that you mention it...”

“Also, your ability to make it or not is also important. There’s no reason to consider dishes or meals you can’t even make with the ingredients you have available. So you can think about the ingredients you *do* have.”

“Eggs, I guess?”

“Then a western meal that’s made from eggs. Omurice, rolled omelet... Well, I can only think of the stuff we regularly eat.”

“How about French toast, then?”

“That sounds great. I’m all for it.”

Ayase-san had made it before, which allowed me to enjoy a dish I’d usually only read about in novels.

“It’s easy to make and light on the stomach, too.”

“It’s like cake, right? Feels like a good match for today.”

Once you’ve decided on the general menu, the rest is extremely easy. Since it’s western food, we’ll have actual soup instead of miso soup. Thankfully, we still have some leftover soup broth. And since we have a lot of vegetables available, we can even make a salad. The two of us split up

to prepare everything, and once the food was ready, we lined it up on the dining table and sat down ourselves. It had barely taken thirty minutes to prepare, and now the two of us could eat our French toast with a side salad and corn soup.

“When it comes to cooking, it can take thirty minutes to an hour to prepare something, but the time you take to eat the food is much smaller in comparison, huh?” I said.

“That is a good point. But that’s how it is with about everything, right? Whatever we use in our daily lives, we only get to use it for a moment despite the excessive amount of time it took to make it.”

She’s not wrong. I like books, and I can read a paperback in an hour or a two, but I wonder how many days it actually takes to write the whole thing. Or how many months. Maybe not that long. But when I think about it that way, I feel like I should never forget my gratitude for the people who create something for the sake of others.

“Ayase-san, thank you for always cooking such delicious food.” I bowed slightly and Ayase-san averted her eyes.

She’s flustered. I can tell.

“You’re exaggerating. I’m just doing what I can, nothing more.”

That excuse of hers hasn’t changed since we first met, huh?

“That doesn’t matter. I’m still grateful.”

“You’ve been picking up a few dishes here and there as of late, right?”

“It’ll still take me time to catch up with you. Even this French toast was amazing.”

“...You’re welcome.” She averted her gaze even further.

“Would you like some coffee?” I asked her.

“Coffee will just keep me up all night, so I’d rather not...”

Oh yeah, it’d be bad if she lost sleep despite there being no exams.

“That reminds me...” I stood up and checked the box on top of the cupboard.

Inside was coffee without caffeine, which my old man had gotten from one of his coworkers. It’s the type that comes in packs that you put on top of the cup while pouring steaming water through it.

“How about this, then? It’s caffeine-free.”

Since Ayase-san nodded and gave me her approval, I turned on the electric kettle and prepared two cups for both of us. In the meantime, Ayase-san washed the dishes. A few minutes later, the water was boiling, so I prepared two cups of coffee. I felt the intense heat wafting upwards, and a distinct scent drifted up to my nose. I was just about to take a sip from it when Ayase-san suddenly spoke up.

“Ah! Wait a second, Asamura-kun.”

“Hm?”

Ayase-san opened her bag which she had placed on the chair next to her, taking out some kind of wrapped object.

“Huh? Isn’t that from our place?”

The plastic wrapping was the same we used at our bookstore.

“Yep, they were selling this today,” she said while removing the wrapping, revealing a small square box.

Inside was an object that was shaped like a pumpkin.

“...Is this a light?”

“Yep.” She placed it on the table.

The box read ‘LED candlelight’, so guessing what it was wasn’t hard. The pumpkin had its contents removed and was now equipped with an LED light in the shape of a candle. If you connected it to an outlet and turned on the switch, it immediately created a pleasant source of light.

“I’ll turn off the lights.”

Once the ceiling lights were turned off, only the faint light from the pumpkin lantern shining on top of the table illuminated the room. When I looked inside, I could see the candle burning brightly despite the fact that it wasn’t an actual candle.

“What a weird time this is. Normally you’d have to use genuine fire to get such a shaking and flickering flame, and yet we can even artificially recreate that nowadays.” Ayase-san commented as she sat back down.

That’s thanks to the artificial illumination of the LED. Just as she said, it really does look like a flickering flame. With the room completely dark except for the pumpkin light, Ayase-san and I looked at each other.

“A long time ago...”

“Hm?”

“Well, it was similar to this. This is the same kind of pumpkin lantern I got from Mom years and years ago. But back then there was an actual candle inside of it.”

“Maybe it’s from the same manufacturer?”

“Might be. On Halloween nights, I was always alone because Mom had to work at the bar. There was a time in grade school when I lit the candle and fell asleep... Mom scolded me so much after that.”

If I had to guess, Ayase-san herself must have known how dangerous that was. But even so, light is the symbol of life. Proof that someone exists here and now. It’s the same experience you get when coming home to the lights already turned on in your home.

“When I saw that light, it made me feel like I had come home.”

“I totally get you.”

“We rarely got to see each other because of her job. I think I was really lonely when I was a child,” Ayase-san said and continued. “But... I’m happy I can spend Halloween with you this year, Asamura-kun.”

With the faint light coming from the lantern, only our faces stood out from the darkness surrounding us. When I looked at her radiating eyes, reflecting the light of the candle, I found my heart shaking, like it was urging me forward.

“Hey.”

“Hm?”

“Um...”

I gently moved my body towards hers, and she responded in the same way. Just like the LED light’s artificial flame, her eyes swayed left and right with uncertainty. Without intending to do so, I found myself reaching for her cheek with my right hand. I gently caressed the hair strands that ran along her face.

“Your hair’s gotten longer.”

“It’s still way shorter than it used to be.”

“I think you look great with it like that.”

“...Thanks.”

Let’s stay as siblings that simply get along really well. We both swore this a month ago. But right now, I’m trying to break that promise out of my own desire. But do I have the determination to stand strong against everything that I’ll have to face as a result? I asked myself and my heart, but...

‘So, since you folks are too clever for your own good, I shall put a curse on you that’ll turn you into monkeys.’

The devil’s whispers reached my ears. Since we’re not just any normal boy and girl, this is a line that we really shouldn’t cross without being prepared for whatever awaits us. However, if you asked me... asked me if I wanted to spend more time with her, and share my happiness with her... then my answer was already written in stone. I want to touch her, I want her to accept me. It was nothing but selfishness, and just as that devil said, an idiotic emotion.

When our small silhouettes held hands beneath that street light, it reflected my own feelings and desires. After Ayase-

san and I had gazed into each other's eyes for a few moments, I could see that she had relaxed her eyes—**closing them**. I had no idea she had such long eyelashes... That pointless observation popped up in my mind, but the very next moment, I also closed my eyes.

I felt a soft sensation pressed on my lips. **I kissed her**. Not as my little sister, but as the girl Ayase Saki.

Nobody saw us right then, except whoever might have been watching us from the heavens above. Or maybe even God had his view stolen from the parade of demons on this Halloween night. That faint glimmer of hope filled my chest. This was our single moment where no blame would befall us.

“This truly feels like the witching hour. The Halloween light must have some sort of power.”

We moved away from each other as Ayase-san uttered these words under her breath.



Chapter 12

31st of October (Saturday) - Ayase Saki

I snuggled into my bed, pulled the blanket over my head, and pressed my cold hands against my burning hot cheeks. I ran my fingers over my lips. **We... kissed.**

During my shift at the bookstore, I happened to coincidentally spot the pumpkin candlelight made out of plastic. It looked exactly the same as the candle Mom had bought when I was in grade school. Its size, the color of the pumpkin, and even the expression it had. The only difference was that the one back then had been a genuine candle, and now it was lit by a newer LED. I hesitated at first, but I still decided to buy it before heading home.

After our shifts ended, Asamura-kun and I headed home. The moment we stepped outside, I was baffled. The streets were packed with people wearing costumes, the crowd so large that you'd keep bumping into people if you just walked normally. And I actually did. If Asamura-kun hadn't supported me then, I probably would have ended up on the ground. I gratefully accepted the hand he offered me, and we held hands the entire way back. That alone made my heart race uncontrollably. When I saw the distant lights of

our flat, I felt relieved, but also dejected that we'd have to stop holding hands.

Since today was Halloween, Mom naturally had to work a full shift during the bar's busiest times. So she would be back late at night. That being said, Step-dad should be home. He didn't have any work today, and he wouldn't eat dinner before we got home. That's why we went back without taking any detours. However, while we were fighting our way through the crowd of people in Shibuya while holding hands, he had gone off to meet Akiko-san. This meant that it was just Asamura-kun and I at home. We made dinner together, ate it together, and he even brewed me some coffee. I was reminded of the candle I had bought at work. It made me think about when I was a young child. The faint light of the LED lamp flickered on and off, much like a real flame. While gazing at this phenomenon, I thought about the reason why I had bought that lamp in the first place.

When I was growing up, a pumpkin candle was always a symbol of solitude and isolation for me, the token of what it meant to be alone, and I probably wanted to overwrite those painful memories. This would be my first Halloween night spent with my new family, after all. I thought that if I turned on that lantern and fell asleep to it, I might just be freed from the sad memories I'd been plagued with since I was a child.

While Asamura-kun and I sat around the table with the pumpkin lantern on it, he suddenly leaned forward. I was completely baffled. After that, everything felt hazy. I didn't even understand what was happening. He suddenly stretched out his arm, reaching for my cheek. His fingertips gently caressed my hair. My cheek immediately burned up, all the blood inside of me beginning to boil, and I suddenly

became worried that he might notice my heart racing just because of that. His face slowly but steadily grew closer, making me realize that I wasn't imagining things.

Eventually, I could see myself in his eyes. I had a shocked expression on my face, obvious enough for myself to see. It was like anticipation and anxiety kept jumping between each other like the flickering of the light. But in the end, I had known that something like this might happen—so I closed my eyes.

Happiness, bashfulness, hope, uncertainty about the future. Many many feelings exploded at the same time. I myself wasn't sure what I was feeling anymore. I had feared that our relationship would forever be at a standstill. But even so, I chose to close my eyes. Our lips only touched for an instant, and yet it felt like the crying child inside of me had finally stopped. Even though the warm and passionate hug from my mom all those years ago couldn't dispel my sadness, he had done it with just this. It must be the magic of Halloween and its light.

Maybe the devil was weaving all of this magic. I was the one who had said we should stay brother and sister, and yet it suddenly felt like I had broken this promise myself. But if I had looked away at that moment, I'm sure Asamura-kun would have stopped me. By looking at his eyes until the very end, I accepted him. Once we had reached the point of no return, I simply closed my eyes and waited. As expected, he pressed his lips onto mine. Compared to when we held hands, I could feel his presence tenfold. And despite the fact that my eyelids were closed, it felt like I could sense the orange light of the pumpkin.

Will-o'-the-wisps. Sometimes they deceive travelers, other times they provide guiding light. They are souls bound to wander through the world, unable to go to either heaven or

hell. I just hope they provide light for the path of the step-sister who fell in love with her brother.

A fresh thought came to mind. We talked about volunteer work at school, namely cleaning up the trash after Halloween. “Why would I have to clean up after the people who caused the mess in the first place?” I had thought and completely forgotten about it, but...

“I could get up early and help out...”

I don’t know if God and everybody else watching in the heavens above would be willing to forgive me if I did that, I just had this urge to do anything that would make me look like a good girl. Maybe I should invite Asamura-kun. Just giving in to the devil’s sweet whispers was fine and all, but if I managed to build up more time and improve our relationship with my own strength, I feel like I’d be able to accept it more easily.

I indulged in these thoughts while snuggling up under my blanket and finally drifted into a pleasant slumber.

Afterword

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Thank you very much for your purchase of “Gimai Seikatsu” volume 5, the novelized version of the YouTube visual novel. I am the original creator of the YouTube version, as well as the author of the novel: Mikawa Ghost. A boy and a girl of similar background start to learn more about each other on a daily basis, achieving a connection deeper than the superficial level—that is the “Gimai Seikatsu” series.

The people who have read and finished this 5th volume might think that we’re nearing the end, but rest assured. I have many more stories to tell, and I am very certain that, for both the fans of the YouTube version and the novel version, you will not be disappointed. “Gimai Seikatsu” depicts the story of Asamura-kun and Ayase-san as they experience their own ups and downs in life. Just as we go through school, university, employment, marriage, and all other steps in life, I will stay true to the idea of depicting their events in life, as well as their mutual contact, so I hope you look forward to it.

Finally, it is time for me to give my thanks. To my illustrator Hiten-san, Nakashima Yuki-san, Amasaki Kouhei-san, Suzuki Ayu-san, Hamano Daiki-san, Suzuki Minori-san, our video director Ochiai Yuusuke and everybody else involved with the YouTube channel, my editor O-san, the mangaka of the

comicalization Kanade Yumi-san, all personnel involved with the release of this series, and of course to all my readers—
Thank you very much.

This has been Mikawa Ghost.