

3

義妹生活

三河ごーすと

illust Hiten



Days with my Step Sister

presented by
ghost mikawa

義妹生活

3

三河ごーすと

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義妹との登校





プールの義妹


「そういえば先輩はこの夏、
どこか遊びに行ったりしてますか？」

「んん？ わたし？
そりやもつ、」

エッグい水着を着て
海に繰り出してナンパされる
女子大生ムーブだよ」



diary

Recently, I've been scared of writing diary entries like this. Every time I organize the events of the day, Asamura-kun keeps filling my head more and more. It's like my attempts at getting along with the first man I've lived together with, and my efforts of understanding who he truly is, are now coming back to bite me. I figured that our tastes in cooking would be completely different, and considering that our lifestyles and values are probably also entirely different, I had no way of knowing when I would step on a landmine with him. I started to put a lot of work into trying to understand this new family of mine so that I wouldn't be rude to him, and to ensure that I wouldn't ruin this happiness Mom had finally managed to attain... and that was how it all began. Before I realized it, I was always thinking about him, seeing his kindness each and every day anew. I found myself excited to figure out each new side to him. ...Even though we promised to refrain from doing so when we first met. Even now, it's still not too late. I'm good at hiding my feelings. When I started attending middle school, no matter how much pain I felt, I would never cry and cling to Mom. I'd never ask her things like 'Don't leave me'. If this were just a problem with my own feelings, I should have been able to hide it just fine and keep living my life. However, in the random offchance that Asamura-kun has similar ~~romantic~~ feelings for me, will I be able to hide my own feelings for ~~him~~... That might be impossible. I'm not confident enough that my heart will be able to withstand that outcome. I need to draw a line, and quickly. After all, throughout my entire life so far, Asamura-kun is my very first 

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Prologue

Around a month has passed since we entered our summer break. In other words, this was the first long break time that I, Asamura Yuuta, would be spending with my younger step-sister Ayase Saki. Ayase-san is a fellow second-year student at Suisei High; she's currently 17 years old. She's beautiful to the point of being known by almost every student at the school, and even though I call her my younger sister, our birthdays are barely one week apart.

You would surely expect certain things to happen in a situation like this, as would anyone with common sense. Our parents decided to get remarried, making Ayase-san and I step-siblings, but we are still in the middle of our adolescence, running into each other on a daily basis as we live under the same roof.

And now our first summer break has begun. If we were step-siblings like the ones you often see in fiction and stories, we would already be having all sorts of template events in the near future. To name a few: A pool visit, a trip to the sea, and a summer festival. In general, we'd head out together a lot, deepening our bonds, and there would be incidents that would make your heart rate race above normal levels. It's a natural course of events. It has to happen, as this is what the readers anticipate.

However, reality couldn't be further from fiction. It's always as realistic and uninteresting as you can imagine. No such events happened between Ayase-san and I, no matter how many days passed. At the very least, not up to the current time, which is close to the end of August. No notable progress has occurred in our relationship, and we just spend our days plainly and simply like we always have. The only thing different from before is the amount of time we spend together. After all...

“Good work today, Asamura-san.”

“Likewise, Ayase-san.”

...We spoke to each other like we were strangers who had just met. For this entire month, both her and I were working at the same part-time job during the same shifts.

Chapter 1: 22nd of August (Saturday)

It was another Saturday morning, towards the latter half of summer break. Outside the window, I could hear cicadas holding a live concert. I pondered life while eating some rolled omelette with my chopsticks. Generally, during summer break, a weekend basically puts a school-free day on top of your already school-free day, which then creates this feeling like you're missing out on something. Can't we just take all of the Saturdays in this 40-day summer break interval as extra holidays after the end of this vacation?

I don't think it's that big of a request to make. If a public or national holiday falls on a Sunday, we generally get Monday off, so we technically should get all the Saturdays that happen during summer break—or if that's too much to ask, at least the Sundays—converted into vacation once summer break ends. Don't you agree? I considered this idea so much that I brought it up during breakfast.

“You already have an entire month of summer break, and yet you want even more? Is there anything you want to do or something?” My old man seemed astonished in reaction, so I stopped eating and started thinking.

“—No, not really.”

“So why?”

“I just felt like I'm wasting time.”

“That's youth for you.”

“I don't think age has anything to do with this.”

“Once you reach my age, you'll be unable to think of anything to do even if you suddenly get a day off.”

“Woah, you're saying that in front of Akiko-san? At least make it sound like you're happy to spend time with her...”

“Fufu, you really are considerate, Yuuta-kun. Unlike a certain Taichi-san.” Akiko-san commented from her seat across from my old man at the table as she picked up a piece of rolled omelette.

Since my old man and her remarried two months ago, she's now basically my step-mother. She works as a bartender at a bar, so she mostly works at night and comes home late. My old man for his part is your typical salaryman, so he leaves early but doesn't come home that late at least. Despite being newlyweds, their day/night cycles were opposite from each other except for weekends and holidays. That's why I am yet again reminded that today is a weekend when I see my old man and Akiko-san talking together in the morning like this.

“But you need to think about these sorts of things, Yuuta-kun.”

“I do?”

“For example, today might be a Saturday and a school-free day, but it’s not all that different from the other days you’ve spent this summer break, right?”

I found myself nodding along to Akiko-san’s argument. Just as she said, such a long period of holidays and no school causes you to lose grasp on the concept of days, and they all sort of blur together. Even more so since I’ve been living this kind of lifestyle for an entire month since summer break started in July.

“But today is a Saturday instead of a normal weekday, right? Meaning you’ll be working part-time later, Yuuta-kun.”

“Yes, I have a full shift again today, so I’ll have to head out at noon.”

“Very admirable. So you’ll be working the same schedule as you did yesterday, right?”

“Yes.”

“Since today is actually Saturday, you’ll be getting a holiday bonus, which results in higher pay! That’s amazing!”

“Eh... Eh?”

“It might feel like any normal day, but you actually get paid much more. That’s a great thing. Don’t you agree?”

“I... guess?”

“If today wasn’t Saturday, you wouldn’t get this bonus. When you think about it that way, isn’t the way you’re currently spending summer break the best?”

After hearing her out, I couldn’t help but at least partially agree. Even though the logic sounded oddly contradictory, it was far easier to believe when you combined it with Akiko-san’s naturally slightly air-headed voice.

“Jeez. Asamura-kun, you’re being deceived.” Ayase-san cut in, seeming unable to bear with it any longer after having only listened in silence up until now.

“Really?”

“Yup. If you go with that logic, then you could also say that you’ve been working full-time with only a weekday salary up until yesterday.”

“Ahh... I see.”

Basically, Ayase-san is saying that the weekdays during summer break aren’t ‘normal days’, but rather all ‘holidays’. That would mean that I’m not gaining anything by working today; instead I’m losing out on potential income. The reason I found myself easily agreeing with Akiko-san’s logic was because she had blinded me with the logic that a Saturday during summer break is like any ‘normal’ day,

which she brought up first thing in the conversation, thus creating the concept that today is ‘normal’ in my mind. Guided thinking is a terrifying thing.

“Be careful. Mom has the talent to become a used car salesman.”

“How cruel, Saki. Is that something you should say to your own mother?”

“I know how you really tick *because* I’m your daughter. Befuddling people is something like eating breakfast for you, right?”

“Ahh, that takes me back. No matter how sad or depressed I ever got, Akiko-san always knew how to cheer me up.” My old man added his own comment like he seemed to remember something thanks to what Ayase-san said, but didn’t you basically admit to being deceived there?

Is that something you should be saying with such a happy and delighted tone of voice? Then again, the woman in front of me here is known as the bartender with the most experience out of Shibuya’s entire business district, so she’s a pro at dealing with customers. She could probably make my old man and I dance in the palm of her hand. But that’s neither here nor there.

“Being forced to work on a holiday is a bit of a depressing way of thinking about it, but as long as I keep in mind that I get paid more today, it’ll probably have a better impact on my mental state, so I’ll go with that.” I said. Akiko-san gently smiled and offered me her slender hand.

“Yuuta-kun, would you like another serving of miso soup?”

“Yes, please.”

“Ah, I’ll get it. I wanted some more myself, anyway.” Ayase-san stood up before Akiko-san and snatched my bowl.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Saki-chan, could you get me another serving as well while you’re at it?”

“Ah, yes.” Ayase-san accepted my old man’s bowl with her hand that wasn’t holding a ladle.

After that, she smoothly carried the bowl over to the pot, turned up the heat on the stove, and stirred the miso soup. Before it started boiling, she turned off the heat again and carefully poured some soup into the bowl.

“Thanks, Saki-chan.”

“This isn’t anything special, so don’t worry about it. Here, Asamura-kun.”

“Thanks.”

Ayase-san put my bowl down in front of me and sat down in her own seat to restart her breakfast.

“Saki-chan’s miso soup is as delicious as always.” My old man said, smiling in joy wide enough for his eyes to look half-closed.

On weekends, Akiko-san and Ayase-san were both responsible for breakfast, but miso soup is Ayase-san’s fort . Today, it was standard miso soup with scallions and deep-fried slices of tofu. The tofu rehydrated in the soup perfectly, making it soft and perfectly chewy, and the scallions’ texture made it enjoyable to eat.

“Yup, you’re right. Ayase-san’s miso soup is really fantastic.”

“...Thanks, Asamura-kun.” Ayase-san sounded like she hesitated for a moment before giving a response.

Upon seeing this, Akiko-san gave a blooming smile. “Fufu, you two have gotten pretty close.”

“Yup, they sure did.”

My old man and Akiko-san looked at each other, smiling in contentment. I felt relieved to see them like that. Thinking back to when I was much younger, eating breakfast like this was either supplemented with rage and voices raised in anger, or awkward conversations, making the food lose all taste and warmth. Compared to that, now I was being practically forced to watch a lovey-dovey married couple exchange words of affections to no end.

Of course, being teased and feeling slightly uncomfortable about it all was par for the course, but it’s better than them holding back. Ayase-san seems bothered by it a lot of the time, but the fact that she doesn’t leave shows that she shares similar sentiments to mine.

“But you two still call each other by your family name, huh?” My old man commented.

Akiko-san also glanced over at Ayase-san.

“Are you still too embarrassed to call each other by your given names? You can go with ‘Yuuta-niisan’, you know.”

I found myself agreeing with Akiko-san’s proposition. I guess this is what you call difference in experience. I can’t imagine Ayase-san calling me ‘Onii-chaaan~’ with a sweet voice, but ‘Yuuta-niisan’ sounds plausible. It’s not too different from ‘Yuuta-san’, and it would make us feel more like siblings... I guess. Though it’s not like I would really know since I don’t have and never have had an actual little sister. I think this is pretty reasonable at least. However, Ayase-san calmly shook her head in response.

“It’s not that I’m embarrassed, but it doesn’t feel right.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Well, you’re right. ‘Asamura-kun’ makes it a bit less complicated.”

“Complicated?” I was confused by my old man’s choice of words, so he elaborated.

“Before we started dating, Akiko-san called me ‘Asamura-san’. At home, that is. So to Saki-chan, ‘Asamura-san’ refers to me, and ‘Asamura-kun’ refers to you, Yuuta. That makes it easier to follow, I guess.”

I didn’t even hear the second half of what he said. I just froze up, with my mouth open in shock. I had never even thought about that, but it’s true. Obvious, even. Even as close as they are, they still have a certain level of politeness towards each other. Even more so since he was still a customer back then, and a veteran at customer service couldn’t suddenly close the distance between them by calling my old man ‘Taichi-san’.

In public spaces, Modern Japan sees the addition of ‘san’ after a name as fairly formal, but sometimes it becomes inevitable to even add a person’s family name... Wait, hold on.

“Wait, so back then you called Akiko-san...”

“Yup, I called her ‘Ayase-san.’ Makes sense, right?”

“It took quite some time for him to start using my given name though, my goodness.”

“Hahaha, you’re making me blush.” My old man scratched his red cheek.

This gesture you could only describe as an example of belated adolescence caused even me to feel embarrassed. Ah, good, I’m being forced to watch a newlywed couple flirting first thing in the morning. But I guess this just goes to show how happy they are. When I raised my head and glanced over at Ayase-san, she made a bit of a troubled expression, but immediately went back to eating her breakfast.

Thanks to that, I managed to regain my calm as well. Thanks, Ayase-san.

After we finished eating breakfast, I brewed some coffee and set the cups out in front of everyone. Since breakfast was done and I hadn’t helped, I figured I could at least do this much. My old man and Ayase-san prefer it black, but Akiko-san likes it with a bit of milk, so I poured a small amount into a small creamer pitcher and offered it to her.

“Thanks, Yuuta-kun.”

“You’re welcome.”

As for me, I go with wherever my mood takes me, so I’m pretty random when it comes to my preferences. As for coffee, I usually alternate between Brazil Santos and Blue Mountain. My old man heard somewhere that the smell helps you focus,

so he bought heaps of it. I think it was right before Ayase-san's supplementary exam. Since we still had a ton left over, I was slowly chipping away at it. As for how I finished my summer homework so fast, it was either because of the time I had at my part-time job or because of the coffee.

"Still, I never thought you'd start working at Yuuta-kun's part-time job, Saki."

"How many times do we have to go over that, Mom?"

"I mean, I just never imagined something like that."

"It's my first time working part-time, so I figured that it'd be easier to get into it if someone close to me had experience. I've always loved books, and I wanted to help my modern literature scores too, so this was just perfect, to be honest."

This exact exchange has probably happened at least three or four times since the beginning of summer break. Akiko-san was still a bit confused by it, but for Ayase-san, it was probably much easier to answer than the questions on her supplementary exam she had before break.

Of course, it was a surprise to me to see Ayase-san want to work part-time at a bookstore, which combines physical labor with not-the-best pay, considering how adamant she was about finding a job that pays a lot with the least amount of effort and time invested. She also doesn't seem to be as much of a book lover as I am, though I'm not trying to gatekeep here or anything.

That's why I doubted my eyes at first when I saw Ayase-san at the bookstore on that day. Up until that point, she had never mentioned anything about her plans or that she already had a place in mind. I was curious enough to want to ask her about it right away, but I couldn't exactly just leave my work, so I had to suppress my curiosity until the end of my shift. Then again, that was just wasted energy on my part, because she told me right away after I got home. When I asked her why she hadn't told me beforehand, the answer was simple.

"It'd be embarrassing if they didn't accept me after I applied."

It wasn't exactly an exciting plot twist like would be in a drama. It is true that it's embarrassing to fail a job interview, so I understand where she's coming from. While sipping the coffee in front of me, I reminisced about the evening Ayase-san nonchalantly told me 'Starting tomorrow, we'll be coworkers, Asamura-kun'.

"Are the two of you sure you want to be working all summer break?"

"No worries. I'm still attending my summer classes. I can take proper care of myself, okay?"

Once you become a second-year in high school, you should immediately start focusing on your university entrance exams. Especially in our school, Suisei High. It's quite a highly-regarded uppity school, so most people—aside from my friend

Maru Tomokazu who spends his summer break with club activities—generally focus on mock exams or summer courses. As a side note, Ayase-san isn't attending said summer courses.

Since such courses are usually offered by a famous prep school, naturally one that charges money, she would have needed to ask her family for money in order to attend. My old man said that he wouldn't mind paying for them, but you know how stubborn Ayase-san can be. After all, she plans to get into a famous university all on her own, without accepting any sort of help from others, and I can't help but respect her for that.

"Summer courses? Ahh, I don't really care about that." My old man said, based on trust (or so I'd believe), and completely ignored my hard work.

Instead, he voiced an entirely different concern.

"I mean, you and Saki-chan aren't showing any signs of heading off anywhere for your summer break."

"That's what you meant?"

Both Ayase-san and I are busy pretty much all day every day, so being able to hang out as a family like this was a rare occurrence even during summer break. That being said, I didn't expect my old man to just completely ignore the topic of studies altogether and suddenly act all serious about something like that.

"It's very important. When you grow up to become an adult, you'll find it harder and harder to find time to really enjoy yourself. There's no time like the present for you two to spend some love-filled youthful time with friends."

"Mmhmm. So why do I feel like you've been having plenty of that despite your age?"

"In our case, it's love between adults. There's a difference."

Or so he said, but when I look at this couple, I wonder what exactly the difference is. But that would be too much of a philosophical question right now. Maybe everyone in the world just assumes that whoever says something first is right.

"As high school students, shouldn't you like, you know, go on trips, go to festivals, and create lots of memories?"

"As an adult, shouldn't you like, you know, warn me not to have too much fun? Also, I'm having plenty of fun doing my shifts at work, so it's not all work and tedium." I replied with an exhausted tone.

My old man shook his head in response. "Work is still work. You can't compare it to a trip or something like that, can you?"

"Well, you're not wrong..."

I mean, from an adult's perspective, working part-time somewhere is still pretty much like playing around, right? Adults love to talk about things with this kind of nuance, right? Apparently the same can't be said of my old man, though.

"Once you become third-years, you'll be busy with entrance exams, so having a bit of fun right now while you can shouldn't hurt, right?"

"Indeed. I'm worried that Saki is just watching her life pass her by."

Both my old man and Akiko-san started worrying about their children in a very different way than you would normally expect from a parent. Yet again I'm reminded that these two are actually pretty similar to each other.

"Also, your friends might be lonely if you don't give them some attention."

Friends, huh? When my old man said this, the first person who came to mind was a muscular guy with glasses.

"I don't have many friends to begin with, and the few ones I do have are devoting their lives to their club..." I internally gave a wry smile as I answered my old man.

My friend Maru Tomokazu is a second-year player like I am, and a regular attendee to the baseball club. Even during summer break, there's no day without practice. On the contrary, there's training camps, practice games in different prefectures, and that sort of thing. Even if I have time to hang out, he's way too busy.

"I'm glad for the long break! It allows me to practice more than during normal school days!" He told me with a grin, so that's probably how he became a regular. While thinking about what Maru said, I glanced over at Ayase-san.

"Myself aside, I feel like Ayase-san's friends probably invited her someplay."

"No plans." She bluntly denied any assumptions I might have had.

Ayase-san's only friend that I know of is Narasaka Maaya, but unlike Maru, I haven't heard anything about her being in a club. Not to mention that she generally cares a lot about other people, so I figured that, knowing how close she is to Ayase-san, she wouldn't let this summer break pass without inviting her somewhere. Since Ayase-san had denied anything of the sort, I was unable to ask for details and was forced to drop the subject.

Later, I was in my room preparing to head off to work when someone knocked on my door. When I opened it, Ayase-san was there.

"If you're wondering about Maaya, then don't worry about it. We don't have the kind of relationship where we would hang out during summer break. Just to let you know."

I was at a loss for words. She was so blunt about it that I wondered for a moment if I had spoiled her mood.

“Wait, Ayase-san.”

“...What?”

Ayase-san was about to head back to her own room, and I instinctively called out to her. But I didn’t even know what to say. I couldn’t properly put it into words, but I felt like something was off, and that her attitude just now felt dangerous. My intuition generally is pretty good, so leaving this subject untouched could come back and bite me in the long run. All misunderstandings should be resolved as quickly as possible.

After spending these past three months with Ayase-san, I now somewhat understand how she thinks and how she values her time, so I can see how she wouldn’t want to spend time with her friends outside school much, especially during holidays. That being said, she won’t even interact with any strangers—isn’t exactly correct, either. She brought Narasaka-san with her after school, and we played a game together, Narasaka-san taught her here, and she even helped with dinner. When you look at the distance these two are suddenly putting between themselves, it might seem like they suddenly got into a fight or something.

“Sorry.”

“Huh?” I quickly raised my head, my thoughts interrupted before I could come up with anything to say.

With a somewhat troubled expression, Ayase-san continued to speak.

“I’m not angry or in a bad mood, okay? I’m sorry if I made you worry. But Maaya and I really don’t hang out that often.”

“Didn’t she come over several times, though?”

“That’s because she was interested to find out what kind of person you are. The other time I invited her was because she’s good at looking after others, right?”

Oh yeah, Narasaka-san mentioned she had a lot of younger brothers. Unlike Ayase-san and I, both of whom are only children, she was taught from a young age how to be mindful of others and their troubles.

“Basically, without either of us inviting the other, generally nothing will happen.”

“Ahh, well. I understand. I’m not the type of person who really hangs out with other people myself.”

“Do you prefer staying alone?”

“More than going out, I guess.”

I'd say I'm pretty good at entertaining myself. I can spend time by myself for as long as I want, and I don't find it boring or a waste. If anything, spending time with others can be kind of exhausting for me. When I was younger, my mother was always in a bad mood, so I had to always be careful to not anger her unnecessarily when I was at home. It always made me feel tired and tense. To me, a home wasn't a place where I could feel comfortable. That was probably why I developed this reclusive bookworm type of personality. It's not that I'm fine on my own. It's more that being alone just makes things easier for me.

"So you're the same, then. I guess that means this topic is resolved?"

"Yep." I agreed.

"Alright, I have to prepare for work. Also, I'm going to take a detour on the way there, so I'll probably leave early."

"Got it." I nodded, but my sense of discomfort did not go away.

I didn't want to think that she was lying, but something about what Ayase-san said sounded off. After she left and went back to her own room, I kept pondering this odd feeling that was plaguing me, and I realized one thing. Why did Ayase-san go out of her way to come to my room and emphasize that she didn't have any plans to go out with Narasaka-san over summer break?

I stepped out of the house a bit before noon. My shift for the day would last from early afternoon all the way until night. After parking my bike in the corner of the parking lot, I checked the time. I realized that I still had about thirty minutes until my shift started.

"Then again, that's not much time to step outside again..."

I decided to spend a bit of time inside the store, so I entered through the normal customer entrance. Just inside, I saw new releases and popular books on the shelves and on the front display. It's probably the most eye-catching location of the entire bookstore, but because of that, it was always a bit of a battle to get anything there depending on the time of day. Right now, a salaryman I guessed was in his 40s gave the new stuff a glance before he walked towards the corner with the sports magazines.

Although I don't have much time, it's always worth checking out what's new. Since there's only one entrance to the store, the cash register was close by. It makes sense, of course. For the people who have finished their purchases, the most important thing is to immediately move to a different location, and walking around inside the store any more than necessary after their purchase would just be a bother to them.

If you walk past this corner with the new and popular stuff, past several bookshelves, you'll reach an area with books that aren't exactly current top sellers. Everyone knows you should put popular books in a place where a lot of eyes find them. In every bookstore, there's a certain system and arrangement to how you display books in the store. Although I was only taught about ours by a senior at work, it made a whole lot of sense to me. Oh yeah, this takes me back to when I first started working here.

"Yomiuri-senpai, don't bookstores change their displays a lot?"

Around once to twice a year, bookstores would change the location of this popular corner, which baffled me. Even bigger stores couldn't seem to leave it in the same place. I can't imagine a library doing that.

"It's a lot of trouble, isn't it? Not knowing where all the books are." I brought up something that every regular bookstore customer must feel at least once in their life.

"Yup, that's exactly why," was Yomiuri-senpai's puzzling reply.

"What?"

"We do this precisely because you remember where things are."

"What do you mean?"

"To be more technically correct, it's because you think you remember. Humans actually don't remember the tiny details despite remembering the bigger picture. Do you remember what book was right here before?" Senpai asked, tapping one corner of the bookshelf she was standing next to.

It seemed to have not been sold out for too long, but the space was empty. Since this was the light novel corner, I came here pretty often, yet I still couldn't remember exactly what book had been in this location just before.

"Here's your answer."

She showed me the cover of a book we had just received today. It's a pretty well-known book, and the novel is from an author who's known for their short stories. Of course, I had read some of their books before, and when I looked around the bookshelf, I should have realized that it was filled with books from the same author. Although it's not part of any longer series.

"Ah, it was that one?"

"But when you looked at the bookshelf, you didn't think that anything was different from usual, did you?"

"That... is true."

“Basically, you don’t remember what’s inside the shelves. However, your brain thinks that the shelves are the same as ever. Humans are still just animals, so if they don’t think something is off or different, their attentiveness drops.”

I couldn’t help but groan when Senpai said that. Despite her using me as an example, I could still tell that what she said made perfect sense. Of course, I didn’t miss her faint grin at the end. She might look like a beautiful Japanese woman, but she’s pretty rotten on the inside. At least that’s what I was already thinking back then.

“So that’s why we do it?”

“Yup, that’s why we go through all of that. If nothing changes, then you’ll be able to shop without having to actually look. We basically destroy that reality, changing the location of bookshelves and such from time to time. Then you have to walk around for a bit trying to find what you’re looking for, and you’ll pay more attention to your surroundings. Unlike a library, we’re actively trying to sell books here. If we just put the new and popular releases on the special display, the rest of the store will be practically useless, because people don’t check out other books aside from what they’re looking for. A bookstore can’t survive without moving the shelves around from time to time. I know of bookstores that vanished over time because their shelves were basically rotting in place!”

“Thank you very much for the philosophical and profound explanation, Senpai.”

“I was pretty cool, right?”

“You were like an old and shriveled man from an RPG.”

“Hmph, that doesn’t sound cool at all.” She pouted.

While thinking about what Senpai said back then, I looked away from the lineup of new stuff and looked towards the inside of the store. A bookstore is pretty much a showcase of humanity’s knowledge. In addition, new releases reflect the current flow of the world’s information for the current generation. I can feel it on my skin by simply looking at the titles and covers. It’s a great way to spend time, to be honest.

I passed by the display and started my round inside the store. I checked the new releases, running my eyes along the bindings of the books on the shelves. When I do this, I can check how the store is doing, and I’ll be able to help customers better once my shift actually starts. After a bit of time passed, I started figuring I should probably change into my uniform when someone suddenly tapped me on the shoulder.

“Yo, Junior-kun.”

When I turned around, Yomiuri-senpai stood there in casual dress.



“Senpai, don’t surprise me like that. I almost had a heart attack.”

“Have you always had such a fragile heart?”

“It might not look like it, but I have.”

“If you show me, I might just be willing to believe you.”

“If you put it back where it belongs afterwards, I don’t mind showing you.”

Upon hearing my response, Senpai smiled happily.

“Who are you, Shakespeare? Even I know that you can’t take out your heart without shedding any blood. I guess I’ll just have to believe you without evidence.”

“I appreciate it.”

Today, Yomiuri-senpai was wearing slim-fit denim jeans with a sleeveless blouse, her long hair tied up behind her back in twintails. Her choice of clothes looked comfortable and relaxing, even refreshing for the current season.

“Also, aren’t you here pretty early?”

“Right back at you, Senpai.”

Isn’t she supposed to start her shift at the same time as Ayase-san and I?

“Loitering around at home is boring. The A/C is on here, so I figured I’d check out the store before starting my shift.”

“Are you that bored?”

“That’s what it means to be a university student.”

“What about your seminars, your circles, and your research?”

“Ahhhh, I can’t heeear youuuu, can’t hear you at alllll.”

“Don’t react like a grade school student would. How old are you?”

“Remember the saying ‘Better too big than too small’, Junior-kun?”

“Your cheap logic makes you sound like a middle school student.”

“No matter how old I grow, what’s inside won’t change.”

“You’re trying to sound clever, but this is just a half-baked attempt at dodging my question about you slacking off, right?”

“You’ll understand how I feel once you start attending university, Junior-kun. University students aren’t as mature as you high school students might think.” Yomiuri-senpai tried to talk herself out of it as she smiled.

Her credibility when saying that was different than before.

“By the way, where’s your little sis?”

“Who knows? Is she not here yet? She left the house before me, so I’d assume she should be here soon.”

Even all during this past month, Ayase-san and I never walked to work together. She said something about how we should draw a line like how we were with our relationship at school, and I agreed. It’s not like anything bad would happen if the

store found out that we were siblings, and since Ayase-san had to turn in her job application, I'm fairly certain the store manager already knows that we're siblings. He's just not spreading this information to the other employees from what I can tell.

On top of that, I usually travel here by bike, whereas Ayase-san walks, so I would have to slow down and she'd have to speed up to keep pace with each other if we wanted to come here together, and neither Ayase-san nor I enjoy this kind of showy form of consideration.

"Still, I never thought that your little sis would come to work here~ Eh, what's that face for?"

"Well... I just had a similar conversation at home."

Why does everyone think it's a surprise that Ayase-san would work part-time at a bookstore? When I asked Yomiuri-senpai this question, she thought about it for a moment.

"It's not a rare thing to see someone working part-time at a bookstore. However, that goes for high school students who just want to play around a bit. Your little sis is as diligent and serious about her work as you are, Junior-kun."

"Maybe... Oh yeah, Senpai, are you going anywhere this summer?"

"Hmmm? Me? Of course. I'm going to wear a seductive swimsuit and have guys try to pick me up at the beach."

She said this while puffing out her chest in confidence. Should you really be acting this arrogant, though? Not to mention a *seductive* swimsuit? A what swimsuit? Well, from an objective point of view, Yomiuri-senpai is quite beautiful and good-looking. If only she'd stay silent, she would look like the perfect example of a Japanese beauty, especially with her alluring long black hair. Then again, on the inside she's an old man.

"The sea, huh?"

"What's that bothered face about?"

"Well... I can only picture it as a stampede of people."

You'd have to swim off the coast of Honshuu to avoid the crowd. Not to mention that for an introvert like me, going to a crowded beach is a bit too much to handle.

"I'm not going there to swim, so it's totally fine."

"You're going there to get hit on?"

"Yup, yup."

"Is being hit on that good of a thing?"

"I can eat for free thanks to it."

"You're not even poor..."

I mean, I know that the pay from a bookstore doesn't amount to much. Fundamentally, bookstores don't exactly have crazy good profit margins, so the salary isn't anything to boast about. Even if you're an actual full-time bookstore employee. Much more so if you're just a part-time jobber.

"Oh my, do you dislike this practice of obtaining free food?"

"Not exactly, I just don't like the idea of creating debts with other people. Also, constantly being treated like that is basically akin to confessing you don't earn any money, which leaves a bitter aftertaste."

I like to live my life with the principles of give & take, so always being treated to free things, or only being on the receiving end of other people's kindness, just doesn't sit right with me. There's nothing more expensive than something that's free of charge. Not to mention that food I bought with the money I've earned tastes ten times better.

"Well, that's very much like you, Junior-kun. But I'm offering them a beautiful university girl's smexy swimsuit appearance, so it's not like I'm eating for free, don't you think?"

"Smexy...? You already sound like an old man. Are you sure that appearance hasn't already withered away?"

"So you're calling me a dried up university girl?"

"I never said that."

I was just thinking it, is all.

"I can tell what you're thinking!"

"I'm sorry."

"By the way," Senpai put her index finger to her lip and smiled like a teasing cat. "Everything I told you just now was a lie."

"...Everything?"

"Yup, everything."

"So what were those lies for, then?"

"There's no deeper meaning to it!" Senpai insisted.

Then again, as I looked at Yomiuri-senpai now knowing it was all a lie, I probably should have seen through it from the very beginning. I reflected on my mistake. After all, her arms showing from beneath her sleeveless blouse showed no signs of any tan or sunburns. She was still as snow-white as ever.

"Well, jokes and fun aside, we should probably change into our uniforms now."

We walked to the back area of the bookstore and split up. I changed in the empty men's changing room, putting on my uniform. Right as I stepped out to head into

the office, Yomiuri-senpai and Ayase-san stepped out of the women's changing room. It seems like she was perfectly on time.

She was wearing the same apron above her uniform as Senpai was. Unlike at school or at home, she now had her long hair tied up together with a ribbon, probably to help her work more efficiently. Her glittery blonde hair looked like the tail of a prideful and renowned horse. The gap between her employee uniform and flashy hairstyle caused her to stand out in the store, and my eyes would occasionally drift towards her.

It felt like our eyes met for a second. However, this only lasted for a moment, and she averted her gaze again. This isn't good. I need to get used to this already. Or so I told myself as I fixed my posture. I doubt Ayase-san likes it when I sneak glances at her.

The store was fairly crowded. Maybe because it was a Saturday, but it was probably mostly because we're in the middle of summer break. Even so, there was a short stretch of time when the flood of customers calmed down. I think it was around 3pm in the afternoon. After finishing a purchase at the register, Ayase-san let out a polite "Thank you very much!" to a customer as they left. Since no more people were lining up in front, Ayase-san, Yomiuri-senpai, and I all lined up behind the cash register, sighing in relief.

"You're doing great for only working here for one month, Ayase-san!"

"Really?"

"Yup. I thought we got a clever kid when Junior-kun applied here, but you might even beat him."

Her tone sounded like she was serious. Personally, I had to agree. Everything she did was perfect, from dealing with the cash register to helping customers. I didn't even need to step in and help her. Not to mention that this had already been the case about a week after she started working here. She was already remembering all the small details about this job, fitting in much faster than I did back when I started.

That reminds me, Yomiuri-senpai calls Ayase-san 'Little sis' when she's in front of me, but when she's talking directly to her, especially inside the store, she also calls her 'Ayase-san' from time to time. These kinds of things make her seem really mature. Mentally, of course. Not physically.

"Thank you very much." Ayase-san returned a warm smile.

She's been acting more dry and cool at home recently, so seeing a smile like that was refreshing. Then again, it was close to the fabricated smile she first gave me at the family restaurant.

"But that just shows how good you are at teaching me, Senpai."

“That response really shows just how amazing you are.”

“No no, it’s the truth.”

“Um...”

“Ah, yes!”

A customer spoke up on the other side of the cash register, and Ayase-san turned around and started helping them with another perfect smile. It was an elderly woman who seemed to be searching for a manga.

“Should I take care of the cash register?”

“Please do.” Ayase-san nodded and stepped out into the main store.

I figured she would come back soon enough, but after around ten minutes, Ayase-san showed no signs of returning. In the meantime, more customers lined up in front of the cash register, leaving me without a chance to go search for her. Books aside, Ayase-san doesn’t read any manga. She might have gotten lost trying to help the customer.

“Leave the cash register to me. You help her.” Senpai must have seen my worried expression, since she tapped me on the back.

I left the rest to her and stepped out into the main store. When I walked towards the manga corner, I quickly spotted Ayase-san walking along the bookshelves with the customer behind her.

“Is everything okay, Ayase-san?”

“Asamura-**san**...” Ayase-san turned around with a troubled expression on her face, her eyebrows hanging low.

From what she explained, the elderly woman was looking to buy a manga for her grandson. In other words, she didn’t know much about manga herself, and she had a rather perplexed expression as well. She said she was looking for a new release from this month. It had just gotten an anime adaptation announced, and it had fairly good sales. Considering how many copies we get of popular series, I can’t imagine it would be sold out. But Ayase-san couldn’t find it.

“Judging from the publisher, it should be on this shelf...”

“Have you looked it up?” I glanced over at the machine in the corner of the bookstore.

We should be able to figure out if it’s available thanks to the machine’s search function.

“It says we still have five copies, but...”

“It’s not in the front display, is it?”

“No, I already checked that.”

After confirming the situation thanks to Ayase-san's input, I started thinking. It's odd to be unable to find the series despite it having just been released. We have copies of it left over despite how popular it is, too. However, since it's not in the popular items display, I was forced to look through the covers on the shelf. This shelf was filled from head to toe with manga from that publishing label. Going down the lines of authors with the A i u e o principle, I saw older series from them, but not the newest release. It seems like the ones we put on the shelves were sold out.

"Not here..."

"Yeah. I know it should be here, but..."

"That means... Hmm, maybe over here..."

I pushed the books that were laying flat on the display beneath the shelf aside. Then another manga, and a completely different one at that, appeared. It was the exact new release we were looking for.

"Ah!"

"Here. This is it, right?"

In bookstores, customers often take books out from the shelves to look at them but don't put them back in their original place. This is yet another example of that. If the book had been put away randomly somewhere else, it might have stood out more, and thus been easier for Ayase-san to find, but since they put another manga down on top of the one we were looking for, they effectively and accidentally hid it. The number of copies underneath the initial one also matched the number our search machine said we had in stock.

"Amazing...! How did you know?"

"Well... intuition, I guess? More importantly, the customer is waiting."

"Ah, yeah. Um... is this what you wanted?" Ayase-san turned towards the customer, checking if that was the one she wanted.

When she did so, the lady gave her a happy smile back.

"Yes, yes, this seems to be it."

"Great! Would this be all you need?"

The lady nodded in response and we escorted her to the cash register and finished the payment. The woman seemed very happy to have succeeded with her shopping trip, and she tightly embraced the manga and chatted a bit, then left. As she did, Ayase-san and I sighed in relief.

"I'm glad we found it in the end. So how did you even know to look there? It's almost like some kind of superpower."

"No, that's really not it."

On the card on the display, it said ‘Releasing 2nd of August!’, but the label on the book on top of the pile was one that should normally not be released on that day. Basically that book shouldn’t have been in that pile to begin with, which stood out to me.

“I had no idea...”

I don’t blame Ayase-san for not being familiar with manga releases. Unlike me, she doesn’t regularly check new releases.

“It’s hard to notice that sort of stuff if you don’t have a feel for it. I just have a bit of experience, that’s all.”

—If animals don’t think something is off or different, their attentiveness decreases.

These words Senpai told me a long time ago now came back to mind. When your brain thinks ‘it’s not there’, then your eyes won’t register either.

“Even so, I think that’s pretty amazing.”

“I’m sure Yomiuri-senpai would have found it even quicker.”

Yomiuri-senpai had switched with us, and was now patrolling inside the store. While thinking about her, Ayase-san muttered an indifferent ‘I see’ and stood behind the cash register again. More and more customers appeared to buy something, so things got busy again.

I could see the moon starting to rise between the valley of buildings. There were around ten days left in August, so the wind was still warm, and a bit of the leftover heat started to rise from the asphalt. The time of day was fast approaching 10pm, and it’s actually already been fifteen minutes since my shift ended. A high school student is only allowed to work until 10pm, but we’re basically being allowed to leave at 9:50pm instead. Even so, changing clothes and saying goodbye took the full ten minutes.

Ayase-san and I left together, walking next to each other. Since we both prefer to not be overly considerate of each other, we’re both perfectly fine with leaving for work at different times. Yet we walk home together. The reason for this has to do with Akiko-san’s conditions for letting Ayase-san work part-time. Namely, she asked us to walk home together when our shifts end late. She doesn’t want a girl walking home alone in a big city like Shibuya. It just goes to show how loving of a parent she is.

Ayase-san had been against it in the beginning. She argued that having her older brother act as her bodyguard was taking things too far. According to her, she often had to make her way all alone to the bar where Akiko-san worked, and she was safe every time. Oh yeah, a lot of students had at one time spread rumors that Ayase-san

was into some kind of shady paid dating deal, but in reality some students just spotted her as she was making her way to meet Akiko-san, and they got the wrong idea. That explained a lot of things.

And there's probably another reason why Ayase-san originally tried to turn down the idea of me tagging along. Since I was travelling by bike on the way to our job, I can make it home much faster. So she doesn't want to slow me down. If our positions were reversed, I'd probably feel the same way. Since Ayase-san prefers to be more on the giving side than the taking side, she didn't want to accept this condition.

Even so, she eventually agreed. She didn't want to burden her mother unnecessarily when she was busy with her work already. To be honest, I was relieved in that regard myself. Even if she herself said she was fine, I really don't want Ayase-san to walk down the night streets of Shibuya all alone. One time would be fine enough, but since we work almost every day, there was bound to be trouble that would happen eventually.

When I brought that up, Ayase-san gave a nonchalant 'I guess you're right'. After going through this several times, we've gotten used to walking home together. I wiped away the sweat on my cheek, hoping that it would cool down soon.

"It's a hot summer, huh?"

"So it's fall already, huh...?"

"Eh?"

"What?"

We both stopped walking. Ayase-san gave me a baffled expression, and I gave her an equally baffled reaction. After Ayase-san closely investigated my face, she nodded faintly.

"Are you talking about the heat?"

"Yeah. What about you?"

"That." Ayase-san pointed her chin in the direction of a boutique's... shop window?

I could see mannequins standing behind the glass window.

"That's supposed to be fall?"

"It is fall, right? What else would it be?"

Ayase-san's disappointment seemed to only grow when she saw that I remained confused.

"Eh, are you being serious now?"

“Sorry, I see no difference between the style of clothes on that mannequin and what you’re wearing right now, Ayase-san.”

I mean, I could tell that those weren’t midsummer clothes thanks to her pointing it out. The sleeves were also a bit longer... I guess? But Ayase-san is wearing a checkered jacket over her knitted tanktop, so...

“That’s not really the problem here. When you look at the color of the clothes and the minor details, you can tell what’s in fashion this fall. Also, most mannequins are no longer wearing summer clothes, at least not those that you’d put in the front windows of a store. Not to mention that they’re wearing different clothes than they were yesterday, right?”

“Are they?”

“You’re joking...”

“Ah, no, I don’t doubt you or anything. I’m sure you’re right. So please don’t make a face like you’ve run into a zombie or a Santa in the middle of town.”

“Personally, I feel like I’ve encountered something even rarer than that. I wouldn’t even be surprised to see a zombie or a Santa at this point.”

“That’s a bit cruel, don’t you think?”

She’s treating me like some kind of Area 51 inhabitant or a SCP. Maybe my consciousness is just so narrow that I don’t even remember what the mannequins on my daily route are wearing.

“Asamura-kun, are you the kind of person who’s not that interested in fashion?”

“Have you ever seen me reading a fashion magazine?”

If I had money to waste on clothes, I’d much rather spend it on books. Also, who would I, a loner and a bookworm, want to show these clothes off to? Ayase-san nodded, seeming to follow my reasoning.

“I see. I guess you really don’t realize it at all if you have no interest.”

“It seems like it.”

“Well, I guess there’s no problem if you’re not working part-time for the clothes...”

“...Hm? What’s that about?”

“Don’t mind me~” Ayase-san started walking ahead.

I don’t know what exactly she had just been talking to herself about, but I pushed my bike and followed after her. For some reason, though, from then on Ayase-san seemed to be in a better mood compared to before our conversation.

Chapter 2: 23rd of August (Sunday)

I woke up to the feeling of oppressive heat. Turning over, I looked at the alarm clock next to my pillow. It was 10am right now, and three... no, just four minutes. Even though there was barely one week left in August, the heat showed no signs of leaving us alone.

“You’ll get heatstroke even in your room,” Akiko-san once told me, so I quickly turned on my room’s air conditioning. Since I had been sweating quite a bit in my sleep, I changed into some clean clothes. Upon opening the door leading to the living room, I was hit by a strong heat wave that gave me trouble breathing for a second.

When I looked up, I saw my old man standing on a ladder, fiddling around with the A/C, as Akiko-san looked up at him with a somewhat worried gaze. Although it was just another Sunday, it felt weird to see both of them in the living room together, but then I realized that maybe this was the reason.

“Ah, Yuuta. Morning.” My old man met my gaze.

“Yuuta-kun, good morning.”

“Good morning. So, uhh, is it not working?”

“We haven’t gotten any cold air from it for a bit now. Akiko-san woke me up, saying that it was rattling a lot.”

“Should I help you?”

“Ah, no, I’m still looking into it. I don’t know what to fix, either. Not to mention that recent A/Cs aren’t even made to be fixed by an amateur anymore.”

That makes sense, I guess. He seemed to be checking the error message while going through the user manual, sometimes turning it off and on again, even cycling through the different modes. However, the unit seemed to have no intention of blowing out cold air anytime soon.

“That A/C unit is pretty old, you know. If it’s not showing any signs of being kind to me, we might have to go and buy a new unit altogether.”

“We just bought one for Saki’s room, too... I’m sorry about this.”

“No, no. Don’t be. Saki-chan’s room had always been a storage room, which is why it wasn’t equipped with an A/C unit to begin with. Studying in her room without A/C would just be suffocating, right?”

“Thank you, Taichi-san.”

As the two of them started talking about Ayase-san, I realized she wasn’t with us in the living room.

“Is Ayase-san in her room right now?”

“Yes, I just saw her. But with the heat and all... She’s not very good at handling it, see.”

“Is that so?”

“She always gave me a lot of trouble about it when she was a child. As soon as summer rolled around, she would constantly beg me for ice cream, ask me to take her to the pool, that sort of thing. She was so persistent about it, too.”

When she mentioned Ayase-san as a small child, I was reminded of the picture my old man showed me before the marriage. If I had to guess, she was probably in gradeschool back then, and she did seem fairly energetic. Comparing that to now, she’s a lot more secluded and calm. I really can’t imagine her as a child who would constantly bother her mother like that.

“Over the years, she started getting a lot calmer about it, which is a bit lonely in a different way.”

“I guess this is just what happens when teenagers reach their adolescence. It’s embarrassing to have your parents around all the time. Yuuta was the same way.”

When my old man said that, Akiko-san lowered her head a bit and let out a sigh.

“In her case, I don’t think it was simply her growing up... Back in middle school, she was already the way she is now.” Akiko-san chose her words carefully, which caused me to guess what she was referring to.

Things weren’t working out in her family anymore, her father wouldn’t even come home anymore, and Akiko-san was always out working. I think that was the time period she mentioned. Ayase-san must have noticed her family’s wretched condition and started begging for things all the time.

“I see, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s fine.” Akiko-san smiled faintly.

I feel like Akiko-san didn’t even mind that much, but my old man seemed terrified. Listen, even if you hole up on that ladder, you’re not helping anybody. So when she was younger, Ayase-san really liked the pool, huh...? To be honest, I can’t really imagine an innocent and young Ayase-san swimming like that. So if someone told her that she could act the same now without any cares in the world, would she do the same?

For an introverted and inactive person like myself, simply moving around and exercising sounds like it’d be exhausting, let alone joining any large crowds of people, so I’d rather not.

“Hmm, it doesn’t seem like I can fix it. Calling someone over to repair it would probably be the best choice, but considering how busy they are this time of year, I can’t even hazard a guess as to when this can be fixed.”

“I see. How troublesome. Ah, be careful when coming down, Taichi-san.”

“Yuuta, I think it’d be best if you stayed in your room today.”

“I don’t really mind.”

I only had work in the evening today, so that was fine by me. When I asked the two of them what they would be doing about it, Akiko-san mentioned that she wanted to go shopping, and my old man would join her to carry all the stuff. Yeah, doing anything outside at all is also an option...

“I’ll go tell Saki,” Akiko-san said and headed towards the kitchen. She called out to me on the way. “Yuuta-kun, would you like to eat something? I haven’t made anything for myself yet.”

“Ah, yes please.”

My old man and Ayase-san seemed to have already finished their breakfast, so Akiko-san and I warmed up the leftovers and enjoyed them. My old man opened the door to their bedroom, which caused a cool breeze to pass through the living room, but it didn’t take long for me to start sweating like I was sitting in a sauna. At times like these, I really would love a fan.

After finishing the meal and cleaning up the table, I took a page from Ayase-san’s book by grabbing some cool drinks from the fridge and hiding from the heat in my room. Now then, what should I do today? That reminds me, I wonder what Ayase-san is up to in her room? This thought came to mind as I was flipping through a page in a book I was reading, but I was interrupted by a sudden phone call from Maru.

He asked me about my afternoon plans, and when I told him I was basically free, he told me to tag along for a shopping trip. At first, I nearly declined because I couldn’t be bothered to head outside in this heat, but then I remembered that I was in a prison of heat in my own apartment, so I agreed.

The area in front of Shibuya’s train station was even more noisy and filled with people than any other weekday, despite it only being early in the afternoon. When I looked out at this crowd, it felt like the heat had only grown even more intense.

I parked my bike at the usual parking lot. Since I have work in the evening today, it’ll make going home a lot easier later. Maru had invited me to a store that sold anime-related goods. Since it also sold manga and light novels, it was pretty much a direct competitor to the store where I worked. Well, constantly worrying about

that sort of thing won't benefit me at all, and the bookstore I work at doesn't sell any anime merch, either.

After making my way from the front of the train station down north Jingu-dori street, I turned West after running into Inokashira-dori street. The path then split, and I headed on to Udagawa-dori street. That's probably a somewhat easy explanation to follow. To people who don't know Shibuya's layout, this might seem like quite a long distance, but with the city that never sleeps and is always brimming, it was more like a walk than a chore.

There were new types of canned juices in open areas on the street, and young ladies were hawking a popular product in front of stores. You could find yourself quickly reaching your destination here just as you looked around. Around five minutes before we were supposed to meet, I reached the store in question.

"Yo, sorry to call you all the way out here." My friend Maru Tomokazu approached me, his face a bit more tan than before.

"It's been a while. So you didn't have any practice today, huh?"

"Yeah. We only had morning practice today. Nowadays, endless training isn't exactly popular or in style. In this heat, it's more likely that you'll just end up exhausted or even injured, so you have to take some proper breaks from time to time. That's how we're doing it, anyway."

"I see, I see."

Well, I still consider it to be pretty harsh training overall, but I'm sure they want to avoid any injuries or other health-related problems.

"Anyway, my bad that I had you come here on my behalf."

"Well, about that..."

I told Maru about the whole A/C fiasco at home, and how I figured I'd at least have fun in some way if I was forced to endure the heat anyway. It's not like I particularly fancied telling him about my living situation, but I figured he wouldn't feel as bad if I gave him the general gist.

"That sounds rough. So I'd like to get my main goal done first. I'd be bad if they sold out before I got to it."

"Sure."

Normally, Maru isn't the type of person to force his interests on other people, but when he actually asks for help, he always has a good reason. Such as when a product is a limited purchase for one person only. Unless you check out several stores, you often won't get what you want. In times like these, Maru can be quite merciless. Then again, since the release was on Friday, he must be worried about it being sold out.

Now that I promised to help out, I was prepared to help out until the bitter end... Oh yeah, I didn't even ask him what goods we were after.

"After we finish the mission, let's grab something to eat."

"OK."

Although I had gone to a manga and light novel corner many times before, since I'm not too interested in the actual goods, I had Maru show me around.

"So, what are we getting?"

Maru answered as we kept walking. It seems like we're after goods for a spring anime. The season already ended a few months back, but depending on how sales go, they start selling the goods even after that. I remembered the name of the anime when Maru mentioned it. It's a show with five girls. It's some kind of slice of life series.

"And there's a robot."

"What?"

For a second, I failed to understand what he said. If my memories served me right, the setting was in a rural town, and it was like any other average adolescent story... right?

"The light novel the protagonist read in episode 5 was a science fiction work, right?"

"Yeah..."

I remember now. Recently, the existence of otaku and their interests has started to turn more into general knowledge, with even normie protagonists and side characters are interested in the world of otaku, but... Oh yeah, I think he liked science fiction stuff, but it never really went anywhere in the main series.

"So wait, are you...?"

"Yeah, I'm getting that robot the protagonist really liked."

"What does that have to do with the anime?!"

"I can't help it. That robot is just awesome." Maru said. He told me the name of the illustrator who was responsible for drawing said robot, but I'm sorry, I don't recognize them.

When I told him as much, Maru looked at me in shock and disgust and started telling me about how famous of an individual that illustrator is.

"So basically you want a toy version of this robot, right?"

"That's the sum of it."

Once we reached the actual marketplace, they luckily had some of the aforementioned robot toys left. They had enough for Maru and I, but I think those were the last ones, so we cut it fairly close. We both carried one as we walked to

the cash register. There were a lot of customers even though it was Sunday, so the line was fairly long. We kept talking as we slowly progressed through the line.

“I see. This robot is pretty awesome.”

“Right?”

I’m really not familiar with this kind of thing, but its appearance was pretty cool. The robot was inside a box around 50cm in height. It seemed to be some kind of air-combat robot the likes of which would never exist in reality. The anime’s logo was drawn on one corner of the box in a small font, which really made it hard to guess what the genre of the series was. It really looked like it was straight out of a mecha anime.

“It has a lot of movable parts, too. You can really play around with this.”

“Play with it...?”

“Oh? Don’t tell me. Didn’t you play with robot or monster toys when you were younger, Asamura?”

“I might have, but definitely not much.”

I understand collecting them as a kind of hobby, but I don’t understand the point of actually playing with them. I’ve always been focused on manga and novels more than anime, after all. When I was young, my old man had a hobby of buying plastic models of battleships, but my blood-related mother got angry at him because they were always in the way, which was why he decided to never get into it again. I feel like it would be an enjoyable hobby if your family and lifestyle allowed for it.

With manga and novels, I could fill my room, and they would never get in the way if you simply put them on shelves.

“Oh yeah, Asamura, Narasaka and Ayase invited you to the pool, right?” Maru suddenly changed the subject.

Upon hearing this, my brain froze up for a moment. Who’s going to the pool with who? Maru, for his part, didn’t even notice my confusion.

“Seriously, you’ve turned into one hell of a playboy while I wasn’t looking.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What do you...? I’m talking about you and Ayase going to the pool with Narasaka.”

“First I’ve heard of it.”

The hell is he talking about? Since I showed no signs of understanding what Maru was referring to, he told me what he heard through his connections at the baseball club. According to these rumors, Narasaka-san was getting together a group of boys and girls to meet at the pool, and the members apparently included Ayase Saki and Asamura Yuuta.

“Were you not invited?”

“Nope. Heck, I haven’t even talked to Narasaka-san since summer break started.”

“Hmm, then you’ll probably get invited here pretty soon.”

“August is about over, remember?”

“It’s still as hot as ever, so no problems there.”

“Well... I guess so.”

So a plan like this was put in motion without my knowledge, huh? Also, am I even close enough with Narasaka-san that she would invite me like that? I can still count on a hand or two the number of times the two of us have talked to each other. I knew that Narasaka Maaya was very strong when it came to relationships and how she treated other people, but this is way more than I expected. Well, I guess that still doesn’t mean anything is set in stone. The information source is pretty much still just second-hand rumors, after all.

While we were talking about that, we reached the front of the line. We finished paying, returned to the train station the same way I came, and entered a cafe nearby the bookstore I was working part-time at.

Both Maru and I ordered an iced coffee, and he added a club sandwich to his. That’s a sports club member for you. He sure can eat a lot. Compared to the coffee from family restaurants, this one is about twice as expensive, but at least it allows you to have a comfortable seat and not be rushed. I called it a cafe, but it pretty much is just a bit more stylish than an average family restaurant.

Though it’s an establishment where regulars put in orders complicated enough to sound like they’re chanting a spell, we succeeded in ordering something normal at least. Well, compared to a high-class coffee restaurant, this one is much more suitable for high school students. There was once a time when I entered a random establishment near the Shibuya train station without looking at the menu first, and left immediately after seeing how expensive everything was. A cup of coffee with four digits for a price is definitely too much for high school students.

Maru and I put our trays down on the table and let out a sigh.

“So spill the beans. Why did you need two of the goods?” I asked, glancing at the plastic bags with us.

“One for personal use, of course, and one for preservation.”

“I see. So no missionary work.”

“..... You knew from the very start and you still asked me, didn’t you? Bad taste, my friend.”

“I actually didn’t, I just felt like asking. You mentioned someone you wanted to give a present to before, so it was a guess.”

I know that some people buy several copies of something they like. However, when I thought that maybe Maru had bought this for someone else, and needed my help to secure it, it sure didn’t sound too unrealistic.

“I was actually asked to do this.”

“Someone asked you?”

“Yep, a friend online. They really wanted it, but the current situation won’t allow it, you know. So I went and bought it. I’m gonna send it to them later.”

“Huh.”

I didn’t know Maru had a friend like that. When I asked him for details, they apparently got to know each other on an online forum when they were talking about their favorite anime. Their tastes lined up pretty well, and they got close enough to send each other this stuff. That being the case, they probably knew each other’s addresses too. Even so, they only know each other by their online names, but they seem to be good friends nonetheless. Maru knew that they lived in the same town, but they had never met.

“But if you’re such good friends, you might as well meet up in real life, right? Also, I feel like you’d be the type of person who’d organize that yourself.”

Although they could technically meet online whenever, humans really love meeting others in person, face to face. Since Maru knows how to organize and he has the ability to put a plan together, I was a bit confused as to why he hadn’t done so already. Then again, he’s constantly busy with his club, even on Saturdays, so maybe their chances are limited.

“That won’t do at all.”

“Why not?”

“Naturally, not everyone is like that, but there’s a small group of guys who would use this as a chance to hit on girls, you feel me? If there’s not a whole lot of trust involved, it’ll only end badly. At the very least, that’s what I think.”

“Yeah, being this cautious is a lot like you... Hm? Hitting on girls? Is the other person a female?”

“From what she told me, yeah. A university student, even.”

“A university student... so she’s older than you, huh?”

For a second, Yomiuri-senpai came to mind. She’s the only university girl I can think of that I know. Normally it’d be a rare thing for high school students like us to run across university students, so it’s rare that both Maru and I have had

experiences like this. Well, I guess for online friendships it'd be more rare if they were the same age.

"Judging from her messages, she's pretty clever. She's knowledgeable and kind, and doesn't have any prejudices against me. The conversations we have are actually pretty meaningful. Then again, the fact that she's so positive sure helps a lot, I guess."

"Huh, yeah she does sound like someone you could get along with. I bet there's a lot of other people who feel the same way as you... Ahh, that's why."

"Yeah, she's pretty popular in the chat."

I see. So an offline gathering would bring in guys who would try to hit on her.

"I'm surprised you got close enough to send each other stuff like this."

"Yup, it was a crazy coincidence. I'll tell you the whole story sometime if I get the chance."

"I'd love to hear it. So have you fallen in love with her?"

Maru apparently didn't expect me to say this, and he seemed to panic for a moment.

"No, I don't really... or anything."

Oh, what a rare reaction. Well, normally he would act all assertive, so I have to pay him back from time to time.

"Really now?"

When I didn't let up my questioning, Maru seemed to get flustered for real, and grew quiet. Eventually, he said "I'm going to the restroom real quick" and got up from his seat.



It's surprising that Maru of all people is acting like this... Oh yeah, the person receiving Maru's present, and the person receiving the goods from him... Are they the same person? That's another side of Maru I've never seen, and it made me realize that I still didn't know everything about him, which of course makes total sense. Though I have to admit that I didn't expect him to experience romantic feelings like this. I guess we're pretty different after all.

As far as romantic feelings go, I'm quite fond of romance novels, but I don't really picture myself in those kinds of situations. I'd much rather watch over these kinds of events involving other people. I would never expect to experience some kind of romcom-like event myself. After all, this is reality. Something as convenient as getting to know a cute girl and eventually going out...

Well, I did end up living with a girl my age because of my old man's remarriage, but it's not like she's—Actually, she *is* cute. Very cute, objectively speaking. Also, why am I even picturing her while thinking about this? It's true that Ayase-san is cute, but she's my little sister.

“Asamura-kun?”

That's right, even her voice is cute, but a little sister is still a little... Wait, what? When I turned around, I was greeted with a blonde-haired girl looking at my face right from the street next to our seat. Of course, it wasn't a hallucination. It was the real deal, Ayase-san.

“What are you doing here?”

“This is the closest cafe to our part-time job.”

“Ah... That makes sense.”

There was nothing weird about this. Since both our part-time jobs and even our shifts overlapped, it's not odd of her to spend her time in a similar way, especially considering the situation at home right now. That entire thing is the main reason why I recommended this cafe to Maru. This was more than a coincidence, it was obvious enough to practically be expected. However, that doesn't mean I wasn't surprised to meet her here, and thus I didn't even know how to continue the conversation.

“Anyway, I'll be going now.”

“Eh?”

All my thoughts and ideas suddenly rebooted. Before I realized it, I was already looking at Ayase-san's back as she walked away. She was wearing a one-shoulder top worthy of the heat, along with blue shorts. She's got such high hips, almost like a model. Ah, she's even wearing sneakers today, maybe to match her current outfit. As she walked away with light steps, the door to the store opened and closed.



“Sorry to make you wait.”

“Eh? Oh, Maru.”

“I remembered the time, so I came rushing back, but... Asamura, you were talking with Ayase right now, weren’t you?”

Time? I looked at the clock hanging inside the store, and realized that it was almost time for me to head off to work. I guess that’s why Ayase-san left so quickly.

“Something’s going on between you and Ayase, right?”

“No, that’s not...”

True—is what I wanted to say, but that would make me a liar. I feel like it would be much more efficient if I just told Maru about everything. And reassure him that because we became step-siblings because of our parents’ remarriage, whatever he might be thinking isn’t going on at all... But what would he even be thinking?

However, with my tightness of schedule in mind, I couldn’t go deeper into this conversation at all, so I split up with Maru almost like I was running away. Now I really lost my right to criticize adults who lived by the ‘let sleeping dogs lie’ mindset. However, I still barely made it to the office in time for work. I changed into my uniform, put on my apron and nameplate, and left the changing room. Right then, Ayase-san and Yomiuri-senpai came out of the women’s changing room.

“Yo, Junior-kun! Take care of me today!”

“Same here, Yomiuri-senpai.”

“Please treat me well today, Asamura-san.”

“Y-Yeah, right back at you, Ayase-san.” I stumbled over my words.

The influence of the sudden encounter at the cafe apparently still had left me reeling.

“It seems like it’s only us for the shift tonight.” Yomiuri-senpai said.

Basically, it’ll be just the three of us, huh?

“I feel like that’s not enough people.”

“True. Well, it’ll be fine. Saki-chan counts for two people.”

“Please don’t have too high expectations of me.” Ayase-san remained modest, but once work started, her efficient movements and work ethic really made it seem like several people were doing it.

She’s really diligent, and fast on her feet. Since she remembers everything when you teach it to her once, she can pretty much work independently from me. Not to mention that she’s very thorough. She still has her trademark blonde and flashy hair, but she does take off her ear piercings when at work.

Granted, it's not like people would put her under the microscope just because of her looks, but when you work at a store that people of all ages visit, you never know when someone might make a complaint to management. I bet she doesn't even care what other people think of her, but knowing Ayase-san, troubling the store is something she would want to avoid.

She even kept her nails plain, not decorated at all. They're easy to see when you're putting covers on the books when working at the cash register, after all. I doubt anyone would complain if she managed to do everything perfectly, but when Ayase-san first started working here at this bookstore, she had a bit of trouble pulling the vinyl off. When you wear flashy clothes despite being a newcomer who can't do their work perfectly yet, it's much easier to get complaints.

Ayase-san's careful judgement and avoidance of any kind of risk greatly surpassed anything I could have imagined. And she was diligent enough that she started sweating ever so slightly from her hard work, despite the A/C inside the bookstore being on. When working part-time, you generally take breaks offset from other workers. Even more so when it's only the three of us, since if all three of us took a break at the same time, nobody would be there to help any customers.

After around two hours, Ayase-san took her break. Of course, not a super long break, but about ten minutes. If you're working full-time, you get about an hour. However, since we were basically working four hours from 6pm to 10pm, the break was kept short.

"Then I'll be right back."

"Yep yep. Have a good break, Saki-chan."

"I'll be back in ten minutes." After giving a brief response to Yomiuri-senpai, Ayase-san headed off to the employee area.

"Hmmm..."

"What's wrong?"

While seeing Ayase-san off, Yomiuri-senpai seemed to be lost in thought about something. A full-time worker was taking care of the register right now, and the number of customers had decreased drastically. Everyone was probably eating dinner right about now. So Yomiuri-senpai beckoned me over.

"Yes?" We moved to a space behind the cash register and started whispering to each other.

"It's about Sakicchi."

"What kind of nickname is that?"

"Oh, a complaint from the older brother himself?"

"Saki-chan, Ayase-san in public places, and now this. You're all over the place."

“I have a lot of them. Saki-chan, Sakisuke, Sacchan... which one would you prefer?”

“You don’t need to ask me. Just stick with Ayase-san.”

“Saki-chan it is then.”

In the end, she went in a complete circle and came back to the beginning. Well, it’s not like I really care what she calls Ayase-san. I don’t have any right to judge or complain.

“So, what about Ayase-san?”

“Tsk.”

“Why did you click your tongue?”

“Anyway, on a more serious note.”

“So you weren’t being serious before.”

“Your little sis. She’s a bit too diligent, you see.”

“Huh?”

How is that a problem?

“Ah, don’t misunderstand. I’m talking about her work ethic. She remembers everything quickly, and pulls it off perfectly. As a fellow excellent employee here, I can tell she’s doing a good job.”

“Part-time employee.”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff! Anyway, I feel like she blames herself too much for things she can’t do.”

I was still confused. However, Yomiuri-senpai continued explaining what she felt like she had seen. For example, Ayase-san’s self-deprecating attitude that she takes whenever she goes. Although this is a praiseworthy attribute that a lot of talented and outstanding people possess, Ayase-san was someone who never took any breaks voluntarily, so if there was ever a time that would force her to stop in her tracks, her heart would break—or something like that. Yomiuri-senpai mentioned a girl she’s friends with who ended up working herself sick because of that, and Ayase-san apparently resembled her.

“That girl was just as outstanding. She was always first when it came to almost everything in grade school. Of course, she wasn’t just talented. She also worked hard to achieve all of it. And in university, she suffered a setback for the first time.”

It’s probably something that happens a lot. That’s what the people around her probably thought.

“Every human being has a thing or two they can’t do. That’s what it means to be human, after all. However, she didn’t agree with that sentiment. She couldn’t forgive herself for not being able to do everything. She didn’t believe there was

something she just couldn't succeed at no matter what. And then she blamed herself for it, convincing herself that this was because she was slacking off."

"So then... what happened...?"

"She went back to her hometown. I think she was from Shikkoku. No idea what she's up to these days. I just hope she's happy."

Yomiuri-senpai is really considerate for worrying this much about someone who's just a classmate of hers. But I couldn't find it in me to tell her this for some reason. And from what she told me, people with strong self-sufficiency tendencies like Ayase-san constantly build up stress while trying to improve, and don't get any rest at all.

It's basically a thought process that goes 'I can't stop on my own'. Eventually, you end up exhausted, your heart worn out. When people have a mindset of 'If I don't stop running, I'll die', in order to actually stop them, there are times when you have to interrupt and get in the way of whatever it is that they're trying to do. There may be a time where you want to respect the other person, but see no other option except to ignore their own freedoms and opinions.

After hearing all of this from Yomiuri-senpai, I remembered something. There was a time when Ayase-san's thought process had crossed the threshold of what was safe, and she wouldn't listen to what I was telling her. Back then, I was forced to stop her so that she would hear me out. Though I wasn't really aware of what I was doing since it was in the heat of the moment. 'Giving it your all at any given moment' is probably a good way to describe this behavior.

"Saying that everything is important basically means that you don't treasure anything at all, you know."

"That's not entirely the same thing, Yomiuri-senpai."

"There are people who truly treasure everything, and succeed. They have talent, you know. But for most people, for the average person, that won't do. We have several things that we can't hope to achieve. That's what I believe. It's fine to assume you can't be a savant at everything."

"I see. That's an interesting thought."

"That's why you should preserve this willpower for the things that are truly important to you. Restraint is also important, you understand."

"Yeah. Basically, if people aren't properly pacing themselves, you have to tell them to, right?"

"Exactly! That's Junior-kun for you! That being said, you'll give me your break time, right?" Senpai put her hands together like she was begging me.

I can't believe she went from a serious topic like that to immediately fooling around a second later.

"Why do you want me to do that for you, huh? Do you have some kind of business to attend to?"

"If I wait until my shift is over, the store will be closed. The trip will only take me about 15 minutes!"

I sighed in disbelief. This person is just...

"I understand. I'll give you my break time, so go buy whatever you need to buy."

"Yay, Junior-kun!"

"You're not getting a high-five."

"What a boring reaction."

"I just can't follow your speed, okay?"

I actually admire Yomiuri-senpai a bit for planting the seed for this train of thought inside my mind, but she had to go and say that next, wasting the opportunity.

"Well, if you really treasure your little sis, then you might be better off stepping more into her territory." Yomiuri-senpai said and headed towards the cash register.

"If I treasure her, I should step more into her territory, huh?"

So she's not even joking around that much. Senpai really is someone I'll never understand.

Even after our shift ended, the heat didn't decrease at all. On the way home, I was pushing my bike as always, with Ayase-san walking next to me. I remembered what Yomiuri-senpai told me. For this past month, Ayase-san has been really devoting herself to her job. If I had to guess, this was probably all for her goal to be able to be independent in the near future. One of the reasons for this was most likely because I failed to find a lucrative but not time-intensive way for her to earn money. Another was probably because of my knowledge about how a bookstore operates that she could use for herself. That reasoning made sense.

However, just like my old man said, I haven't seen Ayase-san relax or act like a high school student during summer break for the entire past month. There's also something that Maru said that stuck with me...

—If people aren't taking proper rest, you have to tell them to.

Maybe I should ask now...

"Ayase-san, did Narasaka-san invite you to the pool? ...The invite that extended to me as well?"

"...Did Maaya contact you?" Ayase-san asked while narrowing her eyebrows.

It seems like she really did get an invitation.

“Nope. It’s not like she has any way of contacting me in the first place.”

“Then how did you find out?”

Oh man, she’s really suspicious now.

“Simple hearsay. I had no idea about it, either.”

I explained about how there was talk going around about Narasaka-san inviting her friends to the pool.

“Do you want to go, Asamura-kun?”

For a brief moment, it almost sounded like she was asking if I wanted to go with her. But that was impossible. She was just asking me if I was interested in going to the pool in general. That’s the only way Ayase-san would even pose this question. She hates being misunderstood after all. She’s being as flat as always, simply asking if I want to go, which was why I decided to reply with the first words that came to mind when the question was phrased in that context.

“Honestly, going to the pool with all those outgoing guys sounds like a pain.” I flashed a wry smile as I responded.

For a moment, I felt like I saw a sad expression flash up on Ayase-san’s face underneath the street lamps, but her usual expression returned just as quickly as it was gone.

“I see. Then you don’t have to force yourself to go, right?”

Something felt off about the way she phrased that, almost like she was bothered by my response. I couldn’t guess what she truly felt. I sensed a bit of anger, a bit of sadness, but also a bit of relief.

“Are you not going to the pool?” I asked.

“I’m not going.” Ayase-san responded.

“Why not?”

“.....”

I took the extra mile and stepped into her territory, but Ayase-san stayed quiet and did not give me a response. A car passed us by at that exact moment. I thought that maybe she couldn’t hear it, but in the event that she did, I didn’t want to bother her any further by prodding her with questions. However, something did feel off.

—*I’m not going.*

I wonder what kind of emotion Ayase-san said that with? As we made our way home, I saw the lights shining out of our flat. I parked my bike in the parking lot and let Ayase-san go on ahead without me. But until I opened the door of our apartment, I kept thinking about Ayase-san.

Chapter 3: 24th of August (Monday)

When I woke up early in the morning, nobody was in the living room. I knew that my old man and Akiko-san wouldn't be there. My old man is off to work, and Akiko-san has yet to come home from work. She contacted us saying that she'd be home late (or I guess early in the morning in this case?).

However, not even Ayase-san, who would normally be awake at this point, was around. Maybe she's in her room? It's not like there's any reason to do so, since the living room was a perfectly comfortable temperature... Wait, a comfortable temperature? Only then did I realize that the A/C in the living room was blowing out cool air. It's fixed, huh? Since I got home so late, and pretty much stayed in my room without eating dinner, I didn't even notice. I guess my old man got a hold of someone who could repair it. Maybe he prioritized that over their shopping trip.

Since it was running, he probably knew that I'd wake up not long after he left. I looked over at the dining table and saw breakfast prepared for me. I suddenly got a hunch and checked my messages, and I found a LINE from Ayase-san.

'I prepared breakfast, so you can eat it whenever. I already finished mine.'

I guess Ayase-san is awake already after all. Maybe she's sitting in her room, studying or cleaning or something. I sent her a thank-you message over LINE and sat down at the dining table.

"Today it's Japanese style, huh?"

On the pale blue plate was grilled salmon, along with radish cut up into a small mountain in the corner, and small Japanese plums. On the plate next to it was a cluster of seasoned seaweed, and salad on another large plate. It was like a breakfast you'd see at an inn. It looked like there was a lot of effort put into this.

After confirming the food I was dealing with, I picked up my empty rice bowl and miso soup bowl and stood up. While warming up the miso soup, I put some rice into my bowl, and after filling it up with miso soup, I returned to my seat.

"Time to dig in." After putting my hands together in thankfulness for the food, I started eating the precious breakfast Ayase-san prepared for me.

I poured some soy sauce onto the radish to let it soak in and put it on top of the salmon, eating the pieces of salmon along with the radish. The sweetness of the fish and bitterness of the radish mixed on my tongue. The fish is as delicious as well, a different kind of taste from meat. Thanks to the radish, the aftertaste was non-existent, and I found myself able to eat several refills of rice.

While admiring the fact that such a simple breakfast could still be so delicious, I reached for the miso soup next. The miso soup base this morning was nameko mushroom. It was easy to drink, going right down my throat. As always, Ayase-san's miso soup couldn't get any better. I really felt like sending her another LINE message telling her exactly that, but I didn't want to bother her, and that's about all I could tell her anyway. So I just sent her an imaginary message of gratitude instead. Thank you for the delicious miso soup as always, Ayase-san.

After finishing my breakfast, I washed the dishes and cleaned everything up a bit more leisurely, since I had some more time until my part-time job started. While thinking about what to do until then, I decided to clean up the living room a bit. The dining table had a thin tablecloth on it so it wouldn't get dusty. I thought maybe I should clean the fridge, and since Akiko-san should be coming home soon, I figured she might prefer her grilled fish not being too cold. If she doesn't feel like eating it, I can always put it in the fridge later.

I cleaned from top to bottom, since the dirt would fall to the lowest layer. I wiped everything clean that I could, and after sweeping the floor, I mopped it as well. Whenever I'm doing something that I'm fairly used to, it really gives my head time to think about something else in the meantime. For example, about how Ayase-san has been acting weird as of late. I think it basically started two days ago.

'If you're wondering about Maaya, then don't worry about it. We don't have the kind of relationship where we would hang out during summer break. Just to let you know.'

No matter how much I thought about it, I failed to see a reason why she would come over to my room just to say that. Even more so if it's Ayase-san, considering how this is clearly unlike how she usually acts.

"Hmmm..."

My hand stopped mid-cleaning, and I let out a sigh as I rested my chin on the wooden grip of the mop. Oh yeah, I remembered something else. According to Maru, the whole pool plan that Narasaka-san put together was supposed to include me as well. But I hadn't heard anything about it. Of course, this makes total sense, since Narasaka-san doesn't know my LINE address or any other way to contact me.

If so, what would Narasaka-san do? She would most likely get Ayase-san to relay her invitation to me. Of course, if Ayase-san herself doesn't want to go, then that's her own decision. However, it's not natural and easily explainable why she would keep silent about the invitation that was directed at me.

What would I do if I was in Ayase-san's position? For example, what if Maru came up with a similar pool plan, and told me to invite Ayase-san? Well, I probably

would tell Ayase-san, even if I didn't plan on going. Something along the lines of 'Maru told me to invite you'. If not, I would basically be stealing a chance for her to enjoy herself. Since we're so clear about being fair in our relationship, it would be going against the rules.

So why did Ayase-san keep quiet? Something is off. But when I reached this thought, I realized that I had stopped cleaning entirely.

"Not good, not good."

I redoubled my cleaning efforts in the living room, but Ayase-san's irregular actions wouldn't leave my mind. I had finished scrubbing the floor when the front door opened and Akiko-san came staggering towards me in a wobbly and sleepy manner.

"Ahhh... Yuuta-kun... morning..."

"Welcome back, and good morning. Would you like something to eat?"

"Yeah... I'll eat some ice cream and then get some sleep." She spoke with her eyes half-closed.

I opened up the fridge and took out the ice cream (which was Akiko-san's favorite, thus my old man always kept the fridge stocked full of it). It was a strawberry flavored ice cream stick.

"Oh yeah, you fixed the A/C yesterday, didn't you?"

"Mmm... Ahh, right. Taichi-san called a technician..." She must have been exceptionally sleepy. Her words came out slowly and with a lot of pauses between them.

From what I understood after Akiko-san sat on the chair and started licking her ice cream, the reason our A/C malfunctioned was dirt in the filter, and my old man trying to fix things on his own apparently only made things worse. Then again, I imagine he really just wanted to show off to Akiko-san.

"It was running perfectly fine with a cool face up until yesterday, and then it suddenly broke down. Machines sure are weird." Akiko-san said.

Upon hearing these words, my heart skipped a beat out of shock. Running perfectly fine with a cool face... and then it suddenly broke down. These words reminded me of what Yomiuri-senpai told me about a diligent person suddenly breaking down from stress and pressure. Maybe humans are fairly similar to machines in that respect.

—*Being too diligent makes them unable to stop.*

One day, their heart might break. If I see that someone needs to stop, I should force them to by telling them... However, would she really accept this?

“Hey, does Ayase-san hate people who force others to be honest with their desires?”

For starters, I need to understand Ayase-san’s personality further. With this in mind, I decided to ask Ayase-san’s mother, Akiko-san, about it. Upon hearing my question, Akiko-san stopped licking her ice cream and looked up at the ceiling.

“Hmmm? Are you asking if she hates people who force themselves on her?”

“F-Forced...”

Well, I guess it’s something like that. However, I feel like the nuance in what she said is different from what I was initially talking about.

“I was thinking more along the lines of coming up with plans and making her tag along.”

“So you’re asking if she would hate someone strong-arming her out on a date? Let me think... Judging from her personality, she would probably dislike that. But things would be different if you actually set up a plan with her and everything.”

“So she would dislike that... I figured.”

Even just as far as I could tell, Ayase-san’s personality was fairly close to how Akiko-san described. If so, then what could even be done to stop her...?

“Hm, do you want to invite her out on a date? Say, Yuuta-kun... Have you fallen in love with her by any chance?”

This sudden comment from Akiko-san interrupted my thought process entirely. What? Um, what did she say just now? I frantically tried to recall the conversation leading up to this point. Is Akiko-san actually having a terrible misunderstanding by any chance?



“N-No, of course not! I wasn’t talking about it in that kind of way. I just felt like Ayase-san has this personality where she goes too far at times.”

I need to explain the circumstances properly, so I told Akiko-san about my conversation with Yomiuri-senpai yesterday. As a result, Akiko-san gave a smile like she finally understood what I was talking about, which allowed me to sigh in relief.

“So that’s what you meant. I totally thought you came to like Saki as a girl.”

“That’s not—”

—going to happen. After all, Ayase-san is my little sister. That’s just impossible. It’s not allowed to happen.

“You’re right, though, Saki really can be like that.” When Akiko-san said this, I felt more tense. “Around the time she moved up to middle school, and I ended up getting busy myself, Saki started to grow up really rapidly, and she tried her best to be considerate of me and not increase my workload. She was far more mature than her peers.”

“That... I can picture.”

“Indeed. And it might seem like a good thing, but considering that all of that happened because I wasn’t there for her... you know. I’m reflecting on it, and the fact that I couldn’t spoil her as much as she deserved. I wanted her to be able to stay a bit more selfish, you know, allow her to stay a child for longer.” Akiko-san’s words stabbed me right in the heart.

I remembered Ayase-san in the picture I was shown. The Ayase-san who would beg for ice cream or beg to go to the pool that she had told me about. However, Ayase-san forced herself to stop acting like a child and decided to live independently more than everyone else. At first, it was probably just her trying to take some of the weight from her mother’s shoulders, but that probably isn’t the only reason anymore.

“Yuuta-kun.” Akiko-san called out to me. I raised my head and found her giving me a serious gaze. “I know this isn’t something I should ask my step-son for, but I want you to help her and make sure she doesn’t work herself into a corner too much. If she says that she doesn’t want to, then I think you should be more pushy about it, just like how you asked me before.”

I hesitated for a moment, but still nodded in compliance with Akiko-san’s request. So far, I’ve lived my life without trying to overstep my boundaries with other people. I don’t take responsibility for how other people live their lives, nor do I want to. After all, I don’t like it when people step into my own territory. Trying to

carry each other's burdens just sounds like so much of a pain that I couldn't be bothered. I remembered what Ayase-san told me when we first met...

"I won't have any great expectations of you, so I want you to do the same for me."

These words gave me great relief and reassurance. This clearly was the best way of going about things in order to form a relationship that wasn't too intrusive. However, I also can't ignore the fact that Ayase-san might break down in the near future... Even if she hates me for it.

"It's fine. Even if she starts to dislike you for it, I'll tell you something she really loves."

"What she loves, huh? You mean something that will cheer her up?"

"Of course!" Akiko-san looked at me with a bright smile.

Naturally, I was a bit doubtful that such a convenient thing existed, but I still asked Akiko-san to help me if need be. I really don't want Ayase-san to hate me. We're living together after all, and she's my little sister.

The faint sound of the A/C running filled the living room.

"Thanks for that." Akiko-san said, throwing the popsicle stick into the triangular corner of the sink.

She must have been pretty tired, since she staggered her way back to her bedroom. I just hope she doesn't fall over. Good work today, and good night, Akiko-san. Now then, as for me... I put the grilled fish back into the fridge and made my way to Ayase-san's room, knocking on the door.

"What?"

The door opened slightly, and I could see Ayase-san's desk. On it were workbooks and notes, and in her hands she was holding her usual headphones. This time, she was wearing over-ear instead of in-ear headphones. Maybe she's studying while listening to lofi music. The A/C was turned on, creating an even more cool atmosphere inside the room. I think Akiko-san mentioned that Ayase-san was weak to the heat.

"Listen, about the whole pool thing with Narasaka-san."

"I'm not going."

I wasn't given any time to finish my sentence. Ayase-san must have seen me at a loss, as she quickly made something of an excuse.

"I don't have the time to waste at the pool after all."

That's exactly what I'm worried about. It's not that Ayase-san is trying to make me angry or anything. She still has this mindset that any time spent playing or fooling around should be avoided like the plague. She doesn't think she needs time

to just relax and focus on something else. Her heart is like green bamboo, endlessly growing but only straight up. There was an old saying that I faintly remember that said something like that. So I started thinking. If I try to follow her lead, she'll just get even more stubborn.

"Alright, that's totally fine. I was just thinking that maybe I wanted to go after all. So could you tell me Narasaka-san's contact information?"

For now, I started acting interested in this event, so I gave Ayase-san a chance to let down her guard and maybe rethink her choice. Ayase-san then finally looked me in the eyes.

"Don't wanna."

"Eh? ...Um, what?" I was shocked to say the least.

After all, I didn't expect to get denied so forcefully and directly. Ayase-san dislikes acting according to emotions with no logic behind them. I didn't expect her to have such a grumpy response just because I asked for Narasaka-san's contact information. Not to mention that Narasaka-san was probably planning on contacting me in the first place. Also, despite being the one who said it, Ayase-san seemed shocked by what she herself had said.

"Um, wait, no. Giving other people someone's contact information... is bad manners after all."

"Ahhh..."

That does make sense. That would explain her reaction. You've gotta protect personal information after all. That's very much like Ayase-san. Yep.

"Let me ask Maaya for you. I'll let you know if I get a response."

"Got it."

She must be using LINE or email, I guess. If so, then I didn't expect it to take too much time. And since she said she wanted to study some more, I left her alone. Since we'll see each other later for our part-time job shift, I could wait. I closed the door and headed back to my own room. The current problem is that I don't think I can even drag Ayase-san to the pool. Right now, Ayase-san is like an immovable mountain focused only on the giant amount of studying and part-time work in front of her. Judging from that, she must be under a lot of mental pressure.

It's not a problem to make her go to the pool. I just want her to take a breather before she breaks down entirely. That's all I was thinking about, and all I honestly wished for. So I decided to ask her later during our part-time job.

Once afternoon rolled around, I left the house. I pedalled my bike through the steaming heat rising from the boiling concrete. I took several breaks on the road up the hill, and had put several water bottles in a bag in my bike's basket, so I was

protected against possible heatstrokes. I felt the sweat building up on my body, but suppressed my desire to stop and wipe it. It's not like I disliked this exercise, though.

In the midst of Omotesando where you could watch university students bustling around, I found a single formal building that didn't seem well-suited to the location. It's a famous prep school targeted at people attempting to pass the entrance exams at Todai¹. Whenever I stopped my bike and entered this building, I felt relieved. Rather than all the places full of normies and party-goers in Shibuya, this place filled with diligent students made me feel much more at peace. Near the prep school were also popular boutiques and a pancake store that was popular on Insta, which attracted a lot of female university students.

I entered the classroom and took a seat in the corner of the room. Unlike at school, the seats at prep school aren't assigned or anything, but I guess it's just in my nature to seek out an open spot. By the way, I'm not a prep school student or anything, I'm just here for the special summer classes. A lot of students around me were the same in that regard, and didn't even talk much with each other, simply focusing on their workbooks and the questions in them.

Although Suisei High is known as a high-level school, it's not like everyone in it is that much of a diligent student, so the difference in atmosphere between stiff and relaxing doesn't come as much from grades or personalities, but rather simply the human relationships going on inside the classroom. Speaking about the students, they generally have black hair, don't wear any flashy accessories or makeup, and don't attempt to stand out in any weird way. Here, it's all people who would be regarded as diligent from a general point of view. They're different from the students at school, especially in how they are constantly looking at their workbooks.

They're more like Ayase-san, at least in my opinion. Her fashion, color of hair, and outer appearance completely contradicts this, but her diligent nature and seriousness of intention were very similar. She goes at life full-force, seeming to possess no time to relax. She's different from someone like me who's just trying to get somewhat okay-ish grades in order to get into a university I find passable. She has the eyes of someone who's fighting.

However, Ayase-san's way of pushing herself is still quite different from the people here. After all, she wants financial success and she wants to be able to stand on her own two feet, which is why she isn't even participating in these summer

¹ 1. The University of Tokyo, probably one of the most difficult universities to get into

supplementary classes, since she would want to pay for them herself. If the average run-of-the-mill examinee tried to make do with self-study, they'd be just ridiculed and seen as arrogant and someone who's trying to buck the trend, but when you see Ayase-san getting all the highest grades in almost every subject and memorizing everything related to it, you can only stay quiet with a wry smile.

Even her weakness with Modern Japanese has somehow flattened out since last month, and she's slowly turning into a perfect examinee student... Well, for someone like me who isn't a madman who thrives off effort, slowly but steadily increasing my knowledge is about the best I can hope for. It's important to know your own skills, after all.

"Um..."

"Eh? Ah, yes?"

A faint voice suddenly called out to me, and I gave a belated response. Since this was the first time another student had spoken to me during summer supplementary classes, it took me a second to notice. The owner of this voice was a girl sitting next to me. It hasn't been every time, but I feel like I've seen her sitting next to me a few times before. Her looks and fashion didn't particularly make her stand out, and you might even call her plain, but there was one part that really stuck with me—Her height.

I would assume she was about 180cm tall. A girl taller than me was talking to me, and I felt an odd pressure for some reason. And yet her voice was devoid of any confidence.

"You dropped something."

"A-Ah, thank you very much." I must have dropped my bookmark when I opened my workbook.

I thanked the girl and picked it up, then I met eyes with her again.

"That's a bookmark from the summer fair, right? The one you get from the bookstore near the train station."

"Y-Yes, that's right."

I couldn't tell her I worked there part-time. Something inside of me prevents me from telling random people personal information about myself.

"I pass by there pretty often. What a coincidence."

"It's pretty much the only place you can buy books in the area, after all."

"You're right,ahaha." The tall girl let out a light laugh.

That's where our conversation ended. It's not that she necessarily wanted to talk with me or anything, but she rather spoke to me because of the bookmark, and found a common topic of conversation for a brief moment. It was an average type

of conversation with no particular meaning behind it. I glanced at the girl, who had already turned back towards her own desk, but then felt like something was off.

...Has she ever come into the bookstore? Since we're both high school students, our current daily lives should almost be the same, but I've never seen her at the cash register. I don't think I would forget someone who had the stature of a model like her. Well, it's not like I work there 24/7 either, and she might not be a faithful regular or anything. We might have just missed each other. With that thought, I turned towards my own desk.

That was about the only notable event compared to my usual summer classes. I didn't exchange any further words with the girl, either. I just spent my time the same as ever.

From the afternoon until the evening, I focused on my exam studies. After the final time block ended and I checked the time, I still had about 40 minutes until my shift would start. The bookstore was about ten minutes from there on my bike. Naturally, that's something I kept in mind when I chose this prep school.

I stuffed my workbooks into my bag and quickly stepped out of the prep school. I grabbed my bike and was about to ride off. Since this flow of action had repeated over the course of summer break, becoming something like a routine, my brain executed these actions automatically. However, something different happened today.

"Huh?"

I subconsciously blinked in confusion. Right as I was bedalling on my bike, I spotted someone sitting at the window seat of the pancake store right in front of the prep school. Her long black hair was kept up tidy with a katyusha headband, and she was wearing what looked to be a stylish flare skirt. Of course, this person who gave off the air of a prim and proper young lady was none other than my senior at work, Yomiuri-senpai.

The people with her must be friends from her university. They were seated at a seat for four inside the store, having a serious discussion while munching their pancakes. Since I was fairly close to them, and because they were talking with quite loud voices, I could make out pieces of their conversation. Two of them seemed to be Yomiuri-senpai's age, and were probably university students, but the third woman had a much different air about her, which stood out in his heat.

After all, compared to the other girls who were wearing clothes befitting the hot summer weather, she was clad in a long-sleeved cardigan, observing the faces of Yomiuri-senpai and the other two.

“Now, who can disagree? Our humanities research is being compared with other natural sciences and being called a soft science because it can’t contribute to society. We’re even having our existence questioned. At this rate, all your research and its validity will be nullified.”

The university students seemed to be unable to say anything in the face of this harsh statement. They just shrunk in place while exchanging helpless gazes. At the same time, the knowledgeable woman smiled without a care in the world, picking up another piece of pancake and lifting it to her mouth. No matter how you looked at it, this wasn’t a conversation to have in a popular pancake store, but the other customers around them either had no idea what they were talking about and thus didn’t intervene, or just ignored it as another piece of background noise. Amidst this heavy atmosphere, one person finally opened their mouth. It was Yomiuri-senpai.

“If we were to define natural sciences with the act of proving reproducibility of laws through experiments, as far as the inventions gained from natural sciences go, they clearly have a higher contribution towards human society. As long as this is a generally accepted fact, there is no room for us to deny the natural sciences from our point of view.”

“Clever. It seems like you’ve accepted the fact that twisting the truth to disagree with a statement is just foul play.”

“Yes, and I say that there is a meaning behind humanities research.”

“For example? Researching literature or historical facts is but a simple fool’s errand. I disagree with the idea of the royal family offering resources towards research that provides us with no benefits.”

“Discovering the truths behind the history our ancestors took is a primitive and essential question on how human beings should behave.”

“Is that so? Literature and history are nothing more than memories passed down to the present from people in the past. Even if you grasp this concept, it won’t allow you to understand the tendencies of a modern and average human being.”

“Know the past, and you shall know the future. Should we not search the past to find hints for how to solve modern problems?”

“You’re saying that history will repeat itself?”

“Yes. We can see that there are reasons for social conflict that have repeated themselves over and over in the past. So would it not be fair to say that learning from the past will open a path to find adequate answers in the present?”

“Ahh, that’s quite illogical, Yomiuri-kun.”

“Huh?”

“The very maxim that history will repeat itself is nothing but an impression from a person in the past. With no substantial data that exists from the past, it is impossible to prove any reproducibility no matter how much you research it.”

“Urk...”

Yomiuri-senpai must have been stabbed where it hurt, and she lost her ability to make a counterpoint. The knowledgeable woman, for her part, held a piece of pancake on her fork and twirled it around.

“The present age has made it possible to observe data from any event you could imagine. The acquisition and gathering of this has been done quite easily, and this brings the truths of people who supposedly were unable to be substantiated to the foreground. Whether or not the people of the future can learn a lot from the past or not, this is the present day for us right now. If one wants to gain hints from the past to solve a problem, it should be your first priority to do so with the help of natural sciences, correct? Are there any objections?” The woman jerked her chin as she asked this, and Yomiuri-senpai responded immediately.

“Yes. The values of people in our present day have remained unbroken and exist atop our culture. By learning about literature, you learn of the past, learn of their religion, learn of their manners, which then allows you to gain an adaptable and accurate observation as to how we ended up the way we are right now. For example, a certain country’s artist creates a music video which looks down on another country’s religion, which then creates an outbreak of anger from these citizens. Is there any scientific way to prove the reason for this anger? Can you come up with any estimation or formula for how to quell their anger? A researcher of humanities would surely come up with several different tentative theories.”

“Hmm, quite the aggressive objection, but your reasoning is not wrong.”

In fact, her actions showed that it must have been quite a strong argument. For the first time, the woman stopped playing with her fork and started to think about what Yomiuri-senpai had said. However, it took her a mere few seconds to speak up again.

“How can you even prove the causality that this anger is related to and originated from that country’s history and religion?”

“Eh?”

“Did this anger arise solely because their culture had been looked down upon? Maybe the music might have made the inhabitants uncomfortable, and the format of the video aided in amplifying this anger?”

“That correlation could be revealed with thorough investigation and social experiments with the people involved.”

“Checkmate, I’d say.”

“Eh? ...Ah.”



Yomiuri-senpai froze up, and the woman stole a piece of her pancake with a smile. Unbefitting of her mature and knowledgeable age, the woman started chewing on the slice she stole like an innocent child.

“You can’t defend against that. Basically, you just admitted yourself that looking through past literature was meaningless, and that we should focus on research about what is occurring in the present. What a shame, prepare a better logic next time, Yomiuri-kun.”

“Urk...” Yomiuri-senpai held her head in frustration and defeat.

After that, she stabbed her fork into her pancake and stuffed it into her cheek. Seeing her aggressively chew on it while still pouting made her seem much more childish, which honestly surprised me. The whole question and answer spiel, and even the sight of her right now, was completely different from how I knew her at work. Since she always shows nothing but leisure and superiority towards me, seeing her at a loss for words and beaten into a corner was oddly refreshing.

“Kudou-sensei, how can you make so many objections for the opposing side? You’re also part of the faculty for humanities.” Yomiuri-senpai asked.

It seems like this knowledgeable woman was named Kudou. Judging from the fact that Yomiuri-senpai called her ‘Sensei,’ she must be a professor, or rather an associate professor. I read in a book once that you can’t become a professor without reaching a certain age, and this woman didn’t look that old to begin with.

“It’s simple, really. I understand that true feelings and lip service are two different things.”

“I see... So then, what argument would you have made, Sensei?”

“I would have started by asking ‘What’s wrong with being a soft science’?.”

“...Eh?”

“It’s true that humanities is categorized as a soft science, but you can still argue against the premise that it doesn’t posit any contribution to humanity. It’s true that the natural sciences’ research and progress will directly impact and influence humanity’s well-being as a whole, but sadly the happiness of humanity is not something that has a direct value associated with it. Righteousness and happiness sadly don’t share any common tendencies across all of humanity. For example, I personally see this time of eating sweet and delicious pancakes as the greatest happiness there could be, but what percentage of people in this world would agree with me?”

“Isn’t leaving behind children in this world generally seen as a shared happiness between humans?”

“So are you saying those who don’t want to have children can never be truly happy?”

“...A valid point. There are a lot more people in today’s age who do not want children.”

“Exactly. As things stand, the thesis of humanity’s happiness—or how humanity should continue to exist—is exceptionally vague. Even the results and inventions of natural sciences can only achieve things that are superficial. Precisely because we are part of the soft sciences, and a practical science, you should accept our studies if you do not want society and this world to fall to ruin. That’s probably what my answer would have been.”

“Ahh, when you put it that way...”

“Bringing attention to communication with other countries wasn’t a bad attempt. If you had accepted the fact that we are a soft science, but then showed the value we offered, it might have been a better attempt.”

“Very interesting... Thank you very much, Kudou-sensei.” Yomiuri-senpai lowered her head towards the woman slightly and let out a sigh. “Man, I really can’t beat you.”

“No. You’re amazing, Yomiuri-san, I couldn’t follow at all from the very beginning.”

“Right, right~”

“Hey, you two. Don’t act like this doesn’t have anything to do with you. I’m treating you to some expensive pancakes, so you have to entertain me. Now, for the next topic of our debate...”

“Ehh, there’s no way we can win against Yomiuri-san!”

The university girls raised groans of despair. As for Yomiuri-senpai, right when a new topic of conversation came up, she averted her gaze from her friends, probably to hide her frustration. In doing so, she coincidentally looked over in my direction... or maybe not so coincidentally, judging from the circumstances. She then met eyes with me as I stood next to the street. *Crap*, I thought.

I might have accidentally picked up parts of their conversation, but if you think about it objectively, I was pretty much just eavesdropping. I can’t really say I was doing anything above-board there. However, Yomiuri-senpai looked away from me immediately and glanced down at her wristwatch.

“I’m sorry, Kudou-sensei, I need to head to my part-time job.”

“Yes, feel free. Don’t worry about the payment.”

“Thank you very much for treating me.” Yomiuri-senpai gave a polite bow, put her bag over her shoulder, and left the store.

When she passed by me, she gave me a faint glance that looked more like a message than anything, so I followed after her. A few minutes later, when the pancake store wasn't in sight anymore, I spoke up to Yomiuri-senpai.

"I'm sorry about what happened before."

"Since you've apologized, you basically admit to your guilt, correct?"

"Okay, hold on. That's a misunderstanding. I didn't do it on purpose."

"So you're a criminal who doesn't know when to give up, I see. ... Well, I don't think you were stalking me or anything."

"I'm glad to have received your good faith."

"Since you're pretty clever, you'd probably use an even more sick method if you were stalking someone."

"I really didn't want *that* kind of good faith, okay?" In the face of such harsh criticism, I opened my bag and showed her my reference books. "I just came from my summer classes. I'm taking them at the prep school nearby."

"Ahh. I see, my friend."

"Waah, so much trust and reassurance in your weird choice of words."

"Basically, you weren't just waiting for me, but were also listening in on our conversation?"

"That's..."

She set me up. I walked right into her guided question, leaving me unable to say anything. Seeing this, Yomiuri-senpai burst out laughing.

"I was just joking. Just paying you back a bit since you saw me in such an embarrassing situation. Come on, let's go."

"Ah, yes."

I hurriedly got off my bike and started walking next to Yomiuri-senpai, pushing it as I went. I briefly glanced over at her. With her beautiful black hair, her prim and proper clothes, she gave off the air of a noblewoman as she was bathed in the white sunlight. Although it was already getting close to evening, it seemed as bright and sunny as noontime. It was nighttime last month when we went to the movie theater, but these clothes made her seem even more neat and tidy than usual.

"I didn't think you'd be there to see me have my logic destroyed and frustrated like that. My pride as a senior was greatly injured."

"No, that's not..."

I never had any respect for you to begin with—I forced myself to stop before I said these words. However, the nuance in what I had said before then seemed to have been conveyed, as Yomiuri-senpai gave me a sharp glare. Feeling like I was being stabbed by a million needles, I quickly changed the subject.

“By the way, who was that person just now?”

“Are you talking about Kudou-sensei?”

“Yeah, her.”

“That’s Junior-kun for you. You had three young university students at your disposal, but you looked at the ripe woman instead.”

“Aren’t you being the rude one for talking about her age?”

“Those kinds of things are allowed if it’s between women, Junior-kun.”

I wonder if she learned about that from this Kudou-sensei as well. Of course I didn’t even dare to ask. I don’t want any more trouble than I’ve already gotten myself into today.

“Kudou-sensei is an associate professor at my university. I imagine you must have guessed as much from her age, right?”

“Yes, vaguely. But aren’t you on summer break right now? Do you usually eat pancakes with your professors like that?”

“She sometimes invites us out like that. Well, not many people actually join her.”

“So you are different. Is that what you’re saying, Mr. Self-conscious?”

“50 points for that remark.”

“Are you displeased now? Normally you’d always tease me like that.”

“At least call me Ms. Self-conscious. I am a woman after all.”

“That’s what you’re displeased about?”

Apparently she didn’t have any complaints about being called self-conscious.

“At my university, I’m actually in the group of diligent people. I doubt you can even imagine how I must be, since I act so completely differently around you.”

“I know that you’re clever, so it’s not that much of an image breaker... I was just impressed that there’s always a higher place, huh.”

“Kudou-sensei seems like she’s living in a different world, yeah.”

“I can’t really tell much with just that one scene I saw.”

“She’s pretty much always like that. Like she’s bottomless, and it’s often hard to tell what she’s even thinking~”

“Well that’s pretty much how you seem to me, Yomiuri-senpai.”

She’s a girl older than me who seems to always have some kind of trick up her sleeve, not allowing me to understand anything about her. With how knowledgeable and quick-witted she is, it always feels like she’s got me dancing on top of her palm. Maybe the age gap between us is something I subconsciously became aware of, which then causes me to react like that. Maybe this is something totally common. If I were to stand on the same stage as Yomiuri-senpai, would I be

able to fully understand her? While I was thinking that, Yomiuri-senpai made a frank expression.

“Ehh, I don’t want that.”

“Don’t want what exactly?”

“You’re thinking about how you’ll push me down one day, right?”

“Huh?”

Unable to progress what I had just been told, I let out a dumbfounded voice.

“It’s frustrating if you lack knowledge and wits, okay? One day I’ll tell you.”

“Was education always a battle like this?”

“That’s how I enjoy it. Did you not expect that?”

“No, it makes total sense.”

Judging from her looks alone, she’s a prim and proper book reader, and a literary girl who tries to gain knowledge by reading books. However, she also has the rebellious heart of a young girl. That is how Yomiuri Shiori works.

“But holding such a long and serious debate must be exhausting, right?”

“Of course it is. You always have to be on edge so that your logic doesn’t fall apart, and you can’t relax either. Not to mention that Kudou-sensei is the type of person who immediately pries apart any kind of gap or contradiction with your logic. It’s so stressful and exhausting that I really don’t want to go through that kind of thing before my part-time job.”

“Despite that, you were quite proactive.”

“If I’m doing something, I go at it full strength. Although it’s annoying. Well, if I’m exhausted, I can just recharge my energy in a different way.”

“In what way?”

“By teasing you. I get a lot of energy and HP back. Ahh, talking with you is so relaxing, Junior-kun.”

“Aren’t you just preying on the innocence of other people?”

“Thanks for being the back of my chair, lad~” She sounded like an old lady, putting one hand on my bike’s basket and pretending to stagger.

“Um.” I was about to ask her to quit using me like some kind of walking cane, but I stopped myself.

I see. This is the biggest difference between Ayase-san and Yomiuri-senpai. After we made it through the small alley and reached the main street, the bookstore was right in front of us, with both of us walking here together. Yomiuri-senpai is unable to decline Kudou-sensei’s invitation to eat out no matter how bothersome it is, and she still participates in the discussion. Of course, she probably sees merits in it large enough for her to pull through all of it, but normally you would want to

avoid physical and mental exhaustion as much as possible. Even so, she manages to keep both sides in balance, which is pretty amazing.

In my case, it makes me want to forgive her for anything she does for the sake of her own convenience. Even if she comes up with contrived nonsensical logic at times, the conversation is enjoyable enough for me to ignore it. When you have someone who you can be relaxed around and use to your convenience in the good sense of the word, you can balance your diligent side with your not-so diligent side. Maybe everything would be resolved if Ayase-san had someone like that?

“Ah...”

Right as I was thinking about that, Yomiuri-senpai and I walked into the bookstore, running into Ayase-san who seemed to have just arrived herself. It felt like another coincidence that happened today, but then again, we were in the same shift so it wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

“Yaho, Saki-chan!”

“Mm. Ah, yes, hello. You two were together?”

It appeared that this encounter was quite unexpected for Ayase-san, and she showed a cool reaction similar to how she would act at home, but quickly flashed a friendly smile. The only one who didn't notice that anything was off was Yomiuri-senpai.

“We just happened to meet near the prep school he's attending, right, Junior-kun?”

“Um... yes, that's right.” My response came out a bit late.

Whether it was by coincidence or not, I started to feel awkward with Ayase-san actually in front of it. Maybe it's because I've been thinking about her constantly. I felt pathetic, even though I hadn't done anything wrong.

“Just so happened to? I see.” Ayase-san slowly repeated what Yomiuri-senpai had said like she was chewing on the words, then she smiled. “Well, even if you were close enough to meet up outside of work, I, as his family, would be relieved to know that Asamura-kun is with someone as wonderful as Yomiuri-san.”

“Ehhh? You're a good teaser, Saki-chan.”

“I am merely gifted with good guidance from you Senpai, fufu.” Ayase-san's shoulders gently moved up and down as she giggled.



I guess that's about to be expected from her high adaptability. She seems to have already mastered her ability to converse with Yomiuri-senpai. However, something felt off to me. Did Ayase-san ever do something like this? Namely, to banter about the relationships of a stranger she wasn't all too close with?

With that thought plaguing me, and also with the conversation about the pool in mind, I had a mountain of things I wanted to talk about with Ayase-san, so I decided to bring them up during work. However, as it had been before, the timing today was unbelievably awful.

Just when I had a tiny bit of time on my hands, Ayase-san was busy at the cash register, and when I was folding some book covers for later, Ayase-san left to apparently check the condition of the bookshelves. Even when break time arrived and I asked 'Did you get a response from Narasaka-san?' Ayase-san simply shook her head and left the room to buy some drinks outside. It felt like she was avoiding me.

Time passed until it was already late enough for us to leave. I finished my preparations to leave and waited for Ayase-san like I always would. However, only Yomiuri-senpai came out of the changing room.

"Ah, Junior-kun. Saki-chan asked me to tell you something. Apparently she wants to stop by somewhere, so you can go home without her."

"Eh?" I blinked in confusion.

I didn't hear anything about that, though? I panicked a bit and checked my phone, but I hadn't received any kind of message or email from Ayase-san. Right as I was in a baffled daze, my phone vibrated. I panicked and looked down at the screen, and saw a single line on there.

'I'll be shopping for something, so you can go home without me.'

That was the only sentence I received over LINE. 'Got it', I responded. It's not like there aren't any stores that are open after 10pm of course. Maybe she's buying something that'd be too awkward to purchase with me around? That being said, this is all so abrupt that I can't help but be curious about it. Yet again, it felt like she was avoiding me. No, no, no. There's no way, right?

While thinking about all of this, I pedaled my bike and quickly reached our flat. I was yet again reminded how quickly I could make it home if I was riding my bike normally. However, when I asked myself if I really wanted to get home that badly, then the answer was an obvious no. It seems like I've gotten used to coming home with Ayase-san over the past few weeks.

I parked my bike in the usual parking lot for the flat and made my way up to our apartment. Since it was Monday, my old man was already home, and probably

asleep since he had to get up early tomorrow. As for Akiko-san, she must be working right now. I quietly muttered 'I'm home' so that I wouldn't wake up my old man and headed to the living room. Normally, this would be when Ayase-san would start making dinner for us, but... I can't always rely on her, huh?

I opened up the fridge and spotted some salad. Beside I spotted a small pot covered with plastic wrap.

"Miso soup, huh?"

Figuring that Ayase-san would be home soon as well, I prepared two bowls for the miso soup and another two for the rice, one for each of us. I took out the salad, wondering what I should make for the main dish. When I checked through the freezer and fridge again, I found some small plastic packs in the freezer.

"What are these?"

When I took them out, they turned out to be cooked rice with added ingredients, but frozen. There was rice colored brown from the soup stock, as well as sliced shiitake mushrooms, carrots, and other ingredients mixed in there.

"I'm home."

I turned around and saw Ayase-san enter the front door.

"What? Ah, dinner... Sorry, I'll get to it right away." She said.

"Ah, no, don't worry about it. I was thinking I might as well do it myself today. What am I supposed to do with this, by the way?" I showed her the plastic container with the cooked rice.

Since I had lived most of my life without the concept of cooking rice, I never came up with the idea of putting cooked rice in the freezer.

"Ah, well. I made that in advance, so you just have to warm it up in the microwave."

"...How many minutes?"

"It says on the microwave."

When she said that, I actually had no clue what she meant, so I checked the microwave. On it, there were different recommended times for cooking different kinds of things that you'd want.

"Ah, this?"

There was an illustration there with rice inside a bowl that said 'Heat up' on it. We've been using this microwave for a solid five years, and I'd never noticed that icon. I put the frozen container into the microwave and went to press the start button.

"Ah, wait. Take the lid off."

I was confused. "Why is that?"

“If you leave the lid on, the ice inside will melt, and the rice will get all sticky. I don’t like it like that.”

“I... see?”

I actually had no idea what she was talking about, but if that made it better, I decided I might as well listen to her. As I was warming up the cooked rice, Ayase-san took care of preparing the miso soup she took out from the fridge. Along with the special rice, we also had the tofu miso soup and salad. Ayase-san also took out some tomatoes from the fridge, cut them into small pieces, and put them on top of the salad. It felt fairly luxurious to see the green color of the lettuce, cabbage, and cut radish and the white color of the salad mixed with the red color of the tomatoes.

“It looks really good.”

“When cooking a Japanese-themed meal for a family, it always ends up looking a bit brownish, so if you add tomatoes or paprikas, it gives it a bit more color.”

Paprikas are basically colorful bell peppers that come in a variety of red, orange, and even yellow or green. I’d looked them up online once. Also, they’re not as bitter as bell peppers, so with a bit of washing, you can even eat them raw. Ever since Ayase-san became responsible for the cooking in our family, more and more weird dishes and ideas for cooking started to pop up. Or maybe my and my old man’s cooking knowledge is just super outdated. But, leaving aside broccoli or cauliflower, I don’t think you’d usually run into stuff like Romanesco or other exotic vegetables.

“There’s a lot of inventing going on, huh?” I started to feel apologetic for always eating everything and never thinking about it.

“It’s not that big of a deal if you ask me.”

“No no, I’m always thankful. Really. I already gave up on searching for that high-pay part-time job, so I just feel guilty for always being on the receiving end.”

“I’m already thankful that you looked for some studying-oriented BGM. So we’re even.” Ayase-san gave me a calm smile.

Only in times like these did it feel like all the awkward atmosphere from the past few days had vanished. After that, Ayase-san put some tea leaves into the small teapot. I saw her doing this and took out two teacups from the tableware shelf, putting them in front of Ayase-san. After she finished brewing the tea, she poured it into both the cups so we would have something to drink with our dinner.

The warmed-up rice went perfectly with the soup stock, and it was delicious. Not to mention that, just as Ayase-san had said, the rice didn’t stick together too much, which made it even better.

“If that’s not enough, you can warm up another pack from the freezer.”

“No, it’s pretty late already. This is enough.”

When I looked at the clock on the wall, I saw that it was getting close to 11pm. Now that I’ve eaten, I should take a bath and then head to bed. Not to mention that Ayase-san would always take her bath after me, so the longer I took, the longer she’d have to stay awake. However, it was indeed a comfortable dinner. I’m hesitating now. I almost felt like ending the day without cleaning up the whole thing we had gone through this afternoon. With a sigh, I forced myself to speak up again.

“So... about the whole pool thing with Narasaka-san.”

“We’re still talking about that?”

“I mean, I still haven’t gotten her contact information. If she’s waiting for my response, then I figured it would be rude to make her wait.”

“...Alright, I’ll tell you.” Ayase-san sounded a bit annoyed. She grabbed her smartphone from the dining table and started searching for Narasaka-san’s contact address.

“Wait.” I put up my palm, gesturing to her to stop.

Ayase-san gave me a somewhat puzzled expression.

“I actually don’t care about Narasaka-san’s contact address at all.”

“...What?”

“To be more accurate, I’m not all that interested in going to the pool with Narasaka-san.”

Ayase-san’s somewhat suspicious expression now turned into one of confusion. She was making the kind of face that basically read ‘What is he talking about?’ Or maybe I’m just saying something she didn’t expect me to. And she’s not wrong, because I’m going to say something that would go against anything she would have anticipated me to say.

I don’t mind the fact that Ayase-san doesn’t want to go to the pool. And if I wanted to respect her freedom of choice, I should wait for her to change her mind. People who willfully disregard other people’s opinions are just egoists deluded by their own stories. Reality is not some kind of story, which is why this kind of action is something toxic, something that could only hurt others. I know that, but that doesn’t mean I’m not allowed to worry about her.

“I want to go to the pool with you, Ayase-san.”

“I don’t get it.” Ayase-san looked like she had seen an alien—or rather, I had never met an alien, so I have no way of knowing what they look like—but she gave me that kind of look.

I, however, ignored this and continued.

“The reason I said I wanted to go is because I thought maybe you were interested in going yourself. The reason I wanted to know Narasaka-san’s contact info was because I was hoping that maybe you’d be jealous about me being the only person having fun.”

“Me?”

“You.”

“Why would I be jealous?” Ayase-san looked like she had lost all context for the current conversation.

If only this had overlapped with the feelings she simply hadn’t realized yet, I might have just been able to have a bit more relief.

“You want to go to the pool, right?”

Ayase-san’s mouth closed, and it seemed like she purposefully puckered her lips close so that no words could come out.

“I heard about it from Akiko-san. You’re bad with the heat, so you’d always ask for ice cream, or beg her to visit the pool with her when you were younger, right? And even right now, you can’t handle heat all too well, right?”

“That’s...”

“It’s true, right? I mean, when the A/C broke down, you immediately stayed in your room. Knowing that you work like that, you at least would be a bit interested to visit the pool with your friends, right?”

“Why are you so dead-set on getting me to go to the pool?”

“Remember what my old man said? Once we’re third-year students, we have to focus on university entrance exams, so we should have some fun now while we can.”

“Yeah, he did...”

“I understand that you want to become independent as quickly as possible. But if you keep stressing and pressuring yourself like this every single day, you’ll collapse before you even reach your goal. I’m worried about that, okay?”

“You’re worried...?”

“That’s right. I want you to take a step back, Ayase-san. I figure it would be best for you to spread your wings and get a bit of rest.”

I had said everything I wanted to, so all I could do was wait for Ayase-san’s response.

“You can’t... say that for sure.” Ayase-san’s gaze dropped to the table, her eyebrows narrowed downwards. “I don’t have the time to go to the pool. I really don’t.”

“Ayase-san...”

With her lips tightly pursed together, she reached for a sticky note on the table, scribbled down something that she was reading from her phone, and put it in front of me with such force that it felt like she was slapping it down on the table.

“I’m going to study now.” She said. She put her dishes in the sink and went to her room.

“No good, huh...?” I let out a sigh and dropped my gaze down to the sticky note.

It was a phone number, with a handwritten, albeit not-very-neatly-written, ‘Maaya’ below it, so this must be Narasaka-san’s phone number.

“Why would I go there all on my own...?” I slumped my shoulders in defeat and returned to my room after cleaning up the dishes.

Chapter 4: 25th of August (Tuesday)

After waking up, I remained in my bed, thinking to myself. Did I mess up yesterday?

“I probably did, huh?”

The voice I let out to my room’s ceiling didn’t reach anybody’s ears, and came back down to me again. I turned my head to the side and checked the time of day. It was already noon, but I was still sleepy. Because of all that had happened yesterday, and myself pondering about it all night, I didn’t get much sleep. Just how can I break Ayase-san’s stiff and thick-skinned consciousness? After all, Ayase-san’s mentality feels sharp and sturdy at the same time. Yet it was frail all the same.

After living with Ayase-san for the past two months, I’ve at least learned a lot about her. Even more so since we’ve been working together each day at our part-time job. If I had to guess, Ayase-san’s thought process probably went something like this.

Being a child means you get things given to you for free. Basically, you’re much more on the taking side than the giving side. When she was a child, she was as normal as any other child, asking her mother for ice cream, or that she would take her to the pool. She was always asking to take. Of course, that made perfect sense, and that’s how things are meant to be. However, Ayase-san doesn’t feel that way. That’s what’s so crucial about this.

Because of her family’s circumstances, Ayase-san stopped her childish days early in her upper years of grade school. She couldn’t allow herself to stay a child anymore. The world works on give & take relationships, but she chose to live more on the giving end of the spectrum. This was probably her own way of making up for her days as a child when she lived on the take side, under the wrong impression that she had troubled her mother by it.

She wanted to grow up as quickly as possible and ease her burden on her mother. Being given something for free probably reminds her of her dark past when she was a child. She would think that as soon as she was a bit selfish, she would only increase the burden on her mother. What irony. After all, Akiko-san herself told me the opposite is true.

‘I wanted her to be able to stay a child for longer.’

I felt my chest grow heavy just thinking about this. Even though they both care about each other, they want the wrong things. The mother wants her daughter to

stay a child for a bit longer, whereas the child wants to become an adult as quickly as possible. Making both parties happy is impossible. They contradict each other, after all. Not even adjusting worked. Ayase-san was still a child after all.

Maybe the current Ayase-san might have been able to come to terms with Akiko-san if they had talked it out and tried adjusting to each other. However, Ayase-san swallowed all of that and climbed the stairs to adulthood. She tried to carry her own burdens as early as possible, which resulted in this twisted thought process of self-reproach. That's why she can't obtain any composure, can't play around with an innocent heart. She can't forgive herself for the honest desire of simply going to the pool.

'I don't have the time to go to the pool. I really don't.'

Ayase-san's expression was as dry as ever when she said those words, but her voice sounded like she was putting on an act. But I'm the one at fault for not being able to say anything. If I were some kind of protagonist out of a story and chose a more dramatic sequence of events to attempt to persuade Ayase-san, maybe she would have changed her thought process about this...

No, that's not right. I shouldn't be running away from reality like this. If I want to save her, then I need to come up with an even sturdier plan. While I was thinking that, my alarm rang. It really was time for me to get up. So, after turning off the alarm, I slowly lifted myself out of bed.

I got up roughly between breakfast and lunch. I stood in the living room, wondering what to make. What should I eat? Or should I just wait until lunchtime rolls around? Normally, Ayase-san would be awake to make breakfast before my old man even left for his work, but she seemed to still be asleep. The proof of that was the dining table. Times like these happen. We can't always count on Ayase-san to make breakfast for us after all. Even back when we were in our end-of-term exam period, both my old man and Akiko-san didn't let Ayase-san make breakfast.

Anyway, as for my own stomach, I'm hungry. Maybe I should toast some bread. Right when I was considering what to do, the living room door opened.

"...Ah."

"Good morning, Ayase-san."

"...Morning."

She looked awfully sleepy. Her eyelids didn't even look like they were fully open. Even her usual dignified atmosphere she would keep up at home had vanished elsewhere. She was even wearing her clothes not nearly as neatly as usual. Both her attack and defense powers had gone down drastically.

"Did you not get much sleep?"

“I did get a bit... after 6am.”

I don't think you could really call that 'sleeping.' It must have been light outside by that point already. That's all-nighter territory.

“Why not get a bit more sleep? We don't have work until the evening.”

“I'm fine. ...What time is it right now?” She said, turning her head to look at the clock on the wall.

Her eyes had looked drowsy, but they suddenly opened wide in shock.

“Eh...? It's this late...?” Saying this, she looked at the dining table.

Naturally, nothing was there.

“Oh no, did he even have anything to eat?”

“No worries, it looks like he had some bread.”

A plate with toast crumbs on it was in the sink, although it didn't seem like he had time to put it in the dishwasher. He at least put away the butter or jam or whatever he had used back into the fridge. Well, before Ayase-san and Akiko-san came to live here, our breakfasts were usually like this. If we even ate anything, that is. So there's no reason for Ayase-san to feel guilty.

I tried to reassure Ayase-san, but she didn't seem to hear what I said. She bit her lip in frustration at her own mistake.

“This is the first time I've overslept like this.”

“Maybe the exhaustion just built up? You can get some more rest, it's fine.”

“That's... I'm really sorry! You haven't eaten anything yet, Asamura-kun. I'll make something right away.”

Ayase-san was clearly out of the loop. Not to mention she had large bags beneath her eyes.

“Ayase-san.” I called out to her with a strong voice.

“Y-Ye... s...?”

“I want you to hear me out without running away.”

“Eh... um, what is it?”

“Listen. When you first moved in here, do you remember what you told me?”

She let out a surprised voice. I guess she still does remember.

“...It really helps that we can 'adjust' so easily...?”

I nodded. That's exactly it. That was the first time we had shown our cards to each other. We exchanged information and decided to adjust to each other's wishes and desires. That's why I continued speaking.

“Right now, I've judged that you're clearly sleep-deprived, Ayase-san. You can try and argue against it, make up counterarguments against me, but just look at yourself in the mirror. I don't want you to make food in that kind of state. I'm

worried that you'll actually harm yourself. You can take a seat on a chair, but I'll make the food. That is my honest opinion."

"Urk... But I said I would be the one who makes the food."

"Principle is principle. You've gotta adjust to the situation and live with the ad hoc approach. Today, your mission isn't to make food, but to get some proper rest."

"B-But..."

"I normally wouldn't say this to you either, Ayase-san. You said so yourself, right? You've never overslept like this before, have you?"

".....No."

"So this is an irregular situation. You don't need to force yourself to do the same as always. Come on, just have a seat. Of course, you can also go back and get some more sleep." I said. I pulled out the chair Ayase-san always sat on.

The floor made a faint screeching sound in response.

"I'm just missing a bit of sleep, okay?"

"I know, but a sleep-deprived Ayase-san has the right to sit on this chair, so come on."

"...Okay." Ayase-san seemed to have resigned herself to her fate. She sat down on the chair.

This might be the first time I've seen Ayase-san act this weak. But more importantly...

"Do you want a slice of toast?"

She replied with a nod, so I took out one slice for her and one for me and stuffed them into the toaster. I also took out butter and jam from the fridge and placed them in front of Ayase-san. Along with the butter knife and spoon, of course. I also spotted some leftover ham and took it out of the fridge as well.



“Do you want me to fry the ham? I feel like you’re always doing that.”

“I like it that way, yeah.”

“You also like it a bit crispy, right?”

“...I like it that way, yeah.”

“I understand. It’s really good that way.”

Since we were in mutual agreement, I took out a frying pan, put some oil in it, and turned on the heat to gently sear the ham. A sizzling sound rang out, and it made me feel even more hungry. Why is it that the sizzling sound of a frying pan makes you feel that way? I put the golden-brown bread on a plate and brought it to the dining table. I did the same with the finished ham, which was slightly burnt on the corners, adding some black pepper on top of it. This is what Ayase-san always does. Huh? Does she do that before grilling it? I don’t know. Just then something else came to mind, and I opened up the fridge. We still had some milk left.

“Do you want some hot milk?”

“Hot milk in this heat...?”

“The A/C’s working, so it’s pretty cool in this room, right? If you’re going to take another nap, drinking something warm should help later.” I said, and Ayase-san grew quiet in response.

“...I’ll take some, then.”

“Gotcha.”

I poured some milk in a cup, warmed it in the microwave, and set it down in front of her. I made some barley tea for myself and put it in front of myself. I put my hands together.

“Then, let’s eat. Some vegetables added to the menu might be better, though.”

“It’s more than enough... Thanks for the food.” Ayase-san muttered. She put some butter on her bread, and ham on top, biting into it.

I did the same thing. For a while, the two of us just continued to eat, not saying a word. However, that one slice of bread was eaten fairly quickly, so Ayase-san next focused on her cup of hot milk. I looked at my own empty cup and considered getting another one. While I was thinking that, a sigh escaped Ayase-san’s lips. She put down the cup, which made a quiet clink.

“I’ve been thinking...” She said, and took another sip from her hot milk, almost like it was a special item she required in order to muster up her courage to speak.

“...I don’t mind going to the pool.” I had been reaching to pour myself another glass of barley tea, but my hand stopped halfway.

Slightly surprised, I turned towards Ayase-san again.

“You suddenly felt like going?”

Right now. Before going to bed, I was really against the idea of going, but... No, that's not right. I was wavering."

"Until 6am?"

"Until 6am."

"But now you feel like going?"

Ayase-san nodded.

"When I woke up this morning... I thought that maybe it wouldn't hurt. But I couldn't really say it."

While I listened to Ayase-san, I felt all strength vanish from my body. I was close to turning into a jellyfish on my chair. I didn't need any dramatic developments after all. In the end, Ayase-san just slept on it for one night and changed her mind. That's all it took.

I guess... this is just much more realistic after all. It made sense to me at least. What you need in reality isn't some guy who'd move mountains, but simply a small event like that. I read in a book before that the smallest trigger can change a person's fundamental thought process.

"But there's one problem."

Huh?

"And it's a very crucial problem that also involves you, Asamura-kun."

"You can't swim? I don't think I'm good enough to teach you."

"No, I can swim, okay?"

"Figures~"

I half-expected that not to be the reason. In reality, the real problem was indeed much more grave than I anticipated, and most certainly involved me.

"Since I didn't plan to go to the pool that day, I have a shift then. I think you do as well, Asamura-kun."

"What's the day for the pool trip?"

"The day after tomorrow, the 27th."

"Woah... seriously?"

"Yup, dead serious."

We have tomorrow, the 26th, off, and our next shift is on the 27th. That's a bit troublesome. Just when I got Ayase-san to agree, we can't even go to the pool in the first place. After I pondered about it for a bit, I put forth to Ayase-san several ways of dealing with this problem.

"Since you really want to go, let's do something about it."

"Can we?"

"Well, this happens a lot, so we should be fine."

“So it happens a lot...”

“Yeah, we’ll just ask for a change in shifts. Simple, right?” I said in a way that was supposed to make me sound confident.

Although it was a simple idea, it could prove very difficult to execute in reality, and I was fully aware of that.

The time of day had progressed to the point where the boiling and sizzling heat started to cool down a bit. More accurately, it was your average 4pm afternoon in Shibuya. A burnt smell drifted upwards from the asphalt, and Ayase-san and I walked next to each other as we made our way to work. We decided to head to work early so that we could ask the manager for a change of shifts.

I mentioned this before, but when it came to us travelling together, we had to adjust to each other either with the bike or by foot. Naturally, neither Ayase-san nor I enjoyed showing such consideration, but now we had a proper reason to. Though I never expected that we’d go to work together because of such a reason.

“It’s gotten more cloudy, huh? Thank goodness.” Ayase-san looked up at the sky as she muttered to herself.

Just as she had said, half of the sky was covered with clouds. Then again, there was still blue sky visible, so it hasn’t gotten darker or anything, but at least it cooled down a bit. It was a tad bit more comfortable outside thanks to that. After Ayase-san looked up at the sky while covering half her face with her hand, she adjusted the bag she had over her shoulder. It was a fairly big bag, but it contained the uniform she was taking home with her every day after all.

Today, Ayase-san gave a different impression compared to usual. She was wearing a brightly-colored top that had both sleeves and collar attached, not showing much skin at all. Where you’d wear a necktie, she had something like a small ribbon. In Ayase-san’s terms, it didn’t have much attack damage, but a lot of defense at least. Mind your manners when attempting negotiation. Maybe what I said is the reason she’s wearing these clothes.

Well, she did give off the impression that she was reliable and hardworking. However, she still kept her ear piercings in, almost like they were a honeybee’s stinger, warning anyone who dared to attack, which was also very much like Ayase-san. Also, I feel like her clothes would be getting really hot right about now.

“Aren’t you hot dressed like that? You won’t get a heatstroke, right?”

“It just got more cloudy, so I’m fine.”

“Did you get some sleep?”

“Sure did. Two whole hours.”

I feel like that's still not nearly enough, but pressing that matter any further would posit no benefit at all, and it would make it seem like I was treating Ayase-san like a child. I don't want her to go back to being a child by any means. As I was thinking that, our conversation ended, and there was nothing more to really talk about, so the two of us walked next to each other without saying a word.

With the ambient noise of the cars stuck in traffic, and the trucks driving around through town playing advertisements at a volume loud enough to bother the neighborhood, I once again realized that this indeed was Shibuya. Almost like Ayase-san had waited for a change of atmosphere, she suddenly spoke up.

"Sorry about yesterday."

"About the whole pool thing?"

"That too, but one more thing. When you came in to work with Yomiuri-senpai, I might have said something rude."

"Ahh..."

That conversation felt a bit off, yeah. She mentioned that, as a family, she could be reassured if I was that close with Yomiuri-senpai, and although the person in question laughed it off as a joke, I did indeed feel like this wasn't exactly Ayase-san's usual style. When a man and woman walk around outside together, they usually are regarded as a couple. This kind of stereotype might appear in your head, but isn't really something to direct at others, which was probably her train of thought.

"It's against our promise to hide any of these feelings, right? It's fine, I can disclose that, surely." Ayase-san almost sounded like she was telling herself, and continued with an uneasy tone. "If anything, I'd like you to be honest if you were dating."

"I see. Why is that?"

"I don't know... Let me leave it at that."

I thought it sounded weird. Like she knew, but couldn't answer. First she pries into my relationship with Yomiuri-senpai, and now she's not even looking me in the eyes. Both of these felt so profound in meaning that I found my heart beating harder as if I were expecting something.

—*Expecting something? Get a grip already, Asamura Yuuta.*

I forced my heart that was about to leap ahead to calm down and carefully waited for what Ayase-san would say next.

"After working together with her, I realized just how good of a person she is."

"Yeah, you're right."

“She’s kind, considerate, and a beauty to boot. She’s clever and knows pretty much everything, and you won’t even get tired from talking with her because of her unique humor.”

“Though she’s a bit of a slacker. And you can’t forget her dirty jokes.”

“That’s not a defect, you’d call it charm, okay? ... Well, maybe I’m just not too familiar with her yet. You’ve been working with her much longer than I have after all. Why am I holding a presentation about Yomiuri-san?” Ayase-san made a wry smile.

I wanted to ask the same thing. Just what is she trying to say?

“I just thought that she wouldn’t be too bad as an ‘Older sister’, you know. I really shouldn’t have said something that would restrict your freedom, so I’m sorry.” Ayase-san went to explain her odd reaction from yesterday.

It’s almost like she had prepared a note beforehand with the contents of what she wanted to talk about, and was just reading it word by word from memory inside her brain. *Hey, are those your true feelings?* Doubt filled my mind, but I ignored it. She said that she would properly explain what unsure and hazy feelings she had, and had revealed her hand. If I were to doubt any part of that and assume that there was a lie mixed in there, it would destroy the entire premise of our relationship. So really my only viable response is to nod.

“Okay, that’s fine. There’s no need to apologize anymore.”

“Got it.”

That’s enough. We’ll forget about this incident and let grass grow over it. This is our relationship, one that’s the most comfortable for both Ayase-san and I. However, for some reason I can’t explain, it felt like something was stuck inside my throat, leaving a bitter aftertaste and feeling of discomfort I couldn’t explain.

As we approached the train station, the number of people around us grew. Even though it wasn’t even time for the salarymen to check out from work, there were men wearing neckties and suits, and the clacking sound of high heels everywhere. There were even some students mixed in the mass. I realized something when I stopped my bike in the parking lot. I audibly clicked my tongue, and Ayase-san looked at me in shock.

“What’s wrong?”

“Say, Ayase-san.”

“What?”

“If we’re going home together as well, why did I even bring my bike with me?”

Couldn’t I have just left it at home if we went to work and would come home from work together?

“Eh?” Ayase-san looked at me like I just said something weird. “Because you had a reason to do so, right?”

“No, not at all. It was just out of habit.”

“W-Well, that happens from time to time... Pfft.”

“Habits are terrifying things, huh?”

“I’ll leave it at that.”

Her eyes were smiling. She made fun of my failure. Well... recently, she’s always been a bit tense, so I’d much prefer her to smile at my expense than not to at all. Either way, I parked my bike in the parking lot, walked back to where Ayase-san was waiting for me, and entered the employee area. There, we ran into a senior of ours and asked where the store manager was. When we opened the door to the office, the store manager was sitting at the window side of the room, at a number of desks forming an island.

“Oh... Asamura-kun and Asamura-san... Ah, no, Ayase-san, was it? Hello, you two.”

I can’t blame him for saying the wrong name. On our family register and on paper, Ayase-san’s real name was now Asamura Saki. Our parents didn’t go through a common-law marriage, but simply put their names together on the family register, which is why our entire family is Asamura now. However, at school or at work, where convenience demands it, Ayase-san goes by her old name. It’s also not like our family is anything special. With recent marriages, the names register, family names, and even used email accounts of the adults stay the same for convenience’s sake, or so I’ve heard.

For Ayase-san, this work was a place with new relationships to form, so she considered calling herself ‘Asamura Saki,’ but she apparently didn’t want to receive any kind of special treatment because she’s my little sister, or something like that. In the end, she started working with her name remaining ‘Ayase.’ Since I always call her ‘Ayase-san,’ none of the other employees had found out.

“Hello store manager. I was hoping to bother you for a second...”

“Hm?”

Realizing that we hadn’t ended the conversation with just a greeting, the store manager raised his head. Although he was barely in his late thirties, he managed to rise up to become a store manager, which showed his skill hidden behind his kindness.

“What’s up?”

“I’m sorry to suddenly bring this up... The two of us, Ayase-san and I, have the day off tomorrow the 26th, and have a shift the day after tomorrow on the 27th, but we were wondering if we could switch those shifts.”

“Switch the shifts...? That sure is abrupt. Did something happen?”

“Umm.”

If we came up with any half-baked lie, it would only risk everything, and I really didn’t want to lose this job. What’s important is that we weren’t lying, but that we also didn’t explain anything that wasn’t absolutely necessary. That’s why I said the following.

“A friend suddenly invited us somewhere.”

The store manager knows that Ayase-san and I attend the same school. That’s why we told him that a common friend of ours invited us. Narasaka-san might be closer to Ayase-san, but she also treats me somewhat like a friend, or that’s the feeling I get at least from our interactions. Ayase-san continued.

“Yesterday, she came back from a trip.”

That’s also not a lie. Narasaka-san just returned from a trip yesterday. That also explained the reason why she didn’t try to contact me until now. It makes sense. She wouldn’t contact some random guy like me when she’s out enjoying her vacation. But she did tell Ayase-san about it. However, the fact that it was ‘suddenly’ wasn’t entirely true. Ayase-san had known about this for a while, but I didn’t. That’s why I mentioned that, whereas Ayase-san commented on the whole trip thing.

Even without lying, you can hide the truth in some way. Though it doesn’t feel very comfortable to use this kind of negotiation method. This is where things are important, so we need to put our all into it.

“I know that we’re being selfish here, but is there any chance we can switch shifts?” I bowed deeply, and Ayase-san followed suit.

“Hmm, give me a moment.” The store manager said, typing away on his computer.

He must be looking at the shift schedule right now.

“Both of you two, huh...?”

As he was doing so, I glanced over at Ayase-san’s expression, filled with worry. Now then, how will things go from here on out? If he rejects our request, then we have to come up with something else. Of course, we can’t just disagree or skip work, but I also don’t want to force any negotiations and ruin the good relationship we have.

“The 27th is a Thursday, right?” The store manager said. He picked up the phone and called someone.

It must have been another staff member who was a candidate to trade their shift with us. After exchanging a few words, he hung up. That happened two times.

“It should be fine. Both people working tomorrow are veterans who have no problem having their shifts changed, so switching with you should work.”

“Really!?”

“Yeah.” The store manager continued with a grin. “So because of that, I expect you to work a whole lot tomorrow.”

It was a perfect example of a candy and whip. Well, there’s no way a high school student could win against an adult. Maybe he saw right through our excuse immediately. However, that doesn’t matter as long as we get to go to the pool that day. That’s plenty enough of a success for us. For now, we thanked the store manager.

“Yes, we’ll do our best!”

“Y-Yes, we will!”

We both lowered our heads deeply and stepped out of the office. After we closed the door, Ayase-san let out a sigh.

“Thank goodness.”

“Glad it all worked out, right?”

“I think I might have been the most nervous I’ve been in my entire life there.”

“I seriously doubt that.”

We changed into our uniforms and began our shift. Today, our job was to put the newly-delivered books on the bookshelves. With a trolley in hand, we walked around the forest of bookshelves.

“Ayase-san, next is... Over there. It’s a technical book.”

“Understood, Asamura-san.” She said, taking several books out of the cardboard box on the trolley and walking ahead to the next shelf, as pushing the trolley over there would just be a waste of time.

She put the books into the empty spaces of the bookshelf and I pulled the trolley after her a moment afterwards. After that, I helped her.

“Saving time like this is great.”

“You’re even more amazing, Asamura-san. Knowing the locations of the shelves really helps our overall efficiency a lot.”

“I don’t remember where *everything* is or anything.”

Today’s new arrivals were more of the genres I was interested in, which was why I knew at a first glance which shelf they belonged to. It was just a lucky case today,

nothing more. In the end, the cardboard box ended up empty a solid 15 minutes before we anticipated.

“Alright, then let’s take a break.”

“Yeah.”

We returned the trolley to the back storage and then headed to the break room together. We poured some cold tea into two plastic cups and sat down.

“Say, Asamura-kun.” Ayase-san suddenly spoke up.

Since it was just the two of us in the break room, she switched back to calling me how she would at home. After she gulped down the contents of her cup, she stood up to get another fill. She let out a sigh, and continued.

“It’s not that you don’t have any friends, but rather that you don’t try to make any, right?”

“I’m not actively avoiding it or anything.”

“But are you conscious of that fact? You’re not, are you?”

“Yeah, I don’t really care all that much.”

“I see.”

“Well, you’re not wrong. It’s not that I’m desperate for friends.”

It’s not that I don’t want any, I just don’t go around actively searching.

“To be perfectly honest, I never thought that we could change shifts so easily... No, that’s not it. I was just scared of negotiating for it. Since I didn’t want to, I subconsciously made myself think that it was impossible.”

“I’m just used to it. I’ve switched my shift several times before.”

“Doesn’t that just show you have much more experience in communication than I do?”

I had never thought about it that way.

“...I guess you could say that.”

“When we entered the bookstore today, you went to ask a senior where the store manager was, and even when we were negotiating with him, you were always resolute and confident, saying exactly what you wanted and needed to... So I thought you don’t seem like someone who struggles with communication.”

“You’re just overestimating me.”

I’m not that skilled or anything. I’ve just been working here long enough that I can talk with everybody easily enough.

“When it’s a place that expects earnestness from you, it’s just much easier. That’s the reason you think that it’s some kind of insane communication skill.”

“I can’t do that.”

“You can. Once you get used to this kind of work, you can. Also, you’re already doing plenty of it. From how I see it, being able to indulge in friendships where no concrete and shared rules exist is far more difficult. I... I’m not good at that at all. So to me, you’re much more skilled at communication than I am.”

“...That’s not...”

It is true. She might not have said it out loud, but the reason she found her place easily in the family is because she decided on the rules with me from the very beginning. Now that she finally feels motivated to go to the pool, I definitely can’t tell her this, but I’m the one who’s far more anxious now. After all, we’re going to the pool. Together. Honestly speaking, I can probably hold a proper conversation with Ayase-san, and maybe Narasaka-san, but I don’t have the confidence that I can have fun with our other classmates around. Even though the day I would be doing so was approaching rapidly.

Chapter 5: 26th of August (Wednesday)

It was like any other Wednesday morning, with the end of summer break slowly but steadily approaching. I matched my alarm clock with the time Ayase-san would usually wake up, and succeeded in getting up in time. It was barely 6:30am, and I was as tired as could be.

When I walked into the living room, Ayase-san was already preparing breakfast. Upon seeing Ayase-san working like that, I was entranced for a moment.

“Good morning. Ayase-san.”

“Asamura-kun. You’re up early today, huh?” She turned around for a moment and gave me a brief response.

“I figured today would be busy after all.” I said and sat down in my seat.

Tap tap... tap. Ayase-san’s hand cutting the carrots suddenly stopped, and she turned around with a somewhat worried tone of voice.

“Busy? We only switched shifts, right? Or did you have other plans today, Asamura-kun?”

“Ah. No, no, no.”

She must have been worried that I actually had different plans today but ignored them all for the sake of going to the pool with her, I guess.

“Really?”

“I swear. I had no plans whatsoever today. If I hadn’t finished my homework yet, this would have been the day for me to work on it, but I’ve already gotten that over and done with.”

“So then...”

Why are you up?—She probably meant to ask as she looked at me quizzically. Well, it made sense that she wouldn’t know. This is a problem only a loner guy like me would have.

“I don’t have a swimsuit.”

“...What about the one for gym class?”

“I chose baseball over swimming, since my friend preferred that.”

“Ahh, I see.”

“He went on and on about some kind of morals that it would be a waste if we always agreed with each other.” I remembered the face Maru had made back then and sighed.

Summer gym classes are generally chosen by the students, and I had to choose between pool swimming lessons or a ball game. Still, even if I had taken swimming

classes and bought the swimsuit for that, it would have been pretty lame to wear that outside of school. You might think I'm being a little too picky about it, but there has to be some kind of dress code when going to the pool with popular people in my class, right?

"Ahaha, you're exaggerating too much. So you're going to buy one later, huh?"

"Yeah, I need to buy one. Luckily, our shift ends at 6pm, so I have plenty of time to buy one later."

Normally I would have a full shift ending only at night, but today it's only half of a usual shift, because this would have been my shift tomorrow.

"So you're going after work?"

"I have to. When I looked into it, I saw that the store selling swimsuits only opens up at 11am, and that's the earliest."

"I see... so you couldn't fit it in between."

"It would be cutting it too close, and I want to avoid that."

The store manager told us to do our work properly today after all, so I definitely do not want to end up late today of all days. If I walked into a store at 11am, I might be able to make it out at 12 if I don't hesitate much or lose my way... which I don't have any confidence in.

"Is it that confusing to buy a swimsuit? ...Oh yeah, you don't really have much interest in fashion, do you?"

I nodded with a sour expression. That's absolutely correct. Fashion and all that surrounds it just don't jive with me. I don't know any basics about how to choose clothes. Why do they have so many different types of them? How are they different? Are they like book genres? I can already see myself being absolutely lost with a wide arrangement in front of me. How am I even supposed to ask for help?

I bet I'd just waste my time being lost or hesitating, so I at least want to take my time instead of rushing myself in order to not be late. Not to mention that I also need to prepare for tomorrow. Going with fellow classmates to the pool during summer break might not seem like that big of a deal, but it'd be troublesome if I realized I was missing things once I was there.

Also, I told Ayase-san that I didn't have any plans for the day, but since I didn't think I would have any shift today, I also need to get some laundry done in the morning.

"I see, got it. Ah, that reminds me. I got the schedule for tomorrow from Maaya."

"Alright."

"I'll send it to you later."

"Thanks."

Of course, Narasaka-san contacted me and invited me yesterday. I just waited to confirm it because of the possibility that the whole shift changing wouldn't work out. I can't say no right after agreeing after all. Right after we got the permission from the store manager, Ayase-san contacted her, and it took around a minute to get a response. That's Narasaka-san for you.

As we made small talk back and forth like that, my old man woke up at around 7am. He took a detour to the bathroom and then came to greet us in the living room.

"Morning, Saki-chan. Oh, Yuuta as well? Now that's a rare sight."

"Morning."

"Yeah, morning."

He made his way to his seat. I stood up and prepared a rice bowl and served him some rice, but my old man made a dejected expression. Yeah, yeah. You must have wanted Ayase-san to serve you the rice. I get it. She's taking care of the miso soup, so put up with it for now.

"Here you go."

"Thanks a lot, Saki-chan."

"You're welcome."

In most cases, Ayase-san's morning menu is a simple recipe that doesn't take much time to make. Today it was tofu with spinach and boiled greens. The tofu was at the top, with ginger and flaked bonito below it and some cut onion sprinkled on top. So she adds soy sauce to that, huh? I had no idea about this until recently, but apparently there are a lot of onion varieties to season the tofu with. Ayase-san told me these are called green onions.

When I looked up onions you'd put on tofu online, I found tons of onion types, including green onions, welsh onions, small onions, chives, and even thin green onion shoots. I was left confused as to what I would even use if I made tofu on my own. Anyway, today it seems to be green onions. Along with that were three grilled potatoes, which she put on a blue plate and put in front of my old man.

"I'll get your share done in a second, Asamura-kun."

"No need to rush. My old man has to leave soon after all."

If we had school today, Ayase-san and I should be getting ready to leave soon as well, but thankfully that's not the case.

"Sorry about that." My old man commented while munching on the food. He quickly finished his breakfast.

At around half past 7am, he left the house, and I put his dishes into the dishwasher. Almost like they had switched on purpose, Akiko-san came home at

around 8am. Since she had her breakfast before coming home, she went straight to the bedroom. It was the same usual morning routine ever since Akiko-san and Ayase-san moved in together with us. It reminded me of the routine back when we were in the middle of our school term.

Since summer break is about to end, I should start getting back into the groove that I had going before. After I helped clean up the dining room, I went back to my room and checked over our plans for tomorrow, namely Narasaka-san's LINE message that Ayase-san relayed to me. It was one large paragraph with the detailed plans, almost like she was a grade school teacher making sure the children knew the program. Maybe she wrote all of this when she was on the trip that Ayase-san mentioned? I guess Narasaka-san goes all out even when she's playing, huh"

'Since Maaya went out of her way to plan all of this, make sure to read it carefully.'

That was the message she added at the very end. Despite not wanting to go at first, now that she's decided on it, she's sure being positive about it. It's exactly as Akiko-san said.

—She was a troublesome child. Begging for ice cream, wanting to go to the pool, complaining if I didn't comply...

Feeling that maybe Ayase-san finally had regained some of her old desire to have fun, I found myself becoming happy as well.

A bit before noon, we stepped out of the house and arrived at our work with enough time left before the shift would start.

"Alright! Let's rock this today, Ayase-san."

"Yes, let's do our best, Asamura-san."

The second we walked inside, Ayase-san changed the way she addressed me. It seems like she's even more motivated now to not betray the store manager's trust. Right after starting our shift, Ayase-san and I were tasked with the cash register. That's probably the most stressful job when working at a bookstore. Especially for people like me who are more on the asocial side of things, and aren't too comfortable with speaking with random people. But it's my job, so I have to do it.

Once I had a bit of time free from the cash register, I used it to fold some book covers. I used cardboard as backing paper to cut it, folded it from top to bottom, and left an opening for the book. Since every book is of a different thickness, I have to be mindful that it still fits inside depending on how I fold it. On top of that, I can't give a customer a book with book covers that I have to redo.

There was a time where I folded both the right and left side, and because the book was limited, I had to use a lot of covers, and it took a lot of time. I got scolded

for it in the end. Ayase-san never went through that. Just as Yomiuri-senpai said, she's far more talented than I.

That day, we also had to clean the office and changing rooms. And oddly enough, now that it's a day with a lot of work, Yomiuri-senpai is taking the day off. She's not doing this on purpose, is she? I mean, I originally had the day off today as well, so I can't complain.

"I guess all that's left is to throw out the trash."

"I'll do that."

"No, I've got some trash myself, so I'll do it."

Right as I tried to step out of the office, the manager came in.

"Ohh, it's all clean now. Yup, good work today, you two." He praised us.

I knew that it was just proper manners on his end, but that didn't mean I didn't enjoy it. It was the candy to the previous whip. As I figured, this store manager knows how to move people.

"Thank you very much." Ayase-san showed a grin.

At 6pm flat, Ayase-san and I stepped out of the bookstore.

"Alright, I'll be buying a swimsuit now. Sadly, I can't walk you home today."

"It's still only 6pm, so there's no need for that."

"Right, then you go home without me."

"Asamura-kun, where are you planning on buying your swimsuit?"

I told her the name of the department store where I was planning to go.

"Over there, huh? Let me go with you." She said, which confused me.

"Why?"

"It's a store that sells clothes for women as well, so I'm buying one myself. I tried mine on yesterday, but it didn't quite fit me anymore, so I thought I might as well get a new one." She said and started walking on ahead.

I hurried and followed after her. Are we going to buy swimsuits together? My inexperienced and fragile imagination caused me to only picture a man and a woman shopping for swimsuits together if they're an actual couple. I know that this is nothing but total prejudice, but what other reason would there be to go there together? I can't think of any.

We'd feel tense as we talk with each other about swimsuits and such across the cubicle, only to fall victim to an odd trouble you'd only find in novels or manga. Nah, there's no way that'd happen. However, what if I was misinformed, and it was totally normal and accepted that siblings like us would shop for swimsuits together? When I looked at Ayase-san's sideways profile, which looked as calm as ever, I felt like that conclusion might not be too far from the truth.

If we actually go shopping for swimsuits together, what kind of face should I make, and what sort of attitude should I keep up? We're not too far from the department store, so I'm not sure if I can actually prepare my heart and mind before then...

In the end, everything I just said was all for nothing. As was the case for most department stores, the area for women's clothes was on the lower floor, and the area for men's clothes was up above. By the escalator, Ayase-san stepped on with one foot and turned towards me.

"Anyway, let's split up here. If we finish shopping at the same time, we can meet up at the entrance. If not, we'll just go home separately."

"...Understood."

Yeah, that makes sense. That's how things in the real world work. Let me state it right here. A brother has no need to tag along for his little sister's swimsuit shopping trip... I think. And, of course, it took me more than an hour to pick out my swimsuit. As I thought, going here after work was the correct choice.

Chapter 6: 27th of August (Thursday)

I gazed up at the clear blue sky amidst the unfamiliar scenery around me as the moving train shook me left and right. How long has it been since I've taken the train like this? Since I was born and raised here in Shibuya, and I live an indoor life, I rarely take the train anywhere. Since I have the mentality that 'as long as I have manga and books, I can keep living', Shibuya is like heaven to me. Now that the small streets have disappeared into the distance, and their even smaller bookstores, now only the towering buildings remain.

On weekends and holidays, I would always spend my time walking from bookstore to bookstore, so I never had any need to travel very far. I never thought the day would come when I would use the train to travel to a pool in order to play with others. The inside of the train wasn't very crowded. We had around five days of summer vacation left, counting today. It's the perfect time for most summer activities to end, and for people to start panicking because their summer break is drifting away.

I took out my phone and checked the time. It was currently 9:18am. Since we were supposed to meet up at the ticket gate in front of Shinjuku train station at 9:30am, I still had plenty of time. However, after we did so, it would be another 30 minute train ride, and then another 30 minutes by bus. This pool is unexpectedly far away. It didn't take long for me to start having second thoughts.

No. I've just gotta man up. I can't just go home after doing my best to get Ayase-san to come with us. Also, speaking of Ayase-san, we decided to go our separate ways until we reached the destination for us to group up, so she left home 15 minutes before me. Since there will be other people from our school year with us today, we can't risk anything that would lead to them finding out.

That being said, Narasaka-san already knows. I guess it's not that big of a deal even if people found out, so we didn't try to tell her to keep quiet about it or anything. If people find out, we'll just explain it then. It's not like we're doing anything illegal. I was gazing at the scenery outside when an announcement came over the train's loudspeakers, stating the name of the next station.

A faint breeze washed over me as the doors opened and I got off the train. After I went past the ticket gate, I saw a group of around ten people. The number of boys and girls in this group were about equal, and all of them were wearing Suisei High's uniform. Since they were all carrying bags as well, it almost seemed like they were on a school trip.

“Weird.” I muttered.

I was also wearing Suisei High’s uniform. That’s right, Narasaka-san mentioned in a message she sent later that I definitely had to wear my school uniform, and to bring my student bag and student ID with me. Apparently it’s for a student discount, but don’t you usually only need your student ID for that? I had some doubts, but if everyone is wearing the uniform, then it’s not that big of a deal I guess. I’m good at following directions.

When I looked at all the people gathered together, I saw some familiar faces in the crowd.

“Again, huh...?”

I spotted Ayase-san keeping a safe distance from them. She was also wearing her uniform. When she glanced over in my direction and saw me, she let out a relieved sigh. Well, I guess Narasaka-san is her only real friend in this group. And said Narasaka-san was in the middle of the group, talking to some people. That’s Suisei High’s number 1 communication monster (my own personal opinion). When she saw me, she waved her hand, stretching her body like a puppy seeing its owner. Considering how cute she is, I can totally see her being popular with the guys.

“Good morning good day good evening, Asamura-kun!”

“Good morn... Wait, isn’t a simple ‘Morning’ enough?”

“We do it like that in this industry.”

“What industry?”

“Suisei High Industry.”

“I see?”

So our school is an industry. It makes no sense if you ask me. Anyway, some more Suisei High people slowly trickled in from the ticket gate and joined our group, and we started introducing each other. Normally a short introduction wouldn’t be that much of a problem, but every time a person said their name, Narasaka-san added some kind of weird introduction to it, which made it take way longer.

“My name’s Asamura Yuuta... Please treat me well.”

“Alright, and this is Asamura-kun! He might have a calm atmosphere to him, but he’s secretly a super-popular guy!”

“Choose between secret and popular!” One of the guys retorted.

“Basically, now’s your only chance to get along with him!” She said and laughed.

I guess this was her own way of breaking the ice, namely with a well-mannered joke.

“Right, Asamura-kun!”

“I feel like you’re wrong about a lot of stuff, but... We can leave it at that.”

“Nice to meet ya, Asamura!”

Suddenly, a well-built and tanned guy, probably part of the rugby club, came to ask for a handshake. I froze up in surprise, not expecting such a sudden development from a random person I had just met. Maybe that’s thanks to the atmosphere Narasaka-san created.

“Likewise...”

I saw no other option, so I accepted the handshake. He got really close, though. He really seems like the kind of normie who’d win prizes at every sports festival. But I somehow managed to get through this first meeting. Although the atmosphere was something I really couldn’t get used to. However, my goal today was to make Ayase-san enjoy herself, so I couldn’t flake out this early.

The self-introductions continued. As before, Narasaka-san added some side comments with every person who introduced themselves, or even made up a joke with their name. It worked so well that even I, who had no intentions of remembering anybody from here, found myself at least connecting lines to some of the people, probably even remembering some of their names. I see. So that’s why she’s doing all of this. Narasaka Maaya sure is one hell of a communication monster.

“Ayase Saki.”

“I’m sure you all know Saki, but... it’s fine. She might look a bit scary, but she don’t bite.”

“Something like that.”

“Just call her Ayasshii!”

What kind of comedy character is that?

“Ayase is fine.” Ayase-san didn’t even try to go along with the momentum of the conversation.

Even so, possibly because she showed a wry smile without actually getting angry, several of the girls gave her an unexpected look. I see. So they really thought Ayase-san was some kind of scary person.

“So, Narasaka, why are we wearing our uniforms?” One of the guys spoke up about the subject I had been wondering about this entire time.

“Didn’t I tell you in the message? It’s for the student discount~”

“Isn’t a student ID enough for that?”

“That was only the first part. If you’re wearing your uniform, your parents won’t be as strict when you leave the house, right?”

“That makes no sense!”

“Don’t bother with the details! We can only play around in our uniforms for so long, so we have to use as much time as we can~”

It didn’t seem like the person’s question was answered with that, but he also showed no interest in trying to pursue it any further. When I heard her response, however, I found myself understanding a bit more. It seems like Narasaka-san is even more considerate than I had originally assumed. She probably had figured that some of the participants’ parents would be quite strict about this, and gave them some kind of lie they could use so that they could come out to play with everyone else.

For example, helping a school committee, helping open the school grounds, or some kind of other thing like that. Since she probably knew about these problems, she tried her best to not make anybody stand out in a negative way because they couldn’t participate... Well, that’s just an assumption of mine.

When I looked around, I couldn’t tell who was wearing the uniform because we were told to, and who was wearing it for convenience. Only Narasaka-san knew, and she’s probably trying to keep it a secret. On top of that, since people know she’s an airhead, any kind of nonsensical condition she came up with would be forgiven, and it didn’t dampen that mood at all. Narasaka Maaya is even more of a communication monster than I initially assumed, huh?

“Alright, then let’s go!”

With her voice full of energy, Narasaka-san stepped in front of us and walked to the ticket gate. And with this, my last big event to make memories during this summer break started in earnest.

After hopping on the private railway, we made our way west from Shinjuku. About halfway there, the large buildings around us started to disappear, and the wide blue sky opened up, visible from the train window. Moving west from the center of town basically meant we were moving further away from Tokyo Bay, and also away from the ocean. It’s a weird thing to go away from the water in order to play in the water. Maybe that’s why there are no pools near home, since you can just go to the sea instead.

Our group consisted of ten people including Ayase-san, Narasaka-san, and I. We were a group perfectly divided between five boys and five girls. In other words, it was my first time meeting seven of them. While we were travelling, we exchanged a few words, and I realized that I wasn’t as exhausted as I expected myself to be. I was afraid of being unable to keep up with the conversation, and being left behind trying to contribute on a particular subject, but that wasn’t the case. I guess the true

communication monsters knew how to handle themselves without leaving behind the loners and outcasts, huh?

“So you work part-time at a bookstore, Asamura?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that actually profitable?”

“I wonder... I’ve never worked part-time anywhere else, so I wouldn’t know.”

“But you’re going to work and attending summer classes at the same time?”

That’s so admirable!”

“Yup yup, I’ve just been sleeping the entire summer break!”

“I don’t think it’s that crazy...”

Even despite all of that, I was still not the greatest at holding conversations like these. When it came to actual books, I could talk about them for hours, but then I realized that simply telling them about books isn’t exactly what you would call a conversation. Though I do think that a conversation without a common theme is just too hard to follow for me. Either way, as we talked about this and that, the 30 minutes passed, and after that, we were jostled around in the bus for another 30 minutes.

Finally, we made it to the pool in question. Outside, it was as hot as expected with the mid-summer sun sizzling down, so I had a small bout of dizziness when I got off the bus. Compared to the cool air inside the vehicle, outside is like torture. The white line drawn on the asphalt was almost blinding with the sunlight shining down on it.

“This is the pool?” I muttered as I looked up at the giant building in front of me.

When I heard the word ‘pool,’ I had pictured something like the pool at school, or maybe the local public pool, but this looked more like a hot spring inn.

“This is the entrance. On this side is the indoor pool, and they also have a transparent roof. Beyond that is the outdoor pool. See, you can see some attractions over there, right?” Narasaka-san said and I muttered the name of the object I saw.

“Ahh... a slide, huh?”

“At least call it a water slide! Asamura-kun, where’s your spirit?!”

“What does my spirit have to do with anything?”

“It’ll change your mood. Calling it a water slide will make you more excited. What would you think if we said that high school students were playing on a slide?”

“I was just wondering why you’d play on a slide.”

“...Saki, Yumi, you two say something!” Narasaka-san turned towards Ayase-san and the girl standing next to her.

“It’s too big for a normal slide, so if you really want to get the feel of it across, you should call it a giant water-rushing slide.”

Ayase-san, you just paraphrased it, right? The person next to Ayase-san, Tabata Yumi (I think that was her name, anyway. Narasaka-san mentioned that she has the same name as the train station on the Yamanote Line), looked at her in surprise.

“So Ayase-san knows how to tell jokes, huh?”

“A joke... Ah, yeah.”

Naturally, Ayase-san hadn’t been joking around. She had just said the first thing that came to mind.

“They even have an amusement park around back. Is this your first time coming to one, Asamura-kun?”

“Well, I’d say so.”

It’s not that I dislike amusement parks or zoos or things like that. If anything, I like them. I’m just bad at walking around them with other people and checking out attractions. I’d much rather walk around by myself. Though it might only make me sound like more of a loner if I said that. I just hope that some people understand and accept other people’s preferences. Why is everybody Usain Bolt when it comes to judging other people?

“The indoor pool is the heart of our operation today!”

“Oh yeah.”

That’s what she said in the plans she sent us via LINE. We each bought a 1-day pass and walked inside. After that, I finished changing in the men’s changing room and checked out the swimming trunks I just bought yesterday. It was pretty much the same as changing into my gym clothes at school, and not really that embarrassing, but I felt a bit of anxiety when it came to putting my stuff in the locker. I mean, I have to take a wristband with the key attached to it with me to the pool, so if it gets washed away, what am I supposed to do about it? Also, how is everyone so calm about it? Am I just thinking too deeply into it?

Either way, I made my way to the pool after I finished changing. Once I stepped into the actual building, I was shocked. It was like a gigantic greenhouse. Of course, the sides weren’t made out of vinyl sheets. They looked like they were either glass or acrylic plates. I can’t even tell how many people would fit in here, and the inside of the facility is like a giant beach with a shallow pool, taking up $\frac{1}{3}$ of the entire area. You had your average slide... No, water slide, as well as other attractions I wouldn’t even know how to use.

Along with that, there was a scent of water drifting through the air, different from the peculiar ocean scent. As for the number of visitors, it wasn’t nearly as

filled as I expected, which told you that summer break was about to end and normal everyday life was making its return. At least it's not as packed as I had feared.

Finally, we grouped up with the girls again. All five of them were wearing evidently new swimsuits, which reminded me of what Ayase-san had said the day before, and this explained why she had gotten a new swimsuit. As a girl, you really have to be careful about a lot of things. I would only think about buying new clothes if I ran out of them.

Narasaka-san was wearing a bikini which revealed quite a lot of skin. The lemon-yellow color suited her personality quite a bit. However, possibly because of her small height or gestures, the bikini didn't look nearly as erotic as you'd think. Rather, 'cuteness' got the head start when trying to explain the image it gave her.

Ayase-san was wearing the exact opposite: A tankini that didn't show too much skin. It showed off her shoulders, and there was also an opening between the upper and lower part of her swimsuit. Maybe it was just because of the summer heat, but it really seemed like she preferred wearing clothing that revealed her shoulders. She seems to wear clothes that do that almost every single day. Even so, seeing Ayase-san in her swimsuit caused my heart to skip a beat. I might be used to her in general, but a different kind of appearance really made me feel more conscious of her.

Upon seeing the girls in all their glory, the boys raised cheers for a moment, but even I who usually had no feelings about this sort of thing could tell that most of their gazes were directed towards Ayase-san herself, standing in the middle of the group of girls, almost as if she were trying to hide behind them. She just had a different physique and style than the rest. She had wide and high-up hips, with long slender legs. Even without wearing a revealing swimsuit, that was as plain as day. I could even hear faint whistling from the guys, but for some reason, it filled me with a complicated emotion.

"Ayase's crazy! Hey, you agree right, Asamura!"

"I mean, well, I don't think... jeering like that... is very good..." I found myself responding.

In this day and age where a single sentence could be regarded as sexual harassment, you have to be careful of what you say. Of course, that wasn't the only reason. Some kind of uncomfortable emotion started to build up inside of me, and that was an even bigger reason. However, that sentiment apparently didn't get through to these guys.

"No no no, if you're a man, then you gotta look, right?! You definitely should!"

"It can't be helped, alright?"

They started whispering to each other. I personally didn't know if I was able to hide my displeased expression or not. However, right when I was about to interject a complaint into their conversation, Narasaka-san voiced her own. She put her left hand on her waist, raised her right arm, and pointed her fingers at us.

“Alright alright, you guys over there! Asamura-kun is right! Any staring eyes will get squished between my fingers!” As she said this, Narasaka-san did a motion with her index and middle finger towards us.



How violent and aggressive, Narasaka-san. Thanks to that, the boys stopped whispering and calmed down a bit. They must have caught on to the cold gazes coming from the girls group. Well, I also am a healthy high school boy, so I understand their feelings. I really do, but I do suggest they take a hint on what to say and what not to say in front of the girl in question. Then again, my words had also already escaped my mouth, so I don't know what kind of impression I gave off.

Right when I felt a gaze directed at me, I also caught on to Ayase-san averting her eyes at the exact same time. Was she... looking at me just now? I wasn't given any response to my question, and Ayase-san immediately joined the ring of girls.

"Now, let's get this party started!" Narasaka-san once brought excitement back into the awkward atmosphere. "Let's all check out the attractions until it's time for lunch! For starters, let's see what that slide is about!" She said, pointing towards the water slide.

But you got angry at me for calling it a slide?

According to the plan Narasaka-san came up with, which she named 'Creating lots of summer memories', she set out for us to check out the different attractions around the pool. First, of course, was the water slide. Although it was a bit smaller than the large one we saw from the outside, it still reached up two floors, so it was plenty thrilling. After that, we passed under something like a waterfall, treaded around inside a labyrinth for some reason, and went to lots of other attractions that caused us to gasp in astonishment.

While playing around like that, I remembered the schedule written in the plan Narasaka-san sent us, and yet again felt like praising all of Narasaka-san's careful consideration and planning. She's showing off all the attractions this place has to offer quite well, making it very exciting. No matter who participated, everyone had something to gain.

You can't forget that this time around, we all weren't the closest of friends with each other. Narasaka-san's method to avoid cliques was to make sure it was the first time everyone had met. Then again, Ayase-san and I knew each other quite well beforehand. However, even though all of us were attending the same school, and even if we were in the same year, as long as we were in a different class and had different personalities, that wouldn't have allowed us to get along. What you needed was someone open-minded like Narasaka-san who had a lot of contacts, and was also very open, acting as the common ground.

There are guys from the sports club, literature club, and even some kind of committee, going-home club, and other sorts of things. That's why it should've

made sense that holding a conversation that goes beyond your average daily fare would be hard to achieve. There's no common or shared topics to be had. That's where Narasaka-san came in.

First, she walked around the various attractions with everyone and showed them off. This way, everyone could have fun, and everyone could get more used to each other in the morning, finding shared interests and so forth. This will cause conversations to spring up during lunch time. That's why she ignored the idea of us going solo or in small groups, and instead had everyone move together. Though I do think she also set up some mixed events in the afternoon.

It might seem simple, but it's not at all. After all, the events you yourself want to do are always much more interesting than playing around with everyone else. But she can ignore that and move forward. That way, if the group gets too excited, or if you lose track of time, you can just ignore the schedule and have fun (or so said the plans Narasaka-san sent out). If you don't prioritize other people's preferences over your own, you can't achieve something like this.

12pm passed, and since we spotted some open seats at the food court, we decided to eat lunch. Seeing everyone discuss the events of the morning with smiles on their faces showed me that Narasaka-san's plan was a success. Personally, I was happy to see Ayase-san smiling and talking with the other girls. And just like that, our lunchtime ended, so we decided to play in the shallow pool.

Wave pools sometimes make waves like the actual ocean, but because it was the end of summer break, there were barely any people in there, allowing us to have as much fun as we wanted without bothering anybody. Unlike at the actual beach, you can't play beach volleyball or play in the sand when you visit a pool. So we were a bit limited in what we could do. Despite that, Narasaka-san introduced some ideas in the plans she sent us.

“So with that being said, let's all play kickboard othello!”

“Yeeees!”

We all cheered in unison like we were gradeschool students. Although it was very quiet, I could even hear Ayase-san's voice which made me smile. Rather than a 'Yes', it felt more like a 'Sure~' kinda response. Narasaka-san called it kickboard othello, but I don't know the official name. The game might have originated from Narasaka Maaya herself, but it was a game with simple rules. Everyone had their own kickboard, preferably one that had two clearly distinguishable sides. Luckily, the ones available to borrow here were exactly like that. After that, we split them up so that there was an equal number of front and back ones, split in two groups, and started turning the boards over.

“We’ll split up the groups with rock and paper! The rock group is over here, and the paper group is over there.”

It was a five versus five activity. The paper side was the front group, and the rock side was the back group. Ayase-san and I coincidentally ended up in the same group, with Narasaka-san against us.

“I’ll be setting the timer now. The time limit is three minutes. The group that has more kickboards turned to their side wins.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay!”

“No grabbing or stealing kickboards, alright. They have to be floating, and you can only turn them by slapping them on the corners. However, you’re allowed to obstruct the other group from flipping your kickboards over as long as you follow the rules. Everything clear?” Narasaka-san said, demonstrating what she had just explained.

“Understood!”

“Boys, no pulling or other forms of violence, okay?!” Tabata-san said.

“You have no trust in us, do you?!” Myoujin, I think his name was, complained in a sour tone.

Narasaka-san set the timer on her smartphone, which was protected in a waterproof case, and declared the beginning of the match, and we all sprung into action. This is actually much harder than you’d expect. Also, isn’t this something you would play in a pool with no waves? Even if you don’t do anything, the kickboards end up getting washed away, and since you can’t grab it because of the rules, you have to go and recover your kickboards periodically.

In the end, the rules between retriever and turner were split up between the groups. It’s yet another example of a beautiful ad hoc approach. Eventually, a melody played from Narasaka-san’s phone, signaling that the three minutes were over.

“Okay, stop! No more flipping!”

When Narasaka-san gave the order, everybody stopped moving. The final score was four to six, with Ayase-san’s and mine team victorious. The winners cheered, and the losers slammed their fists into the water. It seemed like everyone was fighting earnestly. Including me. I was out of breath.

“Alright, alright. One more battle!” Narasaka-san set another timer.

Both groups were brimming with motivation. Also I suddenly realized that the melody Narasaka-san was using as an alarm... that’s an anime opening, right? The only reason I could tell was because Maru forced me to watch the one-cour anime

for that series. It seems like Narasaka-san knows a thing or two about anime, huh? She really has a lot of interests.

We lost the second round. Since neither Ayase-san or I are sporty types, we didn't have the strength to continue like we did in the first round. Since the two of us ended up being useless in a group of five, we had no hopes of winning against the sports club members, or people who are always playing around like this.

"Alright, that concludes today's event time! After a short break, it's free time for everyone. We'll leave at 4pm, so come back here by then!" Narasaka-san said, so I sat down at the poolside.

I couldn't even move anymore, probably because I had been using muscles that I usually never use at all. I just wanted to sleep. Unable to find the energy to tag along with the guys who were doing laps in the pool or playing elsewhere, I just decided to take a break by myself when Ayase-san approached me. In response, I hurriedly sat up straight, afraid of looking pathetic. Ayase-san brought her face closer to mine, giving me a somewhat worried gaze.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. A bit exhausted, but otherwise fine. Still, everyone is amazing. So much endurance, and they have great athletic senses as well."

As we checked out the different attractions, and when we played minigames, the ones doing the most work were the outgoing boys and girls. Since I was always more of an indoor type, I didn't stand out at all. It's not like I wanted to or anything, though.

"But you were pretty cool just now."

"Huh?" I was shocked to hear such surprising praise from Ayase-san.

"During that minigame just now. Asamura-kun, you were bringing back all the kickboards that floated out of our area, right?"

"Ahhh."

Well, if nobody else did that, it wouldn't even have been a proper game. Once other people realized that, they started doing the same as me. When I pointed that out, Ayase-san shook her head.

"But you were the first one to do it, Asamura-kun. Not to mention that once you returned the boards, you let other people flip them over, even though that's supposed to be the most entertaining part of the game."

I was surprised yet again. I didn't think she'd notice. Whenever I returned the boards to our team, and they turned out to be on the front side, I left them like that. If they happened to be flipped on the back side, I would have had to flip them over, as this was the whole point of the game. Instead of doing so, however, I instead

pushed the board to another team member, saying ‘Take care of this’, and searched for the next kickboard. In the meantime, that team member did the flipping. Why, you ask? It’s just as Ayase-san stated. The act of flipping the boards is the most entertaining part of the game. I don’t think it would be that much fun if I just flipped over all the boards I brought back. It was supposed to be a team effort, after all.

“Ahh, well, I just didn’t want to run the risk of messing up right when I was the center of attention.”

I wasn’t lying about that by any means.

“Really? Well, whatever your reason was, I just wanted to praise you, totally subjectively. I thought you were pretty cool for doing that. Like an assistant working hard and supporting people behind the scenes.”

“Is that really something cool?”

“Everybody has their own thoughts on things, right?”

“Well... you’re not wrong. But it’s a bit embarrassing when you put it like that.” When I said this, Ayase-san gave a faint smile.

It wasn’t the kind of dry and forced expression she would make at home towards my old man, but rather... How do I put this? It resembled the kind, innocent smile from the young Ayase-san in the pictures I was shown. When I saw this, I thought to myself *Ah, I’m so glad I took that step and crossed her boundaries.*

Of course, it’s not that I felt conceited about it, like I was thinking that I saved Ayase-san or anything like that. I even have proof that this wasn’t the case. It’s just that if I had kept my distance like before, I would not have been able to see her making that kind of expression. When I thought that this smile was only mine, only directed at me, a vexing feeling of superiority filled my chest, telling me that maybe I really did do it all for myself.

“Well, that’s all I wanted to say.” Saying this, Ayase-san stood up.

Like I was a fish caught in her net, my gaze wandered up towards her face.

“Now then.”

Her swimsuit was still drenched with water, the color looking even more vibrant than before. I saw pearls of water on her small amount of exposed skin, glimmering in the light shining down on her. Droplets of water were riddled all through her hair.

“I guess I’ll go do some more swimming!” She raised both her arms above her head, doing some light stretches.



“...Huh?”

The moment I saw that, it felt like I suddenly woke up from something. I wonder why. It was completely natural, yet also abrupt. A certain emotion started to fill my chest.

Ah, I like her.

I formed these words mentally first, and only afterwards did I find myself surprised at the emotion that was suddenly born inside of me. Even though there had been countless chances and situations for me to catch on to these feelings, it happened because of such a trivial gesture that I had seen countless times before. She simply put her arms above her head and stretched. That's all it was.

I wasn't being confessed to, and we didn't make it through a threatening situation that would cause a suspension bridge effect. Up until now, I had only heard and experienced stories about falling in love with someone or confessing to someone from an outsider's perspective, but now I had found myself in a situation like that.

Honestly speaking, I'm bad at dealing with women. After watching my old man and Mom interact ever since I was young, I started to think that marriage would never bring any happiness at all, and frowned upon such relationships. If you stay silent without making assumptions, you'll be complained to, and if you don't conduct yourself upright like a gentleman, you'll be regarded useless, but if you try to consider the other person's feelings, you won't be considered manly, and that also will cause them to feel displeasure. In the end, your girlfriend will cheat on you with another guy who has more money and is more manly than you.

All of this I interpreted as the beginning and ultimately the end of relationships between men and women, which was why I never had any experience with love, nor did I attempt to gather any. So, for what reason did it have to be this person? Why? What explanation is there?

The change happening inside of me happened all too quickly, all too real, and it left me confused. I don't get it. To be honest, this kind of emotion is something wonderful and admirable, for sure. I never thought it would be this simple, something that would give me such relief in a single moment, and yet something so transient. Watching Ayase-san leave, as the water on her sparkled even more than ever before, I thought to myself.

She's my little sister. But she's Ayase-san. She is my little step-sister.

Once 4pm came around, we started our preparations to head back. While changing in the men's changing room, I realized just how sluggish my body felt. It

felt hot, like it was burning up, and heavy. It's the kind of sluggishness I felt after swimming classes at school.

The boys were quicker to group up at the pool's exit. Well, logically speaking, it would take the girls longer to dry their hair and change, so I didn't expect anything else. Around 5pm when the bus arrived, we bid our farewells to the pool. Just like on our way here, it took us 30 minutes by bus to get back, and another 30 minutes by train. We talked a lot more compared to when we were on our way to the pool, maybe because we had gotten much more acquainted over the course of the day. We made it back to Shinjuku at around 6pm.

After passing through the ticket gate, we could see the clear sky. Although it was still colored a lighter red, the sun had already started to sink towards the West. Looking at the tall buildings colored by the evening sky really reminded me that we had come back to a large town.

"Ahhh, that was fun!"

"You still seem to have more than enough energy, Maaya."

"I'm too hungry to do anything else!" Narasaka-san gently rubbed her tummy in response to the girl's retort, and everybody started laughing.

After that, people split up to take the bus, the Japan Railways, the private railway, and even bike. Ayase-san and I will have to take the train back to Shibuya station and then walk home with me pushing my bike along. Since we had to go back the same way, we decided we might as well go together. Nobody would be suspicious if we went together to Shibuya train station.

"Then I'll see you at school!"

We were about to separate, when...

"Ah, Asamura-kun! Waiteth a momenteth!"

"What language is that supposed to be?"

Narasaka-san beckoned me over, running up to me.

"I was just wondering if we could exchange LINE contacts. Is that okay?"

When I heard that question, I glanced over at Ayase-san. She immediately averted her gaze, but she wasn't glaring at me or anything, I don't think. Well, since we're in the same year at school, it should be fine.

"Sure."

We exchanged LINE contacts, and I felt like saying something that had been in the back of my mind for a while.

"By the way, Narasaka-san, good work on the whole plan today."

"Hmmm? Come on now, you can just call me 'Maaya-chan'!"

"We're not that close."

“We’re not?! We’re like best friends who went to the pool together!”

That logic doesn’t make any sense.

“Oh, speaking of which, you did some amazing work with the whole plan today. Thanks to you showing off all the attractions first, we had something to talk about during dinnertime. Although it’s a shame that we couldn’t do all the minigames you thought of.”

“Ahhh,” Narasaka-san scratched the back of her head, showing a bashful smile.

“Mm. Well, we were pressed on time, so it couldn’t be helped.”

“But thanks to that, I had a blast, so thanks.”

“Oh my, even if you praise me like that, you’re not getting anything, okay?”

“I’m not doing this to get anything, I just wanted to thank you. That’s all.”

“Well, I am happy~ Ahaha, I wasn’t hoping for you to feel that way, but I’m happy you caught on and realized.”

“Yeah, I got it.”

You become happy if people look at your actions and understand your kind intentions behind them. I had a similar experience not too long ago.

“Then I’ll see you again! You too, Saki! I’ll send you a LINE later!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The two waved their hands at each other, and Narasaka-san periodically turned around to smile at us.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Yup, I wasn’t waiting long.”

We passed through the ticket gate and headed on the train home to Shibuya. In the end, Ayase-san and I stayed silent for almost the entire train ride. After leaving the train station in Shibuya, we made our way back home to our flat. I was pushing my bike as usual, which I had grabbed from the parking lot, as I walked next to Ayase-san. This was around the time the orange sky slowly started turning navy blue. Although our surroundings were starting to grow darker, the lights of the buildings kept everything bright all the same. It felt like dusk or daybreak².

In modern day and age, using the term ‘dusk’ or ‘twilight’ would probably be more common. However, I personally like the idea of ‘dawn’, and the idea of living beings that aren’t living beings walking around the streets much more so. I think another way to describe it is the Witching Hour—the time when you’re most likely

² 1. There’s a small paragraph here talking about kanji writing of dawn and dusk, which is pretty much impossible to convey into English, so I decided to skip that, and tried my best to make the part after that understandable.

to encounter the supernatural. It's the kind of phrase that makes you worried if the person next to you really is the person you imagine them to be, and you start to lose your grip on reality—

“You sure have gotten close with Maaya, huh?” Ayase-san suddenly spoke up, pulling my mind back to reality.

“Ahh, well. I did want to thank her for inviting me after all.”

“Thanks.”

“Eh?”

“We're friends, so I'm happy you praised her like that.”

Of course, she must have heard what I had said back then. It's not like that was anything troublesome, but it did make me feel a bit conflicted inside.

“More importantly, though, did you manage to spread your wings a little?”

“Thanks to you, yeah.” Ayase-san said. She gently lowered her head towards me, quietly continuing. “Swimming in the pool was fun.” She looked at me. “So I'm feeling refreshed now after being able to swim a lot. I'm glad I did as you said.” A faint smile appeared on her face.

When I saw that expression, I remembered the emotion that had started to grow inside of me, a feeling I can't say out loud. This feeling that you could possibly define as romantic affection had been planted deeply inside of me like a seed... at the very least, I've started to become aware of her charm as a woman, which now left me agonizing about what to do or say next.

Looking at Ayase-san in that kind of light was equivalent to breaking her trust, so if I was straightforward with this emotion, I would surely only end up troubling her in the process. However, at the same time, it also felt like Ayase-san thought of me in a pleasant way. What would be the right choice here?

As I started to grow lost in the labyrinth of my own feelings, I started to speak less in my conversation with Ayase-san, and this silence engulfed her as well, and she stopped talking altogether. The squeaking sound of my bike's turning wheels and the rhythmic sound of our footsteps were the only sounds we made.

I can't look at her face. I can only look at the ground. I didn't even know where Ayase-san was looking. I felt my heart beating faster and louder. I mean, that makes sense. I'm walking home together with a beautiful girl like her, right now in the twilight.

No, that's not it. Last month I went to watch a movie together with Yomiuri-senpai. Back then, I was also nervous, but I can call it different from what I'm feeling right now. Since it didn't happen too long ago, I can distinguish my feelings in both cases. However, if someone asked me what exactly is different... and I

know that this is a pathetic story that makes me want to cover my face... but I can't put it into words.

My instincts told me that it was **different**, but what part of the process was different was a question too difficult for me to answer. It was almost like my feelings were inside a black box, impossible to be opened. Despite the fact that these were my own feelings, I failed to understand them.

Lost in thought, I gazed at the tires of my bike moving along the asphalt in a steady rhythm, and the shadows they drew grew longer and thicker. When I looked up at the sky, night had fallen. Just when I was thinking about how short dusk is, another phrase came to mind—*Ahh, the moon is beautiful.*

“Asamura-kun, you're really good at finding the good parts of people.”

“Eh?”

When Ayase-san suddenly spoke up, I looked to my side at her. She was looking up at the sky, possibly at the moon. She turned her gaze towards me.



“About Maaya. You praised her before, right?”

“Ah, that.”

“You always look at people around you in such a detailed manner. I can’t help but admire it.”

“I... don’t know.”

“I think so at least. You can see their hard work. I told you this earlier at the pool, but I think that’s something very admirable. I think it’s wonderful of you—”

Upon receiving so much praise, my heart started beating faster and faster. However, upon hearing her next words, I immediately lost my train of thought.

“—**Nii-san.**”

I swallowed my breath. My gaze shot towards Ayase-san’s face, and I froze in place. Even though I should have been familiar with Ayase-san and her facial expressions, she suddenly looked like a complete stranger.

Nii-san.

Nii-san.

Nii-san.

Even though I knew that repeating the word over and over in my head wouldn’t help me understand its meaning any easier, my brain thought otherwise.

Nii-san. Basically, **older brother**. I don’t know why Ayase-san would suddenly call me that despite being so against it before. However, what is even so surprising about it? Ayase-san is the one and only person in this entire world who has an actual right to call me that.

“Um, did I surprise you by any chance? I just thought that, with how you cared about me and did all of this for me, you were like a reliable older brother... you know? Is it weird of me to think that?”

When I saw Ayase-san gently tilting her head with a smile, I was **unable to stay what I truly felt**.

“No... I’m happy, Ayase-san.”

“...Ahaha. Still, it doesn’t feel quite right.”

Honestly speaking, that saved me. Because of her suddenly calling me ‘Nii-san’, I finally managed to get back on track. What had I been thinking? This affection Ayase-san shows towards me, and her praise, was all just towards her ‘Older Brother’. She’s put this trust in me because she believes that I am someone she can have a flat and comfortable relationship with. She wouldn’t want the person she lived with to have weird expectations or gross desires towards her, she simply wants a convenient relationship for both sides. And yet, I as a man was about to break that rule.

“I’m a bit tired today, so can I keep dinner simple?”

“...Yeah, sure.”

Even this nonchalant conversation now terrified me. Would I be able to hold a rational conversation with her anymore? Shortly after this exchange, we reached our flat. I said I’d park my bike in the parking lot, so I split up with Ayase-san in front of the entrance. After doing so, and locking it with a bike lock, I looked up at the sky.

The moon was covered by the tall silhouette of the flat. I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself down. Ayase-san isn’t with me. If it was just my hormones running wild, then my body should calm down, and my heart should stop racing now that she’s not here. If so, then I could forget this feeling resembling romantic affection and go on with my life.

“This is not good...”

I knew that this was bad. I knew that I should not harbor such feelings inside of me, but no matter how long I waited, the emotions did not disappear as I wished for them to.

“How should I even talk to her when I get back?”

Nobody was around to answer me. Fortunately so, as this question was one that should not be heard by anybody else.

Chapter 7: 28th of August (Friday)

“I messed up...”

How long has it been since I overslept like that? When I woke up, it was already long past noon, and I had even slept through the start of summer classes. Knowing that my old man had gone out of his way to pay the fees for these classes, skipping them like this made me feel like I had betrayed his trust, and it left a bad taste in my mouth.

I couldn't sleep at all last night. Although Ayase-san and I ate dinner together at the dining table yesterday, it was rather awkward, and there was a lot of silence between the bits of our conversation. Even after I slipped into my bed, the events of today and memories of Ayase-san kept flickering up in my mind and behind my eyelids, making me restless. Seriously, just what am I doing?

My throat felt dry, so I decided to get something to drink. I tried to fix my pathetic bed hair with one hand, feeling too bothered to even wash my face. I made my way to the living room where I heard a cheerful woman's 'Oh' voice.

“Yuuta-kun, good morning.”

“Eh, Akiko-san? ...And Dad as well?”

“Yo, sleepyhead.”

My old man seemed to be reading some newspapers on his tablet. He raised his head to greet me with a slight wave of his hand. He and Akiko-san were sitting at the dining table facing each other, cups of iced coffee in front of them. The TV was turned on, playing a popular drama from overseas. It was a peaceful scene that I hadn't expected.

“Yuuta-kun?”

“Ah... I'm sorry. Good morning.” Akiko-san gave me a concerned look as I spaced out for a moment, so I hurriedly returned a greeting.

Like I was trying to run away from the situation, I entered the kitchen and took out some cold barley tea from the fridge. I poured it into a cup and gulped it down like someone who had found a drop of water in the desert. The cool air inside the room and the cold beverage filling my body caused me to start to calm down a bit. My head started feeling a bit more clear.

“Why are you two at home?”

“I talked about it with Akiko-san, and we both decided to take a small vacation on Friday, Monday, and Tuesday.”

“Ahh, I see. I didn't hear anything about that.”

“If I take too much time off, my superiors will get angry at me, and normally I wouldn’t have taken any this time around, but I had no other choice.”

“Sorry for being so selfish like that, Taichi-san. I felt like we could spend some time together with the four of us today.”

“The four of us...”

“I heard it from Saki. You didn’t have work yesterday, and not today either, right?”

That’s correct. The day after our trip to the pool, today, had originally been a day when neither of us worked. Fridays are the most busy days for a bookstore, so trying to challenge that in an exhausted state would be close to suicide. Myself aside, I really didn’t want Ayase-san to exhaust herself any more after she already used up all of her energy enjoying the pool.

“At this time of day, you’re probably skipping your summer classes, huh? Haha.”

“Did you realize that and not wake me up on purpose?”

“You’re way too diligent with your own studies, so skipping a few classes won’t hurt anybody, right?”

“Well, I’ll give you that...”

“Fufu. I’m glad you’re fine with a bit of selfishness on our end.”

Not only did my old man seem to not care, but even Akiko-san made a nonchalant remark.

“I’ll make some breakfast for you.” Akiko-san said and headed into the kitchen.

I heard the sound of oil sizzling in the frying pan, and Akiko-san suddenly turned towards me.

“Thank you, Yuuta-kun.”

“Eh?”

“You took Saki to the pool, right?”

“Ahh... No, the one who invited her was her friend.”

“But if you hadn’t convinced her, she probably wouldn’t have gone, right?”

“...Possibly.”

“That’s why I wanted to thank you. I can rest assured to have you as her Onii-chan.”

I froze up upon hearing that. I’m sure Akiko-san didn’t intend to come across this way, but the single line ‘As her Onii-chan’ sounded almost like she was reproaching me for these wrong feelings of mine.

“You don’t even have two years until your graduation, after all... Barely two years until she will move out. When I think that we won’t have that many more

chances to really be a family together, I start feeling sad and lonely.” Akiko-san gave a vague smile, which made me swallow my breath.

‘*Be a family together*’, she said. It was such a trivial desire if you thought about it, but I knew just how crucial and important it is to Akiko-san. And the same is probably true for my old man. Both of them lived through a hellish married life and didn’t get a chance to be very happy. Now that they’ve found another marriage to hold onto, even normal days like this are like a treasure to them.

If they found out that I had romantic feelings for Ayase-san, and saw her as a woman, what would they think? After everything they went through, after all the suffering they experienced, they had finally reached a small place of happiness. Can I really disrupt this peace with my own selfish, abnormal feelings?

—*Yeah, there’s no way I can do that.*

The face of my real mother came to mind. While my old man worked day and night to earn the money necessary for us to live, she would constantly bombard him with her own selfish desires, and she eventually found another man to run away with. Back in the past, I scorned that woman as an ape who didn’t know what reason and common sense was.

It’s not that I have an endless amount of love and respect for my old man, but he never deserved any of that treatment. He’s done nothing that would warrant him constantly being shoved to the side for the sake of someone else’s desires.

If you asked me if I could immediately put a lid on these growing feelings inside of me, then saying that I could would be a lie. However, if I lock away this emotion deep inside of me and let it rest for a long time, it’ll go away..... **Will that really be possible? Can I really give up on her? Someone who’s so charming of a woman, and such a wonderful human being?**

“Oh yeah, where’s Ayase-san? Is she still in her room?”

“I think she should be back soon.”

“She went out? That’s unexpected.”

“Indeed. How many months has it been, I wonder...? Ah, speak of the devil.”

I heard the sound of the front door opening, along with footsteps approaching.

“How many months? What are you...”

Talking about—is what I wanted to ask, but I stopped mid-sentence. After all, the answer appeared right in front of me without having to ask about it.

“I’m back, Mom, Father.” A voice as translucent as water passed through the living room.

This voice of course belonged to none other than Ayase Saki—or it should have been. The reason I couldn't say so with confidence was because this wasn't the Ayase Saki I was used to.

“Welcome back, Saki. Oh my, what a fresh look you have there~”

“Saki-chan! Ohh, now that's an atmosphere changer alright.”

Our parents both complemented Ayase-san in unison. And indeed, she had changed for certain.

The symbol of Ayase Saki's armament, her long golden hair shining like a wheat field, had been shortened with a haircut. Where before it reached down her back, it now stopped at her shoulders. It was something like a medium-length haircut.

Now that her hair stopped hiding her piercings, they stood out even more than before, resembling a snake baring its dangerous but equally alluring fangs. I was reminded that we had known each other for barely three months. When you're living a normal life, it would make sense that you would get a haircut eventually, or even go through other changes like physique or usage of make-up. However, someone like me, who had only seen one type of appearance, was unable to deal with this change.

In all the stories I had read, such a big decision or change of appearance was usually the result of a huge event in the person's life, which was why I couldn't help but feel ‘Why now?’ when I saw this. I'm sure there isn't any particular meaning behind this decision at all, and yet even so, I felt like something was off, and I was overwhelmed in the process. And at the end of all my hesitating and thinking, the best I could come up with was a normal line that I had always used.

“Welcome... back, Ayase-san.”

“I'm home, Nii-san.”

With no hesitation whatsoever, she called me ‘Nii-san’ in front of our parents.

“Saki... did you just...?”

“Saki-chan...!”

My parents' delighted voices overlapped, but they sounded distant and not related to me at all. They were worried about us staying at a consistent distance, keeping a dry relationship with each other and not relying on one another, so this single word from Ayase-san probably made them feel like we had all moved a step forward.

Why did she suddenly cut her hair? Why is she suddenly calling me ‘Nii-san’? With no words to work with, I can only make my own deductions and assumptions

about this sudden change in behavior. If I had to guess, she's warning me, saying that we're siblings, and that we can never become **anything else**.

It's such an ironic story. When there's a problem like this, it would be so convenient if we could just show each other our hand, and adjust to the other person like we always would. And yet I found myself relieved to realize that I could just deal with this entire situation by simply not revealing what I feel, and instead keep it a secret.

Right then I just needed time to think about how I could come to terms with my feelings. I wanted to put a nail in the coffin of these romantic feelings, which would allow us to maintain a healthy relationship where we would just be siblings. While Ayase-san doesn't know how I feel, I need to find ways to erase these emotions.

While I suppressed my awareness that I was very entranced by her new hairstyle, I silently steeled my resolve.



Epilogue: Ayase Saki's Diary?

—These are all memories from the past week.

What should I do?

Looking up at the ceiling, I've been lost in thought for a while now.

It's... 4:36am right now.

Since it's getting close to 5am at the end of August, it's still dark outside.

I could probably still sleep for another hour and a half if I wanted to. Since I fell asleep quickly because I was tired, I woke up earlier than usual.

In the corner of my view, I could see the curtains in front of the window swaying. I set up the A/C so that it wouldn't blow on me in my sleep, and I can turn it up or down depending on the heat.

From between the curtains, I could see the white Shibuya night sky closely right before the night was about to end.

Once it clears up, it'll definitely be hot again.

I started thinking.

For one month—For an entire month, I somehow managed to bear with it, albeit with difficulty.

I felt frustrated just thinking about him creating memories elsewhere without me around. I felt annoyed at the thought that someone might learn more about him than I know.

No, I wasn't even aware of my own frustration. All I felt was a gloomy and hazy feeling in my chest, but that was about it.

What is this?

I noticed this mysterious emotion, and gave it a name, about a month ago.

—**Jealousy.**

I wrote that in my diary.

Upon writing it, I realized something.

He's always flat and frank with other people.

That's why he's willing to adjust to even me, when I have such a bothersome personality. He looks at me without prejudices. He accepts and praises my hard work and efforts that I never show to anybody else. He understands me.

I want to learn more about him. I want to understand more about him.

Asamura Yuuta.

I'm attracted to him.

But when I see Mom and Father so happy together, I can't risk destroying that happiness, and I'm sure Asamura-kun would be troubled to know about these feelings of mine.

I'm sure he would.

That's what I thought, which is why I decided to treat him like a stranger at work.

"Asamura-san."

Everytime I called him like a stranger I had just met, it felt like we drifted further apart, but if not for that, I probably would have become even more greedy.

I made it through an entire month like that.

I think it all started to break down ever since then.

It was like any other morning, and Asamura-kun was on the receiving end of some kind of weird persuasion from Mom. She might not look like it, but Mom is really good at confusing and bewildering people.

Well, that's totally fine. It's not like Asamura-kun can always be in his prime. Though I think he normally would have been a bit more rational.

But Father's words right after that were a surprise attack. Not to mention that Mom joined in, talking about how we still call each other by our family names. What do you mean 'Yuuta-niisan', okay?

Wait just a second.

There's no way I could call him 'Yuuta'. That's impossible. But would that be normal for siblings to do? Really? Do all little sisters in this world call their older brothers by their given names? That's hard to believe, honestly.

And Father joined in as well. He said that he called Mom 'Ayase-san' before they started dating. Why did he have to go and say that?

From now on, whenever Asamura-kun calls me 'Ayase-san', I'll be reminded of that. 'Before they started dating,' you know.

Dating. Dating... is where you go out and play together, right? Just when I was thinking about that, Asamura-kun asked me about my plans for the summer.

In a roundabout way. He asked if I was doing anything with friends.

I said 'No' out of reflex, but in reality, Maaya had invited me to the pool. Not to mention that she told me to 'Bring Asamura-kun with you'. The pool sounds nice. And it would be even better if Asamura-kun was with me. That's what I thought.

Ever since Maaya invited me, I was too busy thinking about it to make any progress with my exam studies. I didn't even finish half of what I set out to do.

There's also another thing I realized. Once I start thinking about Asamura-kun, I can't find any way to stop anymore. It ground my studying to a complete halt.

I've always wanted to become as independent as possible so that I don't burden Mom anymore. In order to do that, keeping my grades as high as possible is absolutely necessary. Since I'm not as clever as Asamura-kun, I have to catch up with sheer effort.

That's why I initially decided to decline her invitation.

I even went to his room to say simply that.

I reassured him that Maaya and I aren't so close that we'd meet up over summer break. I'm glad he believed me at least. I wasn't sure what I would do if he pressured me on the matter.

But I was still worried that he might have found out. That he might have realized that I was panicking. After all, Asamura-kun is very sharp. He notices these sorts of things right away.

After all, he managed to find a book I had been searching for a solid ten minutes for in a few seconds.

He's really amazing. He made that lady really happy that day.

But someone else might have found it even faster, at least that's what he told me.

That person—is Yomiuri Shiori-san.

I really hate myself for being so petty, because I didn't want to hear any more praise about her.

But on the way home, I realized that even Asamura-kun can have some things that he's not conscious about.

It was fun.

The day after, the A/C in our living room broke down.

Since I'm bad with the heat, I stayed in my room pretty much the entire day, at least until I had to head out for work.

I let the A/C in my room run, put on my favorite lofi hip-hop music while wearing my headphones, and tried to catch up with my studying.

But I couldn't make any progress.

When the heat reached the peak of the day, I left home and headed to a nearby cafe before it was time for my shift.

I had a half-off coupon for a popular frappuccino, so I decided to get that and do some reading. In particular, the book Asamura-kun recommended to me. After some time had passed, and I judged that I should head off to work, I happened to spot Asamura-kun sitting in the same cafe.

On a whim, I called out to him.

When I looked at his table, I spotted two separate drinks, so I figured he was here with someone else, but...

After a brief conversation, I saw a boy wearing glasses walking towards us from the corner of my eyes. Since he was wearing Suisei's uniform, and because I knew that he was fairly close to Asamura-kun, I decided to end the conversation with him there and walk away.

Since we act like strangers at school, it'd be silly if we were discovered right there after all.

But I saw that the person he was there with was another boy.

I was relieved.

As for the shift after that, it was just Asamura-kun, Yomiuri-san, and I... as well as a full-time employee.

Whenever I saw Yomiuri-san, she would praise me. About how fast I'm learning my job, about how I have talent. It's troublesome because I know she's serious. She's a good senior, after all.

She's very mature, she's really beautiful, she's easy to talk to, and she knows how to look after others.

When I think about the fact that she's always been with Asamura-kun...

That night, on the way home, Asamura-kun asked me a question.

He asked me if Maaya had invited us to the pool.

My heart skipped a beat in shock.

How does Asamura-kun know about that?

I really don't remember the response I gave back then.

I was clearly suspicious of him.

For a moment, I wondered if Maaya had contacted Asamura-kun directly, even though that wasn't possible since they had no common interests at all, if you stopped to think about it rationally.

Does he want to go to the pool?

He might be angry at me if he knew I declined without even asking him. I mean, I want to go to the pool myself. I haven't visited the pool for years.

But... since I'm not making any progress with my studies, I couldn't allow myself to go.

"I see. Then you don't have to force yourself to go, right?" (Because I can't go out to play).

"I'm not going." (I can't go)

I knew myself that my voice sounded awfully cold, but what I truly thought was completely different.

I think that my heart had already reached its limit.

The following morning, I didn't want to see Asamura-kun, so I got up early. I made breakfast before he woke up, and immediately locked myself up in my room. As long as I tell him that breakfast is ready, there should be no problem.

He thanked me via LINE as well. Without adding any emoji, since I don't use them either. He's adjusting to me, even with the smallest things.

But I wonder what he really wants to do? Maybe he actually sends a lot of emotes with other people? If so, then maybe he doesn't want to bother with me?

Other people... Maybe Yomiuri Shiori-san?

Probably because I was lost in thought, it took me a second to hear him knocking on my door.

In a panic, I took off my headphones and carefully opened it.

As expected, Asamura-kun was standing on the other side of the door, and once again he was asking me about the pool.

The reason I had been so sharp and distant before was because I didn't want to hear any more about that. And even so, for some reason, Asamura-kun was being oddly pushy about it that day.

He asked me for Maaya's contact information.

Why did I respond like that?

Why did I say such cold and unbelievable things to him?

I don't wanna.

I said it like a child.

When I saw Asamura-kun's shocked expression, I felt the blood draining from my body. I realized that I had no right to act the way I did.

I frantically tried to calm myself down.

The idea of him asking me for it is more than okay. Maaya invited him, too, after all. It's not like I can just decline for him. That being said, I also didn't feel comfortable giving him my friend's contact info without her consent. That's what I told him, and he accepted the excuse.

I need to ask Maaya if I can give Asamura-kun her contact address.

But she's still on a trip.

I guess I would just be bothering her if I sent her a message in the middle of her own fun.

Of course, I was pretty much just making excuses at that point.

That day was really the worst. I'm certain Asamura-kun didn't do it on purpose, but he kept making my heart tremble in fear and uncertainty. After all, he came to work with Yomiuri-senpai.

I hated just thinking about it, and started hating myself for even thinking that in the first place.

Even though it's his own freedom who he sees and what he does.

She has beautiful brown-black hair, and thanks to her peaceful and mature atmosphere, even I couldn't help but admire her, accepting the fact that she was a good fit for Asamura-kun.

Maybe Asamura-kun likes long and beautiful hair?

I mean, I have fairly long hair myself.

...What am I even thinking about? I feel like an idiot.

I started to feel scared of running into Asamura-kun, so I said I wanted to buy something after work, and sent him home without me.

After I finished my shopping trip and got home, Asamura-kun was standing in the kitchen.

I realized that I had left without even preparing any dinner.

From the back, he looked a bit dejected for some reason. And when he turned around, he for some reason was holding frozen cooked rice in his hand, giving me a confused expression.

I don't know why, but his appearance just made me giggle.

Asamura-kun has so little knowledge about food that it's hard to believe at times.

This is probably because of his real mother.

From what I heard from Asamura-kun, after his father ended up single, he gave up on homemade cooking altogether. More than not remembering anything, or being unable to cook, he simply avoided it all together. In this day and age, you can get by without having to cook, after all.

And yet right now, Asamura-kun is trying his hardest to learn. Making dinner together is fun. Having Asamura-kun help me is fun. It made me feel like we were cooking together.

But once dinner was over, he yet again asked me.

After letting out a sigh, he asked about the pool.

What's that sigh about? I felt myself growing agitated.

I couldn't hold back any longer, and took out my smartphone to look for Maaya's number.

Even though I didn't even consult Maaya herself.

But then Asamura-kun stopped me. He said that he actually didn't care about Maaya at all.

If anything, he wanted me to have fun at the pool.

That made no sense.

Why would he do that?

That's what I asked him.

He said that he's worried about me. He said that I should relax a bit, and have some more fun.

But I have to study. I can't just play around.

If not... I'll end up as a no-good person eventually.

That day, even after 1am passed, and 2am passed, I couldn't make any progress with my studies. I just kept thinking about Asamura-kun and what he had said even after I laid down in bed.

I wondered why Asamura-kun would say such a thing.

It's been two months now since I moved in here with Mom. I remembered everything that happened, thought about it, and remembered what he had said once again.

After I turned off the lights in the room, all my thoughts and feelings flitted through the air like mirages.

When the sky behind the curtains turned white, I finally fell asleep.

What flashed up behind my eyelids was the appearance of Asamura-kun letting out a sigh.

Then my own Mom's face overlapped with his.

Ah. I know that face. One time when I was in middle school, Mom invited me to the beach. Thinking about the financial situation we were in back then, it didn't seem like we could afford it, and I didn't want her to waste her precious time off, so I declined, saying that I had to study.

That face she made back then looked like she was troubled.

I was trying to hold back for Mom's sake, and yet it almost felt like I hurt her, despite not even knowing what that face was about.

I was tired enough to pretty much pass out.

My eyes opened, and I fully woke up.

I changed into some clothes in somewhat of a daze, and realized that my thoughts had stopped entirely.

Wait, what was I even thinking about?

Ahh... well, whatever.

Without thinking about anything, I finished changing, and when I entered the living room, Asamura-kun was already awake. *It's rare to see him up this early*, I thought, but when I checked the time, it was crazy late.

I wanted to hurry up and make breakfast, but Asamura-kun stopped me, prohibiting me from making food.

I can't let him.

This is my mistake. I couldn't fulfil the promise we made because I overslept.

However, Asamura-kun started arguing with me like I was a young child.

Since I was still sleepy and spacing out a lot, I couldn't argue back well at all, so I just did as I was told, sitting down on a chair.

He gave me toast with butter and some fried ham.

When I picked up the scent of bread and meat, my stomach let out a faint growl. I panicked and worried that he might have heard it. Only then did I realize that I was actually hungry.

While I was waiting for Asamura-kun to sit down himself, he suddenly asked me a question.

He asked if I wanted hot milk. What an odd question.

He asked me in this hot summer season if I wanted to drink hot milk.

He said that it would help me sleep faster. I see.

So he warmed up this milk just for me.

While I was munching on the toast, my body slowly started to wake up.

After we finished eating, I looked at the hot milk Asamura-kun made for me and took a sip.

Ah, so warm.

The air from the A/C was cool, but the milk made me feel warm from the inside.

I let out a sigh, and I felt everything grow lighter. Both my body and my head.

"I've been thinking..."

Well, whatever.

"...I don't mind going to the pool."

When I put into words what I was thinking, it felt like a weight fell off my chest.

There's only one problem.

The day of the pool visit that Maaya talked about overlapped with the day Asamura-kun and I had a shift.

After I slept for about two hours, we headed to work.

Asamura-kun wanted to negotiate with the store manager in hopes that we could change shifts, and I of course wanted to join him. That being the case, Asamura-kun suggested that we might as well walk to work together, so he walked next to me while pushing his bike.

Helping Mom at home is pretty much all the social experience I have, so I obviously was worried if we really could switch shifts that easily.

Asamura-kun taught me some tips and tricks for it.

Maybe that's why everything worked out fairly well. The store manager accepted our request, and both Asamura-kun and I thanked him.

Yet again, I've realized how amazing Asamura-kun is.

I could have never done that.

He's probably more skillful at holding conversations than he himself thinks.

When I told him that, he thought I was overestimating him. He argued that they expected a serious attitude, which was what made it easier for him. That's why this communication is easy to do.

When he told me this, it all made sense.

This is pretty much another way of 'adjusting'.

When that thought came to mind, I felt relieved. Negotiation isn't simply forcing your own desires on someone else. Rather, you have to consider both people's circumstances and adjust to the other person.

If you want to do something for your own convenience, you need to listen to what others want. It's like adjusting weights on a scale, trying to find balance.

Since I have this habit of giving the other person more, I never had any problems with it.

I always lean towards the give side in a give & take relationship. That's what I always thought. Basically, I see no problems with giving the other person more.

If that was all that was necessary, I might be able to do things like Asamura-kun as well.

When our change in shift was accepted, the store manager told us to work our best on that day.

If that's all he wanted, then I was confident that I could provide.

Right after getting these results, I contacted Maaya, telling her that Asamura-kun and I would participate.

It didn't take long for Maaya to send back 'Yay!', with a cute cat emote that was pumping its fist in the air. I made a wry smile, and then another long message came in.

The title was something like this:

'Creating lots of summer memories'

Maaya made something like this while she was travelling? Well, whatever.

The following morning... or more accurately, yesterday morning.

Asamura-kun said that he only had a swimsuit from gym classes, so he was clearly hesitant to wear that. So he said he'd go buy one after our shift.

What should I do? I actually had a swimsuit. When I was buying one for the school lessons at Suisei High, I found a cute one on sale, so I bought it.

When I enrolled at high school, our financial situation had somewhat stabilized (otherwise I probably wouldn't have been able to even attend Suisei High), but I didn't want to spend too much.

Since I bought it during the summer of my first year, it's been a full year since then.

But... I had never worn it once since.

I tried it on the day before when I got Maaya's message, but it was a bit tight, and it didn't really suit my current style.

So I looked up swimsuits online until it was time for work. Since I earn money from work, I can afford a swimsuit just fine.

After our shift ended, I asked Asamura-kun where he planned to buy the swimsuit.

Since the department store he chose to visit offered the brand I was planning on buying anyway, I decided to tag along.

Once we reached the location in question, I was suddenly curious about what swimsuit Asamura-kun might buy, but I quickly shook my head, banning such thoughts from my mind.

What good would thinking about it do? It's not like I was going to tag along during his shopping trip.

There's no way I could do that.

So I suggested we split up there. Though I doubt he realized that I was panicking a bit. I thought it wasn't fair that I was so nervous, and he remained so calm despite everything.

And now, today.

It was fun! So much fun! Hella fun!

It's been so long since I've gone to the pool that I nearly forgot what it was like!

There were so many attractions to check out, and I got to swim a lot!

I even talked a bit with the other people there, and remembered some of their names, but I'm not really the best at making friends like that.

If anything, I'm bad at reading the mood, and I don't like putting effort into doing so.

But everything worked out just fine today.

I think it's also thanks to Asamura-kun being with me.

Just like me, he doesn't go along with Maaya's nonsensical jokes, but he's much better than me at dealing with other people. If he wants to do something, he can.

But he also clearly states what he dislikes.

That's one part of him that I'm attracted to, for sure.

We split up at the Shinjuku train station.

Right as we were about to walk away, Maaya called out to him.

She wanted to exchange LINE details, and for some reason Asamura-kun glanced at me.

I subconsciously averted my gaze.

Why did he look at me? He can do whatever he wants.

It's his freedom of choice after all.

When I looked back, they had already finished the procedure, and Asamura-kun was thanking Maaya.

When I heard him saying that, I also realized how well thought-out her plan today was.

Narasaka Maaya truly is a person with a big heart for the people around her, although she herself is small.

I once again had to acknowledge that she likes people.

She has a lot of friends, and is liked by many.

I'm not good enough at all. My likes and dislikes are very strict. If I think 'I don't want this', I just flip a switch and cut off any form of communication.

On top of that, when I think of playing with those people again, I really hate myself for not feeling all too interested. I'm too intolerant, to be honest.

Not to mention that I'm afraid that people will find out that I actually don't like being dragged around.

I don't want to ruin the mood of other people. That wouldn't be fair at all. It's not like the other person did anything wrong. I just can't accept it.

That's why I can't help but admire Asamura-kun.

When he played in the minigames Maaya prepared, he focused on the other people having fun more than him standing out. He understands the hard work other people do.

He's so cool.

Although nobody seems to have realized that fact.

Am I the only one? Now I feel a bit proud about that.

But I got scared.

On the way home, Asamura-kun and I walked next to each other.

The sun had already started to set, and it was harder to see his expression.

I'm sure he's not looking at my face either.

Now's my time to say it, I thought.

To me, he looked so dazzling. So cool, and admirable.

So...

Nii-san.

I said with as clear of a voice as I could.

My heart wouldn't stop racing.

I just hope he didn't notice how my fingertips were quivering.

That's right, I need to tell myself. We're siblings.

However, if I leave some sort of tenuous distance between us, he might be hurt. He's trying to be a reliable older brother, so this was my decision to help keep an adequate distance between us.

We made it home to the living room.

As I watched Asamura-kun eat the dinner I made, I realized why Mom always enjoyed making food for me.

Did I make that kind of expression when he prepared that hot milk for me?

But this is simply happiness as his step-sister. That's what I told myself. I chose my next words carefully so that he wouldn't notice my inner turmoil.

"Would you like another serving of miso soup?"

In response to that, Asamura-kun said:

"No, I'm fine. It was delicious... Thanks, Ayase-san."

When he said this, I felt a strong gaze coming from him, making me flustered for a moment, wondering if I had messed up.

He wasn't talking about the taste of the miso soup.

I might be a bit too self-conscious. Or it might be a desire which made me go through this.

However, in Asamura-kun's gaze, I felt like I saw an odd emotion, almost like he was looking at me like I wasn't his little sister, but just another girl.

...Sorry, Asamura-kun. This surely is just a fabricated hallucination inside of my head, and you actually aren't the kind of person who would make such a mistake.

However, what if?

If Asamura-kun really likes me in that way, and if he told me about his feelings, what would happen to me?

Would I be able to stay righteous, and reject him?

I'm scared.

If this is just about me breaking down one-sidedly, then I can swallow these gloomy feelings and act like they don't exist for as long as they take to vanish.

However, if he were to take the first step, I probably wouldn't be able to bear it.

I would totally break under the pressure.

The following day, my phone's alarm rang from next to my pillow.

It was time for me to get up.

Mom and Dad were already in the living room.

It seems like they both took the day off today so that we can spend it together as a family, or something like that.

When I saw Mom smile as she said that, I realized that this was probably the happiest she had ever been for a long time.

Good for her. I don't want her to ever go through something like that again. I want her to experience all the happiness she couldn't before.

That's... why.

I'll—lock away my own feelings.

I don't want to destroy the happiness they have right now. I don't want to trouble Asamura-kun, either.

I can only pray that these feelings of mine never get found out.

I should cut my hair.

With that decision made, I immediately decided to act.

Yomiuri Shiori-san's long and beautiful hair is one important part of her femininity, and I'm sure that Asamura-kun must be attracted to it in some way.

I know that nothing will be resolved with just this. But if this even helps a tiny bit to secure safety in our relationship, I need to do everything in my power to do so.

Honestly, it's laughable.

All this femininity that I had denied, and yet now I'm being wrapped up in it myself like a stereotype.

I got a new haircut and came home.

I took out my diary from the drawer and re-read everything.

I realized that I had written down everything I felt with almost too much honesty.

Every single word, every sentence.

This is just...

My feelings of being attracted to him are far too clear in everything I wrote down.

But, all these memories of mine for the past week are not written down anywhere.

That's right, this is a diary that just exists in my head.

Why? It's simple.

I cannot risk Asamura-kun reading anything I've felt over the past week.

I realized the grave danger in writing a diary with my honest feelings. If I leave behind any written evidence, he might find it.

I need to get rid of it, and make sure that I never leave behind any more written evidence of my feelings. I'll only reminisce about my memories inside of my head.

I need to hide my feelings as a single girl I'm having towards a single boy. What I should be, what life I should live, is not to act towards him as a girl, but as a little sister. I need to interact with him as a step-sister.

These Days as a Step-sister³ don't need a diary anymore.

³ 1. Gimai Seikatsu

Afterword

Thank you very much for buying the 3rd volume of the novelized version of “Gimai Seikatsu.” I am the original creator of the Youtube version, as well as the author of the novel: Mikawa Ghost.

This volume was about Asamura Yuuta and Ayase Saki both trying their hardest to keep a solid distance between them, as grave changes occur inside of them. My editor and Youtube staff have referred to this as a ‘Divine Volume!’, and I hope you feel the same. If I receive such praise from my dear readers as well, that would be my greatest joy.

Now then, for the people who have read the volume to the very end, you probably have already realized it, but there is another meaning behind this novel’s title “Gimai Seikatsu”. From here on out, the tone of the story will shift greatly. Of course, the day by day style we’ve kept so far will remain the same, but their relationship won’t be able to stay the same any longer... This much is shown in the very last sentence.

The new characters that so nonchalantly appeared in this volume will be properly tied into future developments as well, so I hope you look forward to reading more. I’ll be happy if you keep watching over these two and how their relationship evolves.

Onwards to my thanks.

First up, to my illustrator Hiten-san. Thank you very much for your wonderful illustrations. I have no words for the gratitude I feel to see these important scenes inside the novel being brought to life like that. I especially liked the cover illustration for this volume. Seeing them walk down the street at night filled me with an odd feeling of nostalgia. Of course, such youthful scenery does not exist anywhere in my personal memories, but after seeing this single illustration, my brain just fabricated these memories. It really brings out the importance of the other scenes in the novel, representing it perfectly. I hope for your continued cooperation in the future.

To Nakashima Yuki-san as the voice of Ayase Saki, Amasaki Kouhei-san as the voice of Asamura Yuuta, Suzuki Ayu-san as the voice of Narasaka Maaya-san, Hamano Daiki-san as the voice of Maru Tomokazu, and Suzuki Minori-san as the voice of Yomiuri Shiori, thank you very much for lending your voices to the Youtube project. Because you bring life to all these characters, it allows me to

envision them much more real and vibrantly, making writing them a lot easier to do.

Of course, the same goes to the video director Ochiai Yuusuke-san and all the other Youtube staff, as well as everybody else involved. Thank you very much for everything. Thanks to you, we can bring more and more content to the readers and viewers of “Gimai Seikatsu”. This is all thanks to your hard and dedicated work. Really, thank you so much.

Finally, no matter how you twist or turn it, I have to thank the readers and viewers. Thank you very much for supporting us and granting us this chance. I’ll try my best as always to provide the greatest content for you, so I hope for your continued support of “Gimai Seikatsu”.

This has been *Mikawa Ghost*.

Short story: Sandwiched by Step-sister and Senior at Work

Door opening

“Excuse me. Asamura-kun... is sleeping. He’s taking a nap during his short break. He must have been tired. I thought I would eat something while talking with him, but... hee hee. Well, whatever. I’d feel bad waking him up just for that. I need to get better at my job so that Asamura-kun doesn’t get as exhausted as he is right now. Even if I can take care of a customer and show them around, Asamura-kun can do that with two people in the same amount of time, so it makes sense for him to be tired. To be honest, I have nothing but respect.”

.....

“You’re not listening to me talking, are you? Well, whatever. I’ll just eat something.”

Door opening

“Good work~ Oh? It seems like we already have some visitors here. You were giving it your all during the shift, so that makes sense.”

“Good work.”

“Oh, Junior-kun is sleeping, huh? You sure have a lot of guts to sleep like a log next to your little sis.”

“He was already asleep when I entered.”

“Hmmm~ Wah, he’s sound asleep.”

“...Why are you sitting down like we’re sandwiching him?”

“I figured I’d give him a taste of what it means to have a flower in each hand in his dreams, see~”

“I’m sure he’d be happy.”

“You’re talking like it has nothing to do with you~ You’re a flower yourself, so you should at least be confident that you would appear in his dreams.”

“Are you sure he won’t wake up from smelling the food?”

“Haha, having a dream about being fed from both sides, huh? That’s what I’d call luxury.”

.....

“Have you gotten used to work already?”

“Thanks to your help.”

“Right, with how much work you do, you basically count for two people, Saki-chan.”

“If I count for two people, then you count for at least four people, Yomiuri-san.”

“Don’t just double it like that. You’re giving me too much credit.”

“It is the truth.”

“Even if it is, I wouldn’t want people to expect that much from me. I can’t handle all that pressure. The first step to failing is to over-evaluate your abilities, remember?”

“So then... I’ll go with me being worth one person.”

“That won’t do~ It’s the truth, after all.”

“Ehhh... You’re thinking of me too highly. I’m still not that good at answering questions about books. It takes quite some time for me.”

“That will change as you get more experienced. If you got the hang of that right away, I’d have lost my position as your senior.”

“Hmmm... Even so, I need to learn more tricks to help me get faster.”

“100 points! If you keep up that mentality, you’ll soon be a professional part-timer.”

“Ahaha... Thank you very much.”

“Ah, if we keep talking this loudly, we might wake Junior-kun up. We’ve gotta keep the volume down a bit... If I whisper into his ears, he might have some kind of reaction in his dream.”

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea..”

“It’s not?”

“They say that you shouldn’t respond to other people’s sleep talk, so Asamura-kun might respond in his sleep. Not to mention that we’d have our priorities backwards if we woke him up in the process.”

“Hmm... So you say, Saki-chan, but I wonder which one Junior-kun would be most delighted about?”

“Um...”

“This is just a bit of a reward for my hard-working Junior-kun, from your beloved senior. Open your mouth. Here, aaaaahn.”

“I don’t think there’s any guarantee that he’ll actually dream about food, though.”

“I’m trying to manipulate his dream by telling him things.”

“He might already be having a great dream right now...”

“Then... Why don’t we make it an even better dream? ...Sorry to suddenly call you out here, Junior-kun. I didn’t expect you to tag along with me to this mountain area on the weekend~ We have electricity here, but the wind is so strong...”

ShioriBlowingInYourEar.mp3

“W-What are you doing?”

“I was thinking of making it a bit more realistic~ If you’re somewhere deep in the mountains, the wind can be quite strong, right?”

“Ahh... That’s right.”

ShioriBlowingInYourEar.mp3

“I do think the wind is a bit too fierce.”

“Oh my? Thanks for coming as well, Saki-chan.”

“This is supposed to be deep in the mountains, right?”

“Indeed, just as the—well, not two of us anymore—but anyway. Why did you come here?”

“It’s dangerous for just the two of you, so I figured the more people the better.”

“Yes, that is true. You’re absolutely right about that. With a flower each of his hands, not to mention deep in the mountains, it’d be like he had managed to grab the unattainable flowers all for himself. What a lucky fellow he is.”

“I think that Asamura-kun would be happier if I weren’t around.”

“No no, there’s no way that’s true. But anyway... We made it, Junior-kun~ Let’s give you an experience you’ll never forget~”

“What are you planning on starting?”

“Something very special. Your first time needs a lot of courage, but if you just jump into the unknown, it’ll end in a flash.”

“Although it’s inside his dream, I don’t think you should be saying such weird things...”

“Even if you know of the danger, sometimes you have to take that first step and let yourself fall. Now that you’ve come all this way, you can’t go back anymore. Right, Junior-kun? Now... jump..... And enjoy the bungee jump.”

“Huh?”

“I was talking about bungee jumping! Hmm? What were you thinking about? Did you think I’d kiss him or something~?”

“Isn’t it dangerous to do bungee jumping on days with strong wind?”

“In reality, yes. That’s why we’re doing it inside of a dream. Who knows? Maybe he was jumping with a flower in both hands~?”

“Oh.”

“Ah, oops. I guess I was playing around a bit too much.”

“Asamura-kun looked like he almost woke up there.”

“He’ll probably get angry at me if he finds out I was playing tricks on him in his sleep, ahaha~ Anyway, I’ll be excusing myself now!”

Door opening

“She sure is quick to run away...”

Door closing

“Is she that afraid...? Don’t worry. Come on back. Ah, you’ve calmed down a bit, huh? Thanks for the food. I guess I should go as well. I did kind of contribute to Yomiuri-san’s prank, and it would probably be a bit awkward if he found out that I saw him sleeping. Thanks for everything, Asamura-kun.”

Door opening and closing

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