



2

Ghost **Mikawa**

*Illustration by* **Hiten**

**DAYS**

*with my*

**STEP[SISTER]**



Ghost **Mikawa**

*Illustration by* **Hiten**



**DAYS**  
*with my*  
**STEPSISTER**







"You're funny, and you're nice."

"What's gotten into you  
all of a sudden?"

"Well, you see..."

She mumbled hesitantly as I waited. The glow from the vending machine dimmed, and Yomiuri's face fell into shadow. We both stopped talking, and silence permeated the midnight park. Beyond her, I saw buildings rising up like black tombstones.

"Hey, Yuuta. There's something  
I have to tell you..."







"Wow, Narasaka, you're amazing. You're just like a home economics teacher."

"Whaaat?! Can't you use a cooler example? How about a first-rate chef who's just returned from France?"

"But then you wouldn't be a teacher."

"I guess that's true!"

She smiled as if she didn't have a care in the world.

"You're amazing, too, Asamura. You're a super-fast learner. It makes me want to teach you more and more."



# Suisei High School Final Exam Results

YUTA ASAMURA



MODERN JAPANESE	96	MATH B	88
CLASSICAL JAPANESE	77	PHYSICS	70
JAPANESE HISTORY	81	CHEMISTRY	85
MATH II	92	ENGLISH EXPRESSIONS	90
ENGLISH COMMUNICATION			79
TOTAL		758 / 900	

SAKI AYASE



MODERN JAPANESE	??	MATH B	86
CLASSICAL JAPANESE	90	PHYSICS	89
JAPANESE HISTORY	100	CHEMISTRY	81
MATH II	80	ENGLISH EXPRESSIONS	84
ENGLISH COMMUNICATION			80
TOTAL		??? / 900	

TOMOKAZU MARU



MODERN JAPANESE	90	MATH B	92
CLASSICAL JAPANESE	92	PHYSICS	90
JAPANESE HISTORY	94	CHEMISTRY	82
MATH II	96	ENGLISH EXPRESSIONS	90
ENGLISH COMMUNICATION			94
TOTAL		820 / 900	

MAAYA NARASAKA



MODERN JAPANESE	92	MATH B	82
CLASSICAL JAPANESE	92	PHYSICS	84
JAPANESE HISTORY	94	CHEMISTRY	86
MATH II	86	ENGLISH EXPRESSIONS	96
ENGLISH COMMUNICATION			96
TOTAL		808 / 900	

# DAYS *with my* STEP SISTER

2

**Ghost Mikawa**

*Illustration by* **Hiten**

  
New York



# Copyright

## DAYS *with my* STEPSISTER 2

**Ghost Mikawa**

Translation by Eriko Sugita • Cover art by Hiten

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GIMASEIKATSU Vol. 2

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**"Things would be easy if the whole of humanity could just be chill, like you and me."**



**Saki Ayase**  
A high school junior who becomes Yuuta's stepsister after their parents remarry. Her flashy outfits tend to make people think she is a bad girl, and she has a hard time blending in at school.

**"You might repay me one day, so it's a win-win."**

**"Whoa! You must be the big brother Saki's been telling me about! So it is you— Yuuta Asamura from the next class over!"**



**Maaya Narasaka**  
Saki's classmate. She's always full of energy and loves to meddle. Unable to bear seeing Saki isolated in class, she cheerfully forced her way into becoming Saki's friend.

**Yuuta Asamura**  
A high school junior. He becomes Saki's older stepbrother after his dad marries Saki's mom. He's an average high schooler, but he distances himself from others. He loves to read and is addicted to books.

**"I've decided to get married."**

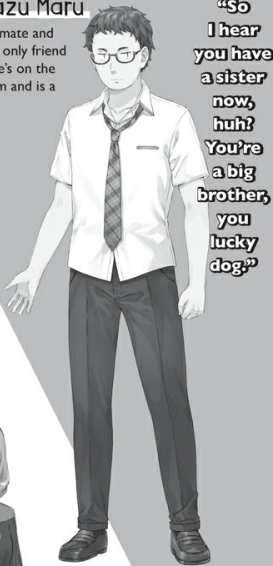
**Taichi Asamura**  
Yuuta's dad and Saki's stepfather. A lot happened with his first wife, whom he divorced before eventually marrying Akiko Ayase. Taichi gets along well with Yuuta and Saki.

**"I appreciate it. You're a really dependable guy, Yuuta."**



**Shiori Yomiuri**  
Shiori is a college student who works part-time at a bookstore with Yuuta. She's rooting for him in his relationship with his stepsister.

**Tomokazu Maru**  
Yuuta's classmate and probably his only friend at school. He's on the baseball team and is a huge nerd.



**"So I hear you have a sister now, huh? You're a big brother, you lucky dog."**

**"Tee-hee. Taichi told me all about you. My, you look put together!"**



**Akiko Ayase**  
Saki's mom and Yuuta's stepmother. After divorcing her ex-husband, she devoted herself to her work and raised Saki single-handedly until her second marriage.

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Frontispiece and illustrations by Hiten



# C o n t e n t s

Prologue

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July 18 (Saturday)

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Afterword

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The final problem she would solve was tougher than the most impenetrable novel...



## ● PROLOGUE

Essentially, a stepsister is a stranger. I can tell you that from experience.

Our parents married suddenly, thrusting us into a sibling relationship without anything to back it up. No kindred feelings engendered by similar DNA, and no years spent growing up together. All that's obvious, of course.

But a month after my dad married Akiko and she and her daughter moved in with us, I began to realize that this *stranger* called a *stepsister* occupied an extremely ambiguous position in my life... I couldn't simply think of her as a boarder in my home.

But if you asked me *what* exactly she was to me, I couldn't tell you.

Once school finished for the day, I made my way home. At the door to our apartment, I reached out and turned the familiar knob.

"Hey, Asamura."

"Hey, Ayase."

It had been a month, but the words we used to greet each other were the same as always.

Just because I was born a week before she was, I'd been designated the older brother, with Ayase as my younger sister. That meant nothing to us, however. We still exchanged cool, polite hellos like strangers.

Ayase didn't act happy and excited to see her big brother get home, nor did she shout at me, swearing and telling me to keep my disgusting face away from her. I was extremely grateful for the latter, incidentally.

But...it *is* true that we've started exchanging a few more words after our cool, polite greetings. For example, we might have a conversation like this:

“You said you were starting back up at work, right?”

“Yeah. Don’t you start today, too?”

Then she’d say yes, and that would be it.

Nothing more than a few simple words, but you *could* call it a change, I suppose.

A week before our final exams, I took time off from my part-time job, and Dad and Akiko told Ayase to take a break from preparing our meals, too.

Today marked the end of our exams, and our exchange just now confirmed the return to our usual routine. This, in turn, led me to think about my stepsister, the “stranger” who was now a part of my family.

A month might seem short, but a lot can happen in that amount of time.

If we were lovers, a month of living together would probably be enough to learn each other’s faults and strain the relationship. Or it might be enough to further close the distance between us and make us fall even more deeply in love. Not that I would know, of course, since I’ve never lived with a girlfriend. These musings were just based on what I’d read about in books.

Then what if she and I were related by blood? In that case, a month would be too short. The correct answer is, after spending over ten years together, a month would be meaningless. In other words, nothing would change between us.

My stepsister—too distant to stress me out with any annoying flaws she might have, but not close enough for me to ignore her presence. I’ve read more than my share of books, and yet I can’t think of a word to describe the strange distance of our relationship. Not now anyway.

As I stepped into my room to get changed for work, Ayase called out, “Chicken was on sale today, so I’m making *yu lin chi*.”

At her casual mention of a dish I’d only ever seen on the menu of a Chinese restaurant—Chinese-style fried chicken, if I remembered correctly—I stuck my head out the door and asked, “You can make that at home?”

“I can, and it isn’t even that complicated,” she said, shooting me a wry smile.



“It isn’t?”

Dad and I were happy to settle for deliveries or ready-made meals we could pick up at the supermarket or the convenience store, so I had no idea what it took to prepare a dish like *yu lin chi*. Thanks to that, my cooking repertoire was still stuck at the level of what I’d learned in elementary and middle school home economics.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m just throwing things together. It’s not going to be super authentic or anything.”

It seemed like she’d accurately picked up my concerns about her overdoing it and burdening herself.

“If you say so.”

Ayase had a habit of letting her thoughts go off the deep end when she felt stuck. Even though we’d only been living together for a month, I felt I’d learned a lot about the kind of person she was. I found myself thinking back to the night almost a month ago when she’d tried her hand at a high-paying part-time job (with me as her impromptu employer).

That little incident could’ve spelled disaster for both of us.

“Aren’t you going to be late if you don’t hurry?” she asked.

“R-right. Okay, I’m off. Oh, wait,” I said, turning around before opening the door. “I’d like you to teach me how to make that dish. I want to try it for myself.”

“...You don’t have to force yourself.”

This time, I was the one to smile wryly. She’d seen right through me.

These days, the whole world was built on contracts. But the high-paying part-time job I’d promised to find Ayase in exchange for her cooking was still pending. She’d said she liked to give a lot when it came to give-and-take. I needed to follow her example and produce results.

So what was I to do? That thought filled my mind as I hurried down the streets of Shibuya, the summer heat still permeating the air.

Cicadas burst into song as if they’d just gotten back to their posts, reminding

me that autumn was almost here. And peeking through the gaps between buildings, I could see a thunderhead, dyed red in the setting sun.

## ● JULY 16 (THURSDAY)

I woke up feeling the heat and humidity like a heavy, invisible membrane wrapping around my entire body—another summer morning. The paltry breeze from the AC unit, which we'd only just turned on, was not going to be enough to snap me out of my listless stupor. Relying on inertia and force of habit alone, I wiped at the pale, fine-grained dining table like an automaton.

It was another morning without my parents.

Ayase brought two plates from the kitchen and placed them on the table I had just wiped.

This time, it wasn't the usual steamed rice. Perched on the plates were mushy slices of toast.

"...Are we having leftovers on bread?"

"It's French toast," she said indifferently.

Not understanding what that was, I could only nod and say, "Okay."

Of course, I had heard of French toast. While I'd never eaten it, it sometimes appeared in my novels. But as many readers do, I had been content to recognize the term and never bothered to figure out what it was. Thus, when presented with the genuine article, I wasn't sure how to react.

"Judging by the name," I said, "I'm guessing it's something they eat in France."

"Apparently, the term was coined in the United States."

"Well, you're certainly knowledgeable, Ayase."

"I think I read that on a menu at some restaurant."

It must've been on one of those seasonal menus with the little explanatory



blurbs. Whatever. It didn't matter where it came from.

"How do you eat it?" I asked.

"Your utensils are sitting in front of you."

"With a knife and a fork?"

"Yep. Though, I don't care if you use chopsticks or your fingers, personally. We're at home, right?"

Her tone was nonchalant, but I still didn't see her completely as family and didn't want to embarrass myself in front of her like that. We weren't blood siblings, and she was a girl in my grade at school, not to mention beautiful. I was reluctant to let her see me looking so disgraceful.

"It feels weird to cut into bread like a steak," I said.

"Yeah? I think it would feel perfectly natural if you imagine it like slicing a cake."

"You've got a point there."

Things could look very different depending on how you approached them.

Putting aside my meaningless philosophical musings, I sliced into the toast and focused my attention on breakfast. As I savored the sweetness of the eggs and sugar, I glanced at Ayase, wondering what to say about the taste.

*Wait a sec.*

Ayase sat across from me with the same blank expression as usual. But the way she moved her knife and fork lacked her characteristic elegance. She seemed fidgety, as if something was bothering her.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Huh?!"

"I just thought you looked a little distracted."

"...Geez, you're sharp."

She grimaced and turned toward the calendar on the wall.

Akiko had brought it along when she and Ayase moved in. It featured cats at

play, so cute that it took a concentrated effort not to feel soothed. An insurance salesperson had given it to her at her bar. Dad and I got by with the apps in our phones and had no calendars at home, but one comment from Akiko about the walls looking bare, and it had instantly gone up next to the dining table.

As I stared at this visual reminder of our family's recent additions, Ayase finally spoke up.

"It's probably today."

"What's today?"

"The day we find out the rest of our test results. I think my class gets them today."

"Oh, you guys don't have your results yet?"

"Nope. Well, we do, except for one subject."

It didn't matter to our school, Suisei Metropolitan High, if two of its students were struggling to acclimate to their new stepfamily. It held our end-of-term exams at the same time as every other year—the beginning of July.

Ayase and I hadn't worked together or coordinated our efforts. We had both studied and braved the exams on our own.

We had promised not to meddle in each other's affairs and to maintain a respectful distance, so we didn't know each other's test scores, and there was no need to go out of our way to find out.

Until just now, that is.

"Hey, Asamura? Can I be rude for a second and ask you something personal?"

"Sure, go ahead. I can't imagine you saying anything so vulgar that I'd want to plug up my ears anyway, warning or no."

Ayase only said things that were acceptable to say out loud. At this point, I felt I could trust her to be decent.

"How did you do on the exams?" she asked.

This was a much more average question than I'd expected. True, it might seem rude to some people. Test results could be a sensitive issue. In that sense,

Ayase was being incredibly considerate.

“Let’s see—I got an 81 in Japanese History, a 92 in Math II, an 88 in Math B, a 70 in Physics, an 85 in Chemistry, a 90 in English Expressions, and a 79 in English Communication. Then I got a 96 in Modern Japanese and a 77 in Classical Japanese...which brings the total to 758, I think.”

“Wow. You’re smart.”

“It’s nice of you to say that, but I still have a lot to improve on. I need to work on my weak areas like Physics and Classical Japanese.”

“You’re outstanding, getting a 96 in Modern Japanese. Wow.”

“How about you?”

“I got a 100 in Japanese History, an 80 in Math II, an 86 in Math B, an 89 in Physics, an 81 in Chemistry, an 84 in English Expressions, an 80 in English Communication, and a 90 in Classical Japanese.”

“Every one of your scores is above 80. You did much better than I did.”

“So far.”

“There’s only one more subject. Even if you bombed Modern Japanese, your score would still be higher than mine.”

“I don’t know about that. I’m not very good at Modern Japanese.” She sighed. It was unusual for Ayase, who was clear-cut about everything, to admit to such a vague insecurity. “I’d like to get a part-time job during summer break, but depending on my score, I may not have much time to do that.”

“Sorry. It’s my fault for not finding you that high-paying gig.”

“You don’t need to apologize for that.”

“But we made a deal.”

Our parents both worked, so Ayase and I usually fixed our meals and ate without them. Akiko sometimes cooked for us when she had the time and energy, but our standard routine was to fend for ourselves.

Ayase was studying to get into a top-ranking college so she wouldn’t be looked down upon or considered weak for being a woman. She was also



searching for a high-paying job so she wouldn't burden our family with her tuition fees. She had asked me to gather information on suitable part-time work in exchange for cooking breakfast and dinner for us.

But embarrassingly, it had already been a month, and I still had no results.

Maybe she just didn't want me to feel guilty about it, but she didn't utter a word of complaint, only flashing me a wry smile.

"I'm sorry I took it for granted that you'd find something for me," she said. "I've decided to try out a regular part-time job for now."

"Then I'll help out with our meals."

"Huh? Well..."

That was only logical, since I couldn't honor my end of the deal. That was why I'd offered to cook, but Ayase hummed like she wasn't so sure about the idea.

"That's okay. You don't need to do that."

"But..."

"It's fun to cook. I find it relaxing."

"I'm glad to hear it. But you're still doing all the work."

There's something called the principle of reciprocity. When a person receives something, they feel they must give something in return. One person gives something to another, and that person returns the favor, which is then returned to them, and so on and so forth. Repeating acts like this is said to nurture smooth relations.

I don't consider myself some kind of saint who can bestow unconditional love on every stranger, and when someone is nice to me for no reason, I tend to get suspicious and wonder if I'm being scammed. Even if it isn't a scam and they're genuinely kind, it makes me extremely uncomfortable.

I was pretty sure Ayase was like me in this regard. She seemed to read my mind and said, "Right. It wouldn't be give-and-take," before carefully considering the matter.

After a moment, she raised her hand and said, "Okay, I have a suggestion.

You've been looking for a high-paying part-time job for me for a month and had no luck, which probably means there isn't one. Can we agree on that?"

"Yeah. I hate to admit it, but unless we start including illegal activities, I don't think we can find the type of job you're looking for."

"To save up enough money to go to college, I need to start working by summer break at the latest. When that happens, I'll probably have to start cutting into my sleep to find time to study."

"I don't think you can study efficiently if you don't get enough sleep."

"Exactly. And that's where my suggestion comes in. I want you to come up with some ideas for me to study more efficiently."

"More efficiently, huh? So like finding good reference books or setting up an environment that will help you concentrate?"

"I'll leave the method up to you. Will you do it?"

In the whole wide world, could you find another sister making such a selfless request of her brother? This was a far cry from that stereotypical scenario of an older brother caving to the unreasonable demands of his spoiled little sister. But there was one thing I had in common with that hypothetical older brother: I couldn't possibly say no.

"All right. Coming up with something worthy of this French toast will be tough, but I'll do my best."

"Thanks. I'll be looking forward to it."

Ayase spoke with such a dry tone and cool expression that it was hard for me to believe she was really "looking forward to it." Her face seemed to say she wouldn't blame me even if I didn't turn up anything, and it made me want to prove her wrong.

What could I do to help her learn more efficiently? As I thought this over, I savored the sweetness of my advance payment, the French toast, on my tongue.

After spending our morning together, Ayase and I headed to school separately. That's right—we didn't go holding hands like some scenario in a

light novel or a manga. My relationship with my stepsister was simply a fact of life—so much so that it left no room to feel doubt or sadness over little things like that.

Neither Ayase nor I had revealed our new familial relationship, and we continued to act like strangers at school. The only exception was Ayase's best friend, Maaya Narasaka. I hadn't even told my friend Tomokazu Maru. It wasn't that I didn't trust him, but negative rumors about Ayase seemed to be circulating among the members of his baseball team, and I didn't want to worry him or tell him anything that might cause problems.

"Hey, Asamura. Don't get carried away checking porn sites at school."

There he was—my friend Maru, teasing me as usual.

I was sitting in my classroom, relaxing before homeroom. I'd already gotten ready for class, and I was playing with my phone.

"Maru, did you know that the insults you throw at other people are a reflection of your own failings?"

"What the heck?"

"You only suspect others of doing bad things because the urge is already there—in your own mind."

"That's an interesting theory."

"That means you're the one who regularly peruses porn sites. You've just proved it."

"Hey, don't start jumping to conclusions."

"So you don't?"

"...Okay, yeah, I do."

*And there we have it.* Maru could have easily lied or refused to admit it, but he didn't. He really was a good guy.

"I don't have the guts to look at porn at school, okay?" I said. "I was just doing a little research."

"Aha! Browsing reaction posts for recent anime, huh? Last night was a real



bumper crop. The new *Project DJ Microphone* was fantastic.”

“Oh, right. I remember you were into that one.”

“The music they chose was great. Nineties video game BGM and real classic numbers any connoisseur would recognize.”

“The nineties, huh...? Those songs sound pretty old.”

“Yeah, but don’t let that fool you. Back then, they were limited to only a few tones, so composers would get inventive and try all sorts of things. The results are amazing. Plus, the way they prioritized the music’s suitability for the game, rather than the musician’s artistry, was revolutionary.”

Maru’s voice gradually grew heated. I nodded in agreement as I watched my friend speak faster and faster, in that way nerdy guys often did. Though I wasn’t as interested as he was, I was careful not to look bored and spoil his excitement.

“I see,” I said. “So they’re using the kind of music that really appeals to your nerdy heart, huh?”

“Yeah, exactly. They manage to preserve the feel of old FM radio music while arranging it into a modern style. And since video game BGM doesn’t have Japanese lyrics, there’s no language barrier, and people all over the world love it. I think whoever is behind *D-Mike* must be super talented.”

“I’m surprised.”

“About what?”

“I just didn’t expect you to talk about music with such emotion. I knew you were well-informed about all sorts of things, but don’t you think you’re spreading yourself a little too thin?”

“You probably feel that way because I only talk about the things I really know.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“I like to be in control when I’m having a conversation. When I talk, I’m like an all-knowing, all-powerful god.”

“In other words, you’re pulling one over on me?”

“Yeah, essentially. Though whether I’m committing a crime depends on my goal.”

“And what *is* your goal?”

“To get the most enjoyment out of any conversation,” he said, full of confidence in this *carpe diem* way of living.

“You’re a real pacifist,” I said with a hint of sarcasm. Maru grinned.

I thought about grilling him on the way he made himself look smart even with a humble argument, but I ultimately gave up, figuring it’d be in poor taste.

“You may not be an all-knowing god,” I said, “but you *are* smart. I bet you did great on your exams.”

“Have you found me out at last? I was keeping it a secret, but the truth is, I’m a genius.”

“I already knew that.”

Maru was still joking around when I tried asking him about his scores. And sure enough, his results were outstanding.

A 90 in Modern Japanese, a 92 in Classical Japanese, a 94 in Japanese History, a 96 in Math II, a 92 in Math B, a 90 in Physics, an 82 in Chemistry, a 90 in English Expressions, and a 94 in English Communication, for a total score of 820.

“Your average score is above 90?” I said, a little daunted. “That’s incredible.”

“I just know how to get those extra points. It’s nothing, really.”

“I highly doubt that’s all it is. We go to a good school, and our tests are especially tough. And somehow, you manage to be on the baseball team, spend time watching anime, and also get top grades. You have to be cheating.”

“I’m not.”

His response came so quickly, it was clear he had nothing to hide. Cheating might be going a little too far, but I wished he had some sort of secret technique, at least. If I could learn a method to study more effectively from Maru, I might have something to bring back to Ayase...but life wasn’t so easy.

Maru must have read my mind, because he stared at me through his glasses, sighing deeply like a wise man about to reluctantly bequeath some mysterious truth to a lowly mortal.

“There *are* certain factors,” he said at last.

“Oh?”

“First, I’m a short sleeper.”

“That’s someone who can stay healthy without much sleep, right? I had no idea you were like that.”

“Yeah. But that’s something you’re born with. Since it’s all up to genes, I can’t recommend it to anyone else.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t sound like something another person could emulate... Hold up, what do you mean ‘recommend’?”

“You want to know my tricks, right?”

“You see through me so well, it’s a little terrifying.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Yeah, you’re basically an open book.”

Maru was like some sort of psychic. He could read a person without even breaking a sweat. This was why I couldn’t stand catchers... Okay, maybe that was just a baseless prejudice.

“Well, there’s no point in hiding it,” I said. “I *am* looking for an effective way to study, though it won’t help if it doesn’t apply to everyone.”

“Don’t rush it, Asamura. We’ve only just begun.”

With an air of self-importance, Maru pulled out his phone and launched a music app.

“Music?”

“Yeah. That’s the secret to my concentration. And I’ve brought our conversation full circle, too. Aren’t you impressed?”

“That’s a bit of a stretch.”

“But it really works. We humans are creatures of habit. Train your brain to



study when it hears a certain kind of music, and your pen will keep moving. It'll actually be harder for you to slack off."

"I guess that makes sense. So it's like a kind of self-suggestion or a life hack. I bet soothing music or background sounds like birdsong or waves would be best."

"It depends on the person. I focus best while listening to club music or heavy metal."

"I think that's probably just you..."

"As I said, it depends on the person. You should try out different types of music and find what works for you."

"Huh? Oh, um, yeah. I'll do that."

His response caught me off guard for a moment, but I made an effort to sound natural. Though my catcher friend could sometimes be unusually sharp, even he would never imagine I was doing this not for myself, but for Saki Ayase.

Still, Ayase had probably already thought of something basic like using background music to study, so it didn't even seem worth mentioning to her.

This was only a starting point.

As I stared past my friend, who was now talking excitedly about *Project DJ Microphone* again, I vowed to dig even deeper for information to help Ayase.

*Come to think of it, I wonder how Ayase did on her Modern Japanese exam.*

The thought popped into my mind as I reached for the door to our apartment. Then I shook my head. It wasn't any of my business. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious, but it seemed like a breach of etiquette to demand an answer just to satisfy my curiosity. If it wasn't a problem and she wanted me to know, she'd tell me herself.

"I'm home."

When I opened the door and spied a pair of women's shoes in the entryway, I called out a greeting. They were the same shoes I'd been seeing every day for a month now, and they meant that my housemate was already home.

I'd thought I was early since I hadn't gone to work or made any stops along the way, but it appeared she'd still beat me. Maybe her final homeroom period had ended early, or she'd walked particularly quickly. I grinned, easily picturing her hurrying along on her way home.

I had just holed up in my room, ready to spend my free time researching background music for studying, when I heard the door open behind me. I turned around to see my stepsister rushing over.

"Asamura."

"Oh, hi... Uh, did you need something?"

I was puzzled. She seemed about to crash into me and wasn't slowing down.

The expressionless face of my beautiful stepsister was now inches away. It was unnerving, as if a mask, carved by an accomplished artist, were fixing me with an intense stare.



“Teach me Modern Japanese,” she said.

“You’ve gotta be kidding,” I muttered, taken aback by the unusual request delivered in Ayase’s typical monotone.

I didn’t doubt she was telling the truth, of course. I instantly understood what was happening and the surprising reason why, so my shock came out before she could explain. Based on my assumption, I figured it would be more impolite to beat around the bush and decided to ask her straight out:

“What was your score?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“Whoa.”

“I’ve always been bad at Modern Japanese, so I had a feeling it’d be a disaster this time, too.”

“You did so well in all your other subjects...but I suppose everyone has their strengths and weaknesses.”

Ayase averted her eyes. “I couldn’t figure out what was going on in the characters’ minds in the stories.”

I blinked.

“The important thing in Modern Japanese is to grasp the text’s intentions,” I said, “but I don’t think you need to understand it fully.”

“But grasping the text’s intentions is basically the same as grasping the characters’ feelings, right? ...Though, I do get the sense I’m letting pointless stuff distract me.”

“It’s hard to imagine you having a problem like that. You’re so sensitive to people’s emotions.”

“Is that how you see me?”

“Yeah. At least where I’m concerned, you always try to understand what I’m thinking and meet me in the middle.”

“Asamura, it’s the other way around.”



“Huh?”

“I *need* to try and meet everyone in the middle, precisely because I don’t understand their feelings.”

“...That makes sense.”

I wasn’t very good at dealing with people who suddenly got moody and expected you to read their mind, since I’d watched Dad go through that up close.

Carrying on a tenuous conversation while trying to guess what your partner is thinking is like continuously rolling a die with a 10 percent chance of absolute failure. It was a game based entirely on chance. That was why I’d been so relieved when Ayase suggested we focus on compromise without expecting anything from each other.

That way, we could continue the game forever, showing each other our hands and always playing the right card to avoid hurting the other person.

But while you could certainly call that being kind and considerate, from another angle, it meant we were refusing to do the work necessary to decipher a person’s feelings based on their words.

“Still, my results this time are awful,” said Ayase. “I wasn’t expecting them to be good, but I’m a little shocked.”

“A 38, huh...? Isn’t anything below 40 failing?”

“Yep. There’s a retest on the twenty-first, right before we’re off for the summer. If I don’t pass with an 80 or above, I’ll have to take supplementary classes during the break.”

“Supplementary classes for material that won’t even be on your college entrance exam—you’ll want to avoid that for sure.”

“Exactly. I definitely want to pass that retest. Asamura, Modern Japanese is your best subject, right?”

“Thanks to my love of reading... I see. So that’s why you want my help.”

“Well?”

“Okay. I’m in your debt right now, so I’ll take any opportunity to repay you.”

“Good.”

Ayase smiled, looking relieved. The tension seemed to have left her shoulders, and she walked out of my room, saying she would wait for me in the living area.

Even at a time like this, she was acting just like her usual self. She’d failed her exam. No one would have blamed her for panicking or lying in bed sulking. But no matter the situation, Ayase was always positive, trying to figure out the best way forward and taking action.

...But that left me with a question.

Ayase was obviously capable of rationally reflecting on her situation and working to improve. So why hadn’t she done anything to conquer her weakness, Modern Japanese?

Anything I came up with now would be mere speculation, however, so I tossed my schoolbag onto my desk, picked up my phone and some writing tools, and stepped out of my room.

When I entered the living room, I saw Ayase holding a pen in her left hand, with her notebook, textbook, and the answer sheet she had gotten back from her teacher spread out before her on the dining table. Incidentally, Ayase had told me some time ago that she was actually left-handed. Her mom had taught her to use her right hand when she ate, but she often wrote with her more familiar left hand.

If this were a manga, we’d have gone to her room and ended up in some sexy situation, but unfortunately, this was reality. It was just another everyday scenario, and we needed to focus on the task at hand.

After pausing for a minute to think, I sat across from her on the opposite side of the table.

“You’re not gonna sit next to me?” she asked.

“That’s a little too close for comfort.”

“You always sit next to me when we eat with Mom and Dad.”

“That’s a totally different situation.”

“It is?”

I was about to say “Yeah,” completely convinced of my argument. But when I saw the matter-of-fact look on her face, it occurred to me that my efforts to avoid getting overly familiar with a girl my age might actually be rude.

If I could stop thinking of Ayase as a girl and act totally neutral around her, that would be ideal. But she was simply too attractive for that.

That was just an objective observation, of course, not a reflection on my own personal taste. Despite her supposedly scary aura and the negative rumors surrounding her, many guys at school had still confessed to her. I felt that more than proved her general appeal.

...And that incident from a month ago had yet to fade from my mind. I still had flashbacks of her coming on to me in her underwear—a crazy course of action she’d nevertheless arrived at logically in her pursuit of quick cash.

It wasn’t as if I was picturing that all day (that would make me a sex-crazed beast), but I couldn’t help recalling it when we were alone and physically close.

“Hey, why would you keep remembering something you promised to forget?” asked Ayase.

“Huh?! I don’t remember anything like that.”

Had she read my mind? It was a little terrifying, but either way, I didn’t remember making any promises. I *had* vowed to forget what happened, but that was just in my own mind. I hadn’t discussed the incident with her at all.

I looked at her, puzzled. She looked back, seemingly even more baffled than I was.

“I’m sure it happened, though it was only a casual mention right at the beginning. Maybe it didn’t make a big impression on you.”

“Ayase, I’m sorry, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Come on, Coach. You’re supposed to be good at Modern Japanese, aren’t you?”

Then I noticed her pointing at her answer sheet, and it dawned on me what she meant.

“...Oh. I didn’t realize you’d changed the subject.”

“I haven’t changed the subject. I’ve been working on this same problem the whole time.”

“Sorry. I guess I misunderstood. Okay, let’s get started.”

It appeared she was way ahead of me. She hadn’t been complaining about my inappropriate thoughts; she’d only asked me about a sentence in her textbook that she didn’t understand.

“Thanks,” said Ayase. “Now, about what I asked you...”

“Oh, wait. Can I start by suggesting some study methods?”

“Sure, if it’ll improve my grades.”

“First, I’d like to figure out what it is about Modern Japanese that’s causing you problems. Hand me your test papers.”

“Okay, here.”

With her pierced ears and dyed hair, Ayase might look like a bad girl, but she was a good student who followed directions. I didn’t think the “38” written mercilessly across her answer sheet suited her.

I got the feeling that whatever her problem was, it couldn’t be a simple lack of understanding, ability, or effort. There had to be some deep-rooted cause, and as I scoured her answer sheet, I found it.

“You had zero problems with kanji comprehension or the essay. You pretty much just bombed the novel-reading portion.”

“...Yeah, that’s what I’m not good at.”

“I bet this is your first time failing. This exam put more emphasis than ever on the novel-reading portion.”

“Correct. I already figured out that much on my own, though.”

She slumped her shoulders and said the problem was that she didn’t know what to do about it.

“You got most of the answers right on the first essay portion, but you left almost all of them blank on the second one. Would it be correct to assume you spent too long on the two novel excerpts in between and ran out of time?”

“You sound like you were watching me.”

“Am I off the mark?”

“No, you’re exactly right. So much so that it kind of pisses me off.”

I saw a grumpy shadow cross over her poker face.

“Sorry. I should have been a little more discreet.”

“You’re forgiven. I should apologize for getting snippy when you’re making a serious effort to help me.”

“Okay. That means we’re even.”

Ayase and I were doing exactly what we’d promised to when we became family. Rather than let our emotions build up inside or start testing each other’s intentions, whenever we had a misunderstanding, we would immediately talk it out and find a compromise.

It really helped me when she honestly told me in her own words that I’d upset her, rather than just making faces.

“It seems like you had particular trouble with Natsume Soseki’s *Sanshiro*. You didn’t get a single answer right, and most of the rest of your answer sheet is blank.”

“You’re right...”

“Did you not notice?”

“I was too busy struggling to answer the questions. Though, I could tell they were even harder for me than the others.”

“So it sounds like you failed to realize that this was the critical section for you.”

There’s a rhythm to answering questions on a test. Since test-taking is a kind of manual labor, results will always be affected by one’s mental state. Your brain is happy when you answer question after question smoothly, and your



pen will feel like it's moving on its own. On the other hand, when you get stuck and can't proceed, your brain registers that frustration and you start to feel stress, which, in turn, diminishes your mental capacity. Thus, to get the best results on an exam, you need to keep your mental state stable and maintain a rhythm as you go...or at least, that's what it said in a book I once read.

I'm easily affected by the things I read, so I'd been putting that method into practice ever since. I break down the test into questions I can answer instantly, those I can answer with a little thought, and those that will require thorough consideration, then proceed at a comfortable pace. That way, before I know it, the answer sheet is full.

"People like you who think logically feel uncomfortable if they don't understand the questions completely," I explained. "When you understand the question, the answer comes immediately, but once you get stuck, you stay stuck forever."

That would explain why Ayase had never managed to conquer her problem subject. Her brain believed she was already tackling her exams with the right attitude, and because of that, she couldn't find a way to improve.

Ayase nodded at my explanation.

"You're right. I think I've been solving all the problems in my other subjects instantly like you said."

"There has to be a reason why you have trouble with Modern Japanese fiction in particular."

"A reason..."

"Once we know what that is, we'll be able to deal with it. Let's use this excerpt from *Sanshiro* and think about what's going on in your mind that keeps you from understanding."

I skimmed over the portion of the work that was on the test. Only part of it was included, since the entire novel would have been way too long for an exam.

Among the many novels of Natsume Soseki, a famous and well-regarded author from the early twentieth century, this work was primarily concerned with straightforward romance and was less of a challenge for modern high

school students to understand.

Some people might be intimidated by the word *literature*, but novels like this were the same as today's popular TV dramas. They used the realities of an average person's everyday life and appealed to people's hopes and empathy. In fact, it wasn't that different from a modern romance novel.

If I had to pick out what set literary works apart, I'd say the way they accurately depicted their era made them valuable as historical records. That, in turn, led to their inclusion in school textbooks and assured that they were passed down over time. This alone, however, made a huge difference in the value of a work within the literary world, and such titles were no doubt worthy of respect.

"I have to admit," said Ayase, "I found this section really tough. But when I glanced around, the other kids in my class didn't seem to have a problem with it."

"*Sanshiro* is known as a progressive work for its time. It was written when political marriages were the norm, but it depicts the troubles of a young couple in love. That kind of romance story was a novel idea back then, but that's why it's relatively easy for a modern audience to understand."

"You think so? ...I wonder what part of it is supposed to be easy."

Ayase chewed on her finger and craned her neck. She probably didn't even realize she was doing it.

"I think it'll be faster to have you tell me what part you don't get," I said. "Try to list out the things you find difficult for me."

"I don't understand what Sanshiro is thinking, or what Mineko, who seems to be another major character, is thinking, or why either of them do what they do."

"Okay. Do you understand that Sanshiro is in love with Mineko?"

"He is?"

Ayase blinked, apparently shocked. But I was the one who wanted to blink in confusion.

I didn't think you needed to be an avid reader to figure that out. As long as you had basic reading comprehension, the description of the characters' thoughts should have made it obvious. Ayase was smart enough to get high marks in all her other subjects, so it seemed strange that she didn't understand.

"It might be tough if you're already stuck at that point," I said. "Hmm, how should I explain it?"

"He's in love with her... You mean romantically, right?"

"Yeah. The prose is a little fancy, and the dialogue is kind of dramatic, but don't you think it's easy to see how he feels when another guy approaches her?"

"He doesn't like other guys talking to Mineko. Is he jealous?"

"That's how I see it."

"But he could simply ask her not to talk to other men if he doesn't like it."

"He's too awkward to do that. I think it's too great a challenge psychologically for him to communicate with the woman he loves."

"I honestly can't understand people who hide their feelings and don't just say what they want... I'm not like that."

"Why don't you try imagining a situation where it's not that easy? The first time you fell in love, for example. Haven't you ever experienced being unable to make the right decision because your emotions got in the way?"

"No. And I've never been in love, either."

"Oh..."

"How about you?"

"...Now that you mention it, I don't think I have, either."

My dad once told me that I'd asked my kindergarten teacher to marry me when I was too young to know what I was saying, but I wasn't even sure that had really happened, so I decided not to count it.

My only clear memories after entering elementary school were of my parents fighting. After seeing that, I could no longer innocently dream about falling in

love or getting married and living happily ever after.

“Hmm. So you’ve never been in love,” Ayase mused.

“...Is there something wrong with that?”

“Nah. It just means that has nothing to do with my bad marks in Modern Japanese.”

“I guess that’s true. I’m interested to find out what made the difference.”

*Could it be because I’m a nerd?*

While I’d never dreamed about dating real girls, I often found the heroines in novels, manga, and anime attractive and had indirectly experienced romance through reading about it. It seemed likely that knowledge had allowed me to understand the way romantic feelings were portrayed in fiction.

But if that was true, we were doomed. Ayase wouldn’t be able to improve in time for her retest, and if I let that happen, I’d be failing as her tutor. I had to give her constructive advice.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s forget about empathizing with the characters. Accept that you can’t figure out their emotions.”

“You want me to guess?”

“No. All you have to do is take in the information in the text as just that—information—and answer mechanically. Don’t think of it as a story about people.”

“Don’t think of it as a story about people.”

“Right. You’re getting stuck because you’re trying to understand the characters’ emotions. Instead, try doing it like math. Fill in the information and work it out like you would an equation. You got a good score in history, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah. All I have to do is memorize stuff. Besides, history is usually interesting.”

“Modern Japanese is pretty easy to grasp if you can remember a novel’s title and when it was written. You’re good at history, so just tie in what you know

about the period, and you can more or less figure out what's going on in the novel."

This was a typical example of *easier said than done*. But considering how intelligent Ayase was in general, it seemed like it might just work.

"That does sound easier to handle," she said.

"Let's practice with *Sanshiro*. We don't know if the same work will show up on your retest, but there are only a few kinds of questions, so if you just practice how to find the answers, you should be ready in time."

"...You think I can do it?"

She asked this simple question with an air of indifference, but from what I'd learned of her so far, I could tell she was pretty worried. The fact that she'd come to me at all proved how concerned she was.

That was perfectly natural, however. This was a subject she'd always had trouble with. But her response to my advice made me certain she would do okay.

Ayase wasn't so naive as to think her problem was solved just because she'd figured out a strategy. That, however, was exactly why I knew she'd reach her goal, even if she had to take some detours to get there.

"You can do it, Ayase."

"Mmm. I'll give it a try. I have faith in you, Asamura."

She meant what she said. She had no evidence I was right, but she didn't doubt me or make any snide comments. She simply picked up her phone and started researching *Sanshiro*—looking up the historical background and commentary on the work.

Once she'd decided on a course of action, she dived right in.

Her concentration was amazing. She was like a machine, never blinking as she checked every article she could find... Well, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration, but she certainly gave off that impression.

She never looked up, even when I left to fetch a drink, or when I checked something else on my phone. She was utterly focused on what she was doing.



If this were a story, I'd probably end up struggling to help my incompetent little sister with her schoolwork, until she inevitably grew tired of quietly studying and started goofing around and playing tricks on me, resulting in something romantic or sexy happening. But in reality, my stepsister simply bulldozed her way through her studies.

It wasn't sexy or anything. Still, listening to her scribbling away in our quiet dining room was oddly comforting.

And in the end...my suggested study method proved fantastically effective.

Once Ayase had consumed enough information about *Sanshiro*, I picked up her test paper and read out the same questions, one at a time. She was able to answer them with little difficulty and got every one of them right.

She was a quick learner. Once she knew how to find the answer, the rest was easy.

"Congratulations," I said. "All you have to do now is master every novel you might be tested on, and you'll no longer have to worry about Modern Japanese."

"Thanks. You're a good tutor."

"...! Not at all." I paused for a minute before answering. I'd noticed the corners of her mouth curving upward as she spoke. "Are you smiling?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure."

She casually shrugged, leaving me puzzled.

The gesture was mysterious, and I found it hard to read. In an ironic twist, she reminded me of the heroine in *Sanshiro*, who she'd had so much trouble understanding.

## ● JULY 17 (FRIDAY)

It was morning again. I got out of bed and exited my room, still half asleep, tiptoeing to the bathroom so I wouldn't run into anyone.

This was one of the big changes that came with gaining a stepsister: my morning routine. When it was just Dad and me, I didn't mind walking around with my hair messy, my eyes puffy, or my pajamas smelly. But that was no longer an option. Now I might run into Ayase or Akiko, two women who were basically strangers, and I certainly wasn't brave enough to expose myself to them looking filthy and disheveled.

I ensured the coast was clear and walked into the bathroom. There, I checked my face, gargled, and rubbed the puffiness out of my cheeks before washing up and shaving the few hairs on my face.

I wouldn't say my appearance was *perfect*, but it was at least good enough to go out in public. Once finished, I proceeded proudly into the living room.

"Good morning, Ayase."

She was fully "armed," as usual. Not a hair was out of place, her makeup was perfect and even, and she had ironed all the wrinkles out of her school uniform.

I had yet to see my stepsister looking anything other than flawless. Her self-discipline was incredible. She must have stayed up late the night before, collecting and memorizing information on novels that might show up on her test, yet she had gotten up at the same time as always. And if that wasn't enough, she was sitting at the dining table with her phone and textbook in front of her, apparently still studying.

When she heard me, she raised her head and stood up.

"Good morning, Asamura. I'd appreciate it if you could settle for something

easy to make today. Would eggs sunny-side up be all right?”

“Oh, it’s okay, don’t bother. I’ll make myself some toast.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Your exam. You want to focus on studying, don’t you?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see two freshly cleaned plates. Dad, who had left the apartment before anyone else, had probably used one of them. The other was likely Ayase’s. Instead of waiting for me, she must have made a simple breakfast so she could spend the rest of her time studying.

“But we have a deal,” said Ayase.

“So far, I owe you more than you owe me. It would be to my advantage if you pass your test, so I’d rather you concentrate on preparing for your exam.”

I decided to cut right to the chase.

Ayase would need to take extra classes if she failed her retest. That would give her less time to work toward becoming independent, and we could forget learning how to study more efficiently. Ultimately, she’d stop being able to cook for me, which would disrupt my diet.

She seemed to register that this was a compromise, not a shirking of her duties, and quickly backed off.

“Okay, thanks. I’ll let you do that,” she said.

“You’re welcome—not that you owe me anything for this one.”

“Mm... All right.”

She flashed me a brief smile, sat back down, and returned to work.

Satisfied to see her in study mode, I proceeded to the kitchen. It was time to put my rusty culinary skills to the test. To think the day would come when I’d get to display my ultimate cooking technique, placing a slice of cheese on bread and heating it, once again. *Heh-heh.*

High school boys like me were simple—all it took was a little mental cheerleading to make a tedious task like cooking a bit more enjoyable... Of course, maybe high school girls weren’t too different. I’d have to ask Ayase

about that sometime. When she wasn't busy studying, of course.

The bread came out beautifully. I managed to achieve a golden brown so fine and even, you'd think I did this every day. The cheese was crisped to perfection—a real work of art.

While I struggled to bite through the gooey cheese, which seemed ready to stretch forever, Ayase paid me no mind. She sat in the chair across from me, still focused entirely on her schoolwork.

She had tremendous concentration. She was so laser-focused, in fact, that I wondered if it was even possible for her to improve. I got the feeling some nice background music wasn't going to cut it.

About the time the toast had settled in my stomach and I was washing it down with coffee, Ayase stretched her arms above her head and groaned in a sultry voice: “Ngh! Mmm...”

Wait, scratch that. She probably didn't mean to sound sultry. That was just my perception. *Sorry about that, Ayase.*

Her summer uniform was lighter, and when she stretched out her arms, the short-sleeved top would ride up, and I'd catch sight of a little more bare skin. It was enough that I couldn't help thinking about it, though I managed to contain my feelings. I kept reminding myself that I wasn't supposed to look at her that way and that it was rude of me. I made an effort to even out my breathing and attempted some natural, everyday conversation.

“All done?” I asked.

“Yeah. Or rather, I think I should be on my way.”

“You're early.”

“It's more efficient for me to take the lead today since I've eaten breakfast and I'm ready to go.”

By “taking the lead,” she meant leaving first to go to school. We did everything we could to avoid being seen stepping out of the same apartment or walking to school together. That's the kind of thing *real* stepsiblings have to think about.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said. “Okay, I’ll see you.”

“Bye.”

“...Oh. Wait a sec!”

As she picked up her bag and was about to leave, I called out to her, so she turned around and asked me what I wanted.

“Don’t try to study on your way to school...,” I said.

I recalled the near-miss incident about a month ago when Ayase was listening to an English recording and almost got hit by a truck. I probably sounded a bit awkward—I thought maybe it was in poor taste to bring up something that was now in the past. All the same, my concern was genuine, so I felt I had to warn her.

“I won’t,” she said with absolute certainty. Then her face turned a light pink, and she pouted, continuing, “I won’t make the same mistake twice.”

“Okay, good. Sorry for bringing it up again.”

“No problem. Bye.”

She turned away and practically fled from the living room.

...Had I screwed up? Tasting the bitterness of the coffee on my tongue, I quietly reflected on our failed exchange.

Remembering the incident in question probably reminded Ayase about how embarrassed she was to be seen making an effort—something she wanted to hide from other people. It made sense she didn’t like me bringing it up.

It seemed I still had a long way to go before I could become a cool older brother.

As I took a sip of coffee, trying to cover up my regret with the bitter taste, I realized something.

“Back then, she said she didn’t want me to see her making an effort, right?”

But what had she been doing that morning? Hadn’t she been studying hard right before my eyes?

The change had been too subtle for me to notice, but compared with when



we first met, she was showing me a lot more of her vulnerable side. It was still baby steps, but maybe the two of us were on our way to becoming siblings after all.

Even at a prestigious school like ours, there was a certain laxness to the days before summer break. Teachers began to wrap up their lessons as soon as they reached a good stopping point, perhaps realizing it would all be forgotten during the long vacation. The rest of the time was dedicated to review or self-study, or sometimes even socializing.

As a result, no one cared that I was playing with my phone behind my desk.

At that very moment, I was swimming through the vast sea of the internet, searching for background music to help Ayase, who might well be the student currently studying the hardest at our school.

Before long, it was time for lunch. I quickly finished the bread I'd bought and stood without a word. When Maru heard the sound of my chair moving, he stopped using his phone and looked up.

"Hey, Asamura, where are you going?"

"To the library."

That was as good an answer as any. I wasn't planning to go to the library, but he might get suspicious if I told him truthfully that I was just going to wander around.

He said okay and returned his attention to his phone. Maru and I often had exchanges like this during our breaks. We were friends, but that didn't mean we were always buddy-buddy. We each tended to spend our time doing our own thing at our own pace. We were able to stay friends because we were on the same page, and we both hated being tied down or pressured to conform to the group.

I left my classroom and headed for the library. That wasn't my destination; I was only walking in its direction. In fact, I wasn't going anywhere in particular. I just wanted to walk.

Yomiuri—my senior at work—had recommended a book to me that said people tended to come up with more ideas if they were walking than if they

remained seated. I'm easily influenced, so I'd been putting what I'd read into practice ever since.

As I walked, I continued to search the web on my phone for some background music that was scientifically proven to help you study, all the while hoping a divine being might bless me with some other brilliant ideas.

I was approaching the library when someone suddenly struck me on the back.

"Hey, Big Brother! What are you up to?"

"...! W-wah!"

The girl behind me gave me such a scare that I stopped breathing for a moment. Immediately on my guard, I turned around and saw a familiar face.

She had a bright, sunny smile full of curiosity, and her lightly colored, slightly wavy hair looked very fashionable. I'd also heard she was secretly quite popular with the male students. It was Ayase's classmate, Maaya Narasaka—the only person at school who knew Ayase and I were stepsiblings.

She reminded me of a playful, mischievous cat that was always trying to slip into your closet. She had probably just exited the library, as she held several books in her arms. Her big, round eyes searched me for a reaction.

"Oh, it's you," I said. "I thought you were some spree killer about to claim me as your next victim."

"What the heck are you talking about? A killer wouldn't be here at school."

"That's where you're wrong. In fact, you're most vulnerable just when you think you're safe. Anyway, we might know each other, but you really shouldn't sneak up and attack me like that."

"Huh? That was just a normal greeting."

"Are you always like this?"

"Yeah."

"Even with Ayase? I can't imagine it."

"Even with Saki! She says it's annoying and tells me to get out of her hair, but I know she likes it."

*So Ayase doesn't like it, either.*

"Sounds to me like she finds it annoying," I said.

"She says so, but she doesn't mean it."

"I'm not so sure. You'd better be careful. Thinking like that will lead you straight down the road to sexual harassment."

"Um, excuse me, but why are *you*, a boy, lecturing *me* about sexual harassment?"

"Girls can harass boys, too."

"Ngh! You sound just like Saki."

*Maybe you should listen to her, then.*

"But hey, you were using your phone while walking," Narasaka pointed out. "You're guilty, too!"

"You're changing the subject..."

"Okay, okay, Mr. Smarty-Pants!"

Now she was sulking.

First, she'd launched a surprise attack and scared me half to death, not to mention touched me without my permission. Then she'd taken a combative attitude and started nitpicking me. Any of those would be grounds to dislike her, but for some reason, I didn't have it in me to be offended. Was it the power of her petite frame? The way she talked? I wasn't sure, but it probably came down to her unique charisma. If someone else recklessly tried to imitate her, I bet it'd be a disaster and they'd wind up a social pariah. That was probably also why she was so popular with the boys in our grade.

"So you read, huh?" I asked.

I tried to change the subject, not wanting to keep criticizing her. Judging by the books' sizes and the look of their spines, I figured they were paperback girls' novels.

"Oh, these? I've been looking forward to reading them, and they finally arrived. It's almost summer break, so I'll have plenty of time!"

“Ah, you’re one of those people who borrow the books they want to read.”

As someone who worked at a bookstore, I would have appreciated it if she bought them, but everybody had their own priorities. Allowance money varied from family to family, and not everyone felt the urge to own a bunch of books. My values weren’t universal.

“I had to sacrifice my free time to study for exams,” said Narasaka, “so now that they’re over, I’m gonna do nothing but read!”

“Ha-ha-ha. Sounds like you don’t have any retests.”

“No way. I’ve never failed an exam in my life.”

“No?”

“I got a total score of 808. Impressed...?”

“What?!” I croaked.

The triumphant look on Narasaka’s face instantly switched to dissatisfaction.

“Hey! You were stunned just now! You didn’t expect me to get an almost 90 average, did you?!”

“...Sorry, you’re right,” I admitted.

“Wow, really? My grades are in the top ten percent of our year, you know!”

“I’m sorry... I know it isn’t good to judge a person by their appearance.”

“You’re saying I look like an idiot! Were you just born rude, Asamura?”

“That wasn’t my intention...”

Well, I suppose I had meant it, at least a little. Not just rude, but “born to be rude”—that hurt.

Narasaka moved her face closer to mine.

“If you’re really sorry, then tell me something.”

“Huh?! Uh...sure.”

“You were on your phone just now. I bet you were flirting with Saki over text, right?”

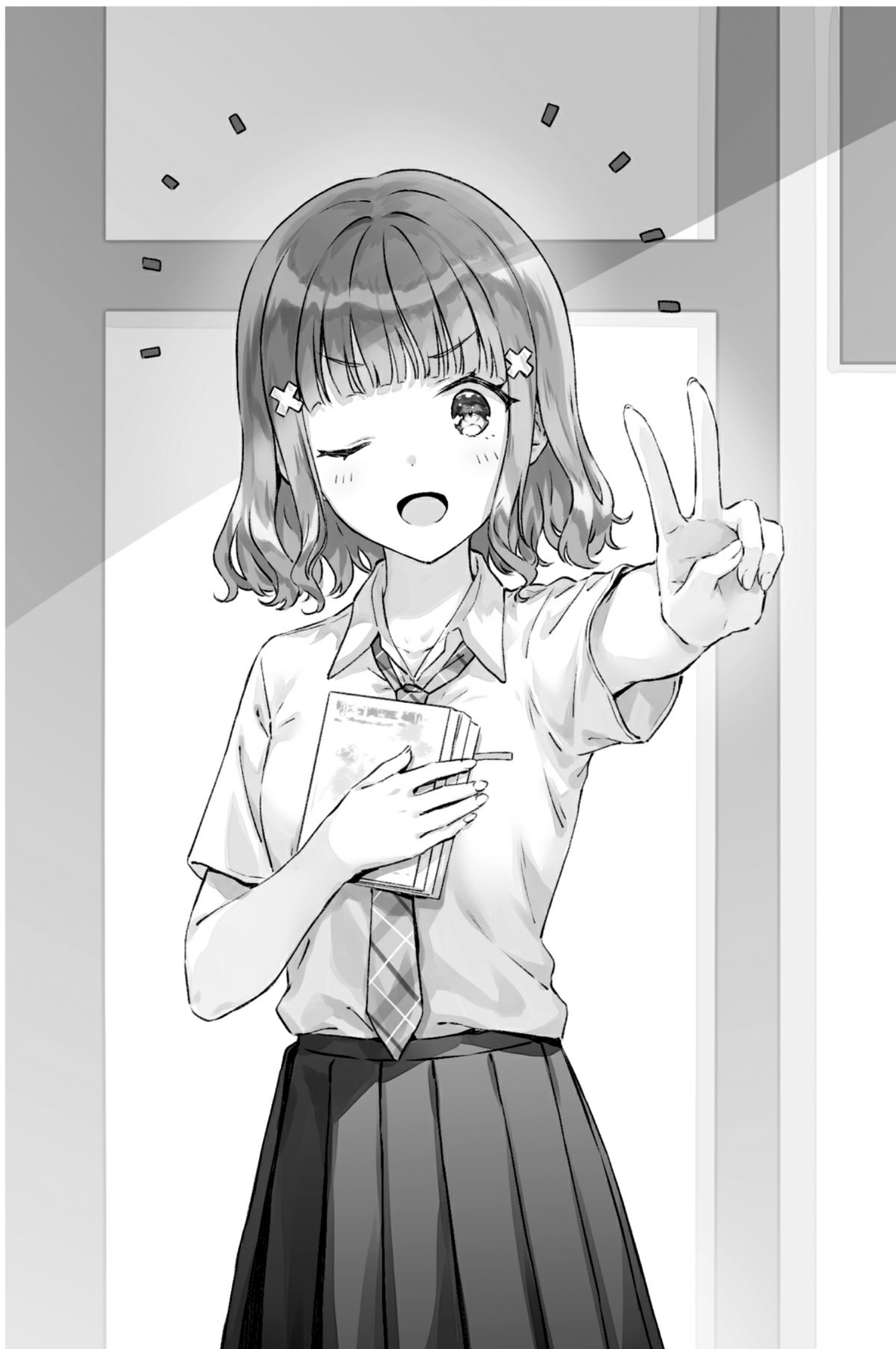
“No, I wasn’t.”

“Oh? Saki was on her phone all day yesterday, too, so I figured you guys had become an item or something.”

“You’ve completely misunderstood.”

Ayase had probably just been researching commentary on famous novels. In fact, why would Narasaka even think such a thing? We’d just become stepsiblings—of course we weren’t going to become “an item.”





“I was just doing some research,” I said.

“Research?”

“Here’s proof.”

I showed her my screen, and she listlessly craned her neck to see.

“Background music for studying?” she asked. “Why are you researching something like that?”

“Well...”

I began thinking up plausible excuses, then reconsidered. I didn’t have to lie here.

“I wanted to tell Ayase about them.”

“Saki?”

I proceeded to explain the situation to Narasaka.

After talking to her a few times, I’d noticed that she often jumped to conclusions. If I lied and she later found out the real reason, she might start wondering why I hadn’t told her. In all likelihood, that would only feed her wild delusions. If I just led with the boring truth, she wouldn’t have anything for her overactive imagination to latch on to.

I played the whole thing down, of course. I did my very best not to reveal even a hint of Ayase’s tremendous efforts, only casually suggesting that she was looking to improve her studying efficiency. I knew she didn’t like people finding out about her hard work, and I wanted to respect that.

“Oh, I see. So you’re looking for music for Saki, huh? Hmmm.” Narasaka was grinning.

“I think your communication would go more smoothly if you simply said what you meant instead of trying to imply things without voicing them.”

“Oh! Spoken like a pro. Asamura, you must be confident in your ability to communicate.”

“...Sorry.”

*Touché.* I'd messed up, so the best thing to do was apologize quickly. If I tried to deny my mistake, I'd just end up making things worse.

"You're a good brother. Don't be shy. You should be proud."

"I haven't done anything to warrant that..."

"Ooh, what a modest guy! I start acting like I've been a good sister to my kid brother when all I've done is cook for him."

"You have a younger brother?"

Ayase might have mentioned that to me before, but I wasn't sure.

"Oh yeah. Lots of them."

"You do? Sounds like a big family."

"Almost a hundred of them."

"Huh?!"

"Just kidding. It's only a normal number."

*So wait, how many brothers does she have?* I was curious, but Narasaka was speeding ahead like an express train, and she wasn't waiting around for any late boarders. She was already on the next subject.

"But gee, what a conscientious guy. You're actually doing searches online for 'good background music.'"

"Isn't that what you normally do?"

"Hmm."

Narasaka tilted her head as if to say she had no idea what I was talking about. *Oh, dang. She isn't joking.*

"How do you usually look for music, then?" I asked.

"Well, I've never really thought about it. I just listen to whatever comes up automatically and choose what feels right."

"Music-recommendation apps are certainly convenient."

Music apps and video-upload sites often had recommendation features, which automatically showed you content based on the songs you'd listened to

and terms you'd searched in the past. I might not be interested in the latest trends, but even I used stuff like that.

"But that's not all, right?" I asked. "I'm sure you do searches, too..."

"I don't."

"No? Oh...I see."

Narasaka was shooting me a blank look like I was an alien she couldn't comprehend. I slumped my shoulders. People did things differently, and I had no right to be upset that she didn't share my way of thinking. Even so, it ate away at my confidence.

"You look disappointed," she said.

"I know it's not right to feel this way, but it's a little shocking to find out we think so differently."

"I'm perfectly fine with the recommendations I get. I'm more curious why you feel the need to do searches."

"I don't like listening only to music chosen for me. I like to have a say in it."

"Huh!"

"...I know I'm only complicating my life."

And I wished she'd stop looking at me with those naive eyes of hers. Usually, my convoluted way of thinking about things was left in the dark, unexamined. But now Narasaka's sunny character seemed to be casting its rays on me, exposing my hidden eccentricities. I closed my eyes and turned my face toward the ceiling.

But what she said next caught me by surprise.

"That's good! I like it!"

"You're teasing me, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not! I like your keen sense of individuality."

"...Thanks."

It seemed Narasaka was unusually good at offering praise. Maybe this was

what a cheerful character was like in real life.

In fiction—like manga, anime, and games—cheerful characters and people with fulfilling social lives were often shown in a bad light. I'd seen a bunch of those stereotypes: shallow womanizers who tried to seduce the heroine, popular girls who bullied pretty girls, and successful types who mocked or attacked gloomy characters.

Of course, I understood that was just their role in those stories, and it was true people like that *did* exist in real life, but when I saw a genuinely cheerful girl like Narasaka, it made me believe there really were plenty of good people out there who could make others happy without even trying. Cute, smart people who saw others in a positive light. Someone like that must be invincible.

"I'd like to try searching online for music, too!" she said.

"Oh yeah?"

It sounded like I'd just found a comrade. *Excellent!*

"Next time, recommend me one of the songs you find! I'll listen to it!"

"But isn't that just replacing the AI with me?"

"It's too much trouble doing it myself."

I guess I didn't have a new pal after all. How sad. The only difference was whether she'd receive recommendations via analog means or digital. Either way, she intended to go with someone else's tastes.

But ultimately, the only one feeling sad about that was me. It was all subjective. Narasaka's way of doing things was just as valid as mine.

After school, I headed to work feeling somewhat depressed.

I knew what awaited me. Everybody working the late shift on Friday was in for hell.

I got changed in the locker room and walked into the office, where I saw the full-time employees and part-timers assembled, looking like soldiers setting out to battle. With one exception, that is. Shiori Yomiuri alone looked totally laid-back as she waved to me.

Yomiuri was a beast at relaxation and did everything at her own pace. Nothing fazed her, not even the impending pandemonium beyond the office doors.

People often said Shibuya was a city of young people—a city that never slept. It had a reputation of always being jam-packed, and that was mostly true, but the traffic came in waves.

Weekends were an obvious peak, since young people were wandering around having fun. But Mondays and Fridays were also to be feared. Every bookstore had to deal with the Monday rush caused by the biggest shounen-manga magazine's weekly release day, but the Friday frenzy was something unique to our particular store.

Besides being a city of young people, Shibuya contained one of Japan's biggest office districts, home to large buildings housing a number of well-known IT companies.

During the late nineties, young entrepreneurs had flocked here, partly due to the still-low rental costs of multitenant buildings at the time. The area came to be known as *Bit Valley*, a play on the English translation of Shibuya ("bitter valley") and the computer term *bit*. It was seen as the Japanese answer to Silicon Valley.

The start-ups from that time had succeeded, grown, and continued to thrive today—or so I'd read in a book Yomiuri once recommended to me.

At any rate, many office workers on their way home would stop at our bookstore, and that translated into a landslide of customers on Fridays.

We went back over the basics, like being nice to patrons no matter how busy we were, watching out for shoplifters in the crowd, and keeping an eye on cleanliness to ensure that our sales area was as neat as could be. Then we headed out to battle.

"Haah... So I'm in charge of the cash register today..."

"Looking a little glum there, Yuuta," Yomiuri said as she tapped me on the shoulder. Her sharp ears had caught my sigh as I headed to my post.

"Well, yeah. With this many people, we're bound to have some

troublemakers.”

“Hey, now. You shouldn’t bad-mouth our precious customers like that.”

“I learned everything I know from you, Yomiuri.”

“Who, me? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She looked at me with perfectly feigned innocence, then put a finger to her lips, hushing me. That was when I saw the other part-timers giving us curious looks as they passed by. We weren’t the only ones on shift that night, and Yomiuri was telling me that we couldn’t behave as we usually did. *What an actress.*

Yomiuri looked like a delicate Japanese woman with long black hair—a living embodiment of a quiet, book-loving, fair maiden. Nine out of ten people would say she was a pure, modest Japanese-style beauty, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. On the inside, she wasn’t much different from a middle-aged man who liked to tell dirty jokes. She *did* love books, and reading was her hobby, so that part was true. But alas, life wasn’t like fiction, and she was no stereotypical book-loving maiden.

“You really like to hide your true self, huh?” I said.

“I got fed up with disappointing people at college. Yuuta, you’re the only one who knows everything about me.”

“Please don’t make that sound so suggestive.”

“I’m just telling the truth!”

She was always teasing me. Not that I could complain, since I only encouraged her.

It feels weird to say this myself, but because I’m a younger guy with no illusions or expectations about women, she must have found me especially easy to get along with among our coworkers. A casual glimpse at her true nature neither disappointed nor excited me, and I didn’t get seriously upset if she started teasing me whenever the mood struck her. That must have been exactly what she needed. To Yomiuri, my existence was extremely convenient.

“Why do you look so chill anyway?” I asked. “Don’t you hate the Friday



crowds?”

“Heh-heh-heh. Maybe it’s because I’m responsible for maintaining the floor and securing shelving space tonight.”

“Oh, that’s not fair.”

No wonder she looked relaxed. By “securing shelving space,” she meant finding spots for new books and magazines arriving the next day. One of the bookstore’s routine tasks was to make preparations ahead of a shipment’s arrival so we could set the newly released books on the sales floor immediately after the store opened the next morning. This kept customers from leaving when they couldn’t find what they were looking for, which led to lost sales. But the store’s profits made no difference to me. The only thing that mattered to us part-timers was that it was easy and meant we could avoid working the cash register.

“Sure it is,” said Yomiuri. “This is hard work that needs to be done.”

“Well, I suppose it can be difficult finding space on the shelves. In fact...if you’re feeling intimidated, why don’t you switch with me?”

“Why are you being such a bully?”

“Ha! See, you know which task is easier.”

If given a choice, anyone would pick her job over the register. So would I.

Humming happily, Yomiuri pulled a list of new arrivals from behind the cash register and proceeded to the sales floor. She was practically skipping.

*What a witch*, I cursed mentally, half joking as I headed to the register.

Thus began my shift from hell.

Customers, customers, and more customers. We rang up purchase after purchase like an unending wave and answered a landslide of inquiries. The volume was dizzying, but I knew how to handle it.

The answer was to lose yourself and enter a state of zen. Like an automaton sticking parts together as they ran across a conveyer belt, I diligently helped customers one by one without emotion. You might think that would be rude to the patrons, but I could put up a front sufficient to keep anyone from noticing.

In fact, I'd never received a customer complaint. The seconds melted together as I worked away, and before I knew it, it was nine o'clock, time to go home.

"I'm off. Bye," I said.

"Oh, you're leaving already?" asked Yomiuri. "...Wow, look at the time. It sure flies by on Fridays."

"You can say that again."

"I think I'll take a breather, too. Yuuta, come to the break room after you get changed."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because I have nothing to do."

"What...?"

"Aw, come on. I'll feel lonely having supper by myself. I'd like to hear about your cute sister while I eat."

"Please don't treat my life like a source of entertainment."

I sighed deeply, glancing at Yomiuri's calculating eyes, which sparkled sweetly as she pleaded. It seemed my willpower was about a hundred times weaker than I'd thought.

"Okay, fine. But I don't have any weird anecdotes about my sister, though I *would* like to ask for your advice."

"Oh! Now that sounds interesting."

I decided to make this a give-and-take situation instead of just letting my senior use me. That seemed to be the only form of resistance I could manage.

The back area of the bookstore was divided into five rooms: a stock room, an office, the men's and women's locker rooms, and a break room. Because of its distance from the sales floor, it was decently isolated, and you could barely hear the customers or the background music playing in the store. Though, you could always see what was going on through the surveillance-camera monitors.

After getting changed in the locker room, I headed to the break room, where I found Yomiuri sitting in a folding chair, slumped over a desk like a blob of

melted ice cream.

“You’re melting.”

“Of course I am. The sales floor is crowded, and the air conditioning is broken.”

“I did think it felt a little hard to breathe out there. But you have no right to complain since you dodged working the cash register.”

“I just did what I was assigned!”

“I know, I know. I’m only kidding.”

“You’re so cruel, Yuuta. Don’t you know you’re supposed to be nice to girls?”

“I respect gender equality.”

Yomiuri was a college student, and yet she was sulking like a child. I was appalled. She was never totally serious about anything, and you had to match that attitude if you wanted to keep up.

I had a kind of mental manual for dealing with her—*Be careful not to take anything she says at face value, or she’ll have a field day teasing you*—and I reviewed it as I sat down across from her. Taking her words at face value might be a no-no, but looking her in the face was all right.



“Yuuta, I think you underestimate the difficulty of securing shelf space,” she said. “It’s just as hard as working the register, but in a different way.”

“I know. But I also know you find it easier.”

“Hey, wait a minute. I happen to find it pretty difficult. Carrying heavy books, standing, squatting... My knees feel like jelly.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“It’s true. To get specific, my knees feel as wobbly as the morning after an intense all-nighter enjoying myself with my boyfriend.”

“You aren’t going to lure me into believing another silly story.”

“Damn,” she said, theatrically clicking her tongue. She made it sound extra cute.

I knew she was trying to mislead me again. This was just another trap. If I complained too aggressively about her dirty jokes, she’d tease me, saying I’d misunderstood and I was the one with a dirty mind. And if I asked if she was speaking from experience, she’d put on a big grin and tease me about taking an interest in her personal life.

Reacting meant defeat. The best way to get through this situation was to act like I didn’t care.

“How about getting a massage if you’re really in pain? If you like, I’ll tell you about a place Akiko mentioned.”

“Akiko?”

“Oh, that’s my stepmother. My new stepsister’s mother.”

“Aha. I see, I see.”

Come to think of it, I’d asked for Yomiuri’s advice about all sorts of things regarding my dad’s remarriage and my new stepsister, but I’d said little about Akiko.

She also had a job that required her to stand for long periods, so taking care of her body was essential. Whenever she was around and we’d talk in the living room, she’d share tips.

I liked to keep a list of potential discussion topics like a stack of cards in my mind, and adding a “health” card was already coming in handy.

“There’s a shiatsu massage place in Dogenzaka... Oh, found it. Apparently, it’s highly recommended.”

“Hmm. That’s a little complicated for me.”

“Oh? This map makes it seem pretty straightforward to get there.”

“I’m not talking about directions. I mean, come on! I’m a spunky college kid. I’m not about to start relying on massages just yet.”

“Using words like ‘spunky’ actually makes you sound kinda old.”

“Damn, you found me out! I’d been keeping this from you, but I only look like a young girl. I’m actually an old lady under the spell of a wandering magician.”

“Can you please stop making up ridiculous stories like that?”

“Ha-ha-ha. Are you already fed up with me, Yuuta? Yuuta ‘Fed Up with My Jokes’ Asamura.”

“What kind of name is that? You’re the one who likes to tell lies. Shiori ‘Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire’ Yomiuri.”

“Good try. I’ll give you a seventy out of a hundred. You used a real phrase, but I’m taking away points because it’s a little outdated.”

I wish she’d stop evaluating my comebacks. It wasn’t like I was putting a bunch of thought into these. And even worse, her evaluations had good reasons behind them, so they stung, even though I knew it was all bunk.

I made a face at her, not bothering to hide my feelings. Maybe that satisfied her, because she chuckled and began taking out her dinner.

It consisted of a rice ball and a small salad she’d bought at a convenience store. It concerned me a little. Would that be enough to sustain her? But then I remembered I used to have a similar diet before Ayase began cooking for me.

“Since you’re starting dinner, can I ask you for advice now?” I said.

“Sure! Ask away.”

“Well, you see...”

I wasn't sure what to make of her arrogant expression, but I decided to swallow any comebacks and get down to business. I explained the situation, choosing my words carefully so I wouldn't leave anything out or violate Ayase's privacy. By the time I was done, Yomiuri was grinning at me.

"Well, well. So you want to help your little sister enhance her studying efficiency."

"Any suggestions? I would appreciate your advice as a successful college student."

"You're currently searching for background music specifically for studying, right?"

"Yeah, though I haven't found anything good yet. There are a lot of passable collections, but I keep thinking there must be something better."

"Actually, I think I *do* have a suggestion. I checked around a while ago when I wanted music to help me concentrate."

"Really?! What have you got?"

"Let's see... Oh, here it is."

She tapped away on her phone, opened YouTube, and navigated to a channel she'd subscribed to. It was full of Japanese anime-style images, but everything was in English. It didn't look like it was run by a Japanese person. Though it was covered in anime pictures, it didn't seem geared toward otaku, either, but had more of a subculture vibe. Overall, the channel gave off the impression of a trendy, relaxing lounge.

"Wow. It has more than ten million views even though the video's over an hour long," I said.

"Impressive, huh? Some of those are definitely replays, but around thirty thousand users connect to their twenty-four-hour live streams."

"Whoa, you're right. All the comments are from English-speaking countries."

"Yep. It doesn't seem like it's that big here yet."

"I guess there are still genres of music out there that haven't made it to Japan. How is it different from the stuff we know?"



“Find out for yourself,” she said as she took a small case out of her bag, opened it, and pulled out a pair of earbuds.

“Uh, what?”

I froze, unable to process what was happening. There were a lot of things people shared, but I didn’t think earbuds were one of them.

Even Ayase—with whom I shared communal plates of food, a bathtub, and a washing machine—had never shared a pair of earbuds with me. But here was Yomiuri, letting me use hers like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“You want to hear the music, don’t you?”

“Oh, um, yeah...”

When she put it like that, I started to get embarrassed for overthinking things. It didn’t seem like she was trying to tease me, either.

I accepted the wireless earbuds with faltering hands, like a caveman trying to use fire for the first time, sure that protesting too much would only make me feel guiltier. Still, I was hesitant to put them too deeply in my ears and opted to set them right at the edge so I could just hear the sound. I was sweating. *Just how much of a coward am I?* I thought, exasperated.

But a second later, when the sound reverberated in my eardrums, I forgot everything else.

“This is it...,” I muttered.

All my stray thoughts disappeared in an instant. The first sound I heard was the pitter-patter of rain—raindrops falling on leaves in the summer. Mellow music wove through a bouquet of natural, environmental noise. Though vinyl records were rare these days, the quality of the sound brought to mind someone in an old movie playing one.

“Wow,” I said. “I’ve never heard music like this.”

Yomiuri covered her mouth with a hand as she took a bite of her rice ball and swallowed.

“It’s called lofi hip-hop.”

The words she'd said were unfamiliar to me.

"Hip-hop? The music where they say stuff like 'hey' and 'yo'?"

"Ha-ha-ha. Wrong."

I'd struck a cool pose like a rapper, which made Yomiuri giggle. It seemed like I was on the wrong track with my question, though.

"Hip-hop is just a genre focused on beat and rhythm," she said. "Lofi isn't the same as the hip-hop you're used to."

"Aha."

"They use modern phrasing from the chill-out genre but intentionally make it sound old-fashioned for a soothing effect. And then they loop it."

"Would you mind speaking in Japanese?"

"Basically, it's good music."

An excellent summary. I only had an average understanding of technical words, so this explanation was exactly what I needed.

"It seems to be popular overseas," she continued. "They purposely blend in noise in the background, which helps you relax and creates a nostalgic feeling, making it perfect for studying or when you want to fall asleep."

"Oh, great! That's exactly what I've been looking for. I knew I could count on your vast stores of knowledge."

"Well, I *am* an old woman, after all. Hoh-hoh-hoh."

"How long are you going to keep that up?"

"Until I stop enjoying it."

"It wasn't any fun from the start."

"You don't have any say in the matter. It's all about how *I* feel."

"Mgh. I guess I can't argue with that."

"I suggest you come prepared when you're challenging the debate queen."

"...Roger that."

The way she could rattle out all sorts of trivia was a bit like an old woman, but if she was going to play the part of a senior citizen, she could at least show some dignity and grace.

“How did you discover this lofi hip-hop stuff anyway? It isn’t easy to find music popular in other countries.”

“Oh, nothing special. I just happened to come across a recommendation on YouTube. Since then, my studying has been going great.”

“Most of the comments are in English, and I can’t understand a word...but I get the feeling they’re full of warmth.”

“Oh? You can tell?”

“It’s just a feeling, but yeah.”

“I knew you had a keen sense of perception. This channel is a place for people to relax, like a bar you drop by whenever the mood strikes.”

“A bar?” I couldn’t stop myself from reacting to the word *bar*. Since my new stepmother worked at one, my mental antenna was primed to pick up on any mention.

“You see it all the time on TV dramas. People stop by a bar when things are tough. They’re always stylish and refined, and the bartender listens to all the character’s problems.”

I wondered if that was how Dad and Akiko met. I’d only heard stories about it, but supposedly, Dad had been in a bad place emotionally, and Akiko had taken care of him. They’d met in a place people came to relax and get away from it all. In that sense, maybe their start had been pretty romantic.

“It’s a lovely image, right?” said Yomiuri. “But reality probably isn’t so romantic, huh?”

“I wouldn’t know since I don’t drink.”

Yomiuri clicked her tongue.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“Good move, kid. I was trying to make you admit to underage drinking so I

could use it against you.”

“Why would you need something to use against me?”

As I watched her grudgingly insert a straw into her tea and suck on it, something occurred to me.

“Hey, are you old enough to drink?” I asked.

“How rude. You think a senior like me isn’t old enough to drink?”

“You’re probably too old. You might even have some kind of condition.”

“Mm... Another good move. You’re getting better.”

“Incidentally, I don’t intend on arguing with your elderly act anymore, since it’s pointless.”

She clicked her tongue once again. It seemed like she really wanted to be an old lady.

She didn’t need to rush it; she’d be one sooner or later. But I was sensible enough to keep that thought to myself.

After that, I subscribed to several of the lofi hip-hop channels she recommended.

She must have been pretty into it, since she explained everything cheerfully, her voice an octave higher than usual. As I watched her from the side, I couldn’t help chuckling.

“Ha-ha...”

“Hmm? Hey, did you look at my face and laugh just now?”

“Sorry. Don’t mind me.”

I wasn’t laughing at Yomiuri. I laughed because I’d realized a sad truth about myself... I was now choosing music based on Yomiuri’s recommendations. In fact, YouTube’s AI had recommended it to her first. That made me no different from Narasaka. Everything I’d said to her was total crap.

*I’m sorry, Narasaka. You were right.*

On my way home, I felt light on my feet. I had something to give Ayase.

I'd been feeling restless, with no results to show in return for the daily homemade meals she provided—I was doing too much *taking* and not enough giving. But tonight, I could sit back and truly enjoy the dinner she made.

When I opened our door, the inviting aroma of a fresh-cooked meal seemed to welcome me home.

"Hi, Ayase."

"Welcome home, Asamura."

Ayase, wearing an apron over her casual clothes, was warming a pot on the stove in the kitchen.

Lately, I'd been seeing this scene almost every day, but I still wasn't used to it. A girl who had been a stranger not long ago was acting like a homemaker in my family's kitchen.

It made me nervous. But more than that, it made me feel guilty. She was doing all this for me. She'd brush it off if I told her that, but it was how I truly felt.

"Have you eaten dinner yet?" I asked. "I'm sorry if I made you wait for me."

"No problem," she said. "I've been studying."

"Oh, okay. Wait a sec, and I'll set the table."

"Thanks."

I wasn't going out of my way to help, and I wasn't trying to be nice. I had suggested it because it was the natural thing to do, and Ayase had accepted my offer without hesitation and with only the barest thank-you. She remembered and understood my feelings on the matter—that it wouldn't be fair unless we shared some of the work.

I put my things in my room, washed up, gargled, and hurried back to the living room.

"Okay, so a rice bowl, soup bowl, and plate for each of us," I said. "Will that do?"

"Skip the plates. And will you pass me the big bowls we use for noodles

instead of the small ones for miso soup?”

“All right. Does that mean we’re having pork stew tonight instead of miso soup?”

“Wrong. I made hot pot.”

“Wow, you can even make hot pot? That’s great, but isn’t that more of a winter dish?”

“I heard it helps combat exhaustion from the summer heat. Since you’re so busy with your job, I figured it might help.”

“Hot pot in summer, huh? It sure smells good.”

“Right? I’ll fill the soup bowls over here if you’ll spoon the rice into the rice bowls.”

“Sure.”

I passed Ayase the larger bowls, opened the rice cooker’s lid, and shoved a rice paddle into the steaming white mass. As I worked, I could smell the distinctive aroma of soy sauce from the hot pot, and saliva pooled on my tongue. Ayase was a good cook, and her skills were improving daily.

We set the table, sat down, and clasped our hands together in thanks.

““Let’s dig in.””

We hadn’t planned it, but our voices overlapped.





Maybe I was imagining it, but it seemed like we'd begun to behave more similarly lately. It was so natural that I couldn't tell who was imitating whom. *This must be what happens when you live together*, I thought as I scooped up a spoonful of soup and sipped it.

"Oh, it's delicious," I said. "Sweet and mild."

"Yeah? Good. I made it Hakata-style, though I was worried it might be too rich; I guess it's okay."

Ayase smiled in relief.

I'd meant it when I said it was good. Flattery aside, it was exactly to my preference. It might give Dad a little heartburn, but he'd said earlier that he was eating out tonight, so that wouldn't be an issue. Knowing Ayase, she'd probably taken that into consideration.

"You made it just the way I like it," I said. "Thanks."

"...Sure, no problem. I have a basic idea of your preferences since you always provide feedback."

"I'm sorry I don't have anything to give you in return for all this effort...or so I would have said yesterday," I bragged, sounding very pleased with myself.

"Huh?"

But Ayase only looked at me with a puzzled expression.

I pulled out my phone, brought up YouTube, and opened the lofi hip-hop channel I had just subscribed to. Then I tapped the twenty-four-hour radio live stream.

Relaxing music immediately filled the room. This was no attention-grabbing power ballad. Instead, the sounds gently blended into the background. It was as if I had suddenly wandered into a quiet forest.

Ayase must have felt the same way. She had been lazily staring at my phone for a few moments when she abruptly widened her eyes.

"What's this...?" she asked.

"Just listen to it for a while."

“Oh, okay.”

She closed her eyes. Then after a few moments of tuning her ears to the music, she sighed in amazement.

“This is awesome. What genre is it? It’s a little different from soothing music.”

“It’s called lofi hip-hop. I thought it might be good to use as background when you study.”

“Oh...! I get it.” She seemed to finally understand why I’d brought up music during dinner. “I’ve never heard of music like this. I’m surprised you knew about it.”

“I just discovered it recently after someone at work recommended it.”

“Ah, you’re talking about *her*, right? That older girl who loves books.”

*Oh yeah.* I’d told Ayase about Yomiuri around a month ago. I recalled Ayase teasing me about how the two of us were a good match. She’d probably said it because we both loved to read, but dating someone like Yomiuri, who always did things however she wanted and expected you to go along with it, would be a nightmare.

“Yeah, it was her,” I said. “She’s my main source for useful information.”

“You two seem pretty tight.”

“We often work the same shifts... Ayase?”

Something seemed off. We’d been looking each other in the eye as we spoke, but just for a moment, her gaze seemed to shift away. It took a moment for her to reply.

“...Huh? What?”

“Are you okay?” I asked. “You seem like you’re zoning out. Maybe you’re tired from too much studying.”

“Oh, um, no. I’m fine. I was focusing on the music.”

Indeed, the lofi hip-hop was still playing, but I wondered if that was the only reason behind how she was acting. I knew Ayase tended to overwork herself, and it worried me. All the same, I hoped I was just reading too much into her

behavior.

“Her name’s Yomiuri, right?” she asked. “She has good taste in both books *and* music.”

“She’s a college student, so she’s got a lot of experience, but I think it’s more than just that with her. I have no idea how deep her knowledge goes.”

“She sounds really cool.”

“Actually, personality-wise, she’s the complete opposite of cool.”

A word like that better suited Ayase—Yomiuri was more of a goofball. When I said as much to Ayase, she laughed.

“Either way, she sounds interesting.”

“That, I can guarantee.”

It was too bad I probably wouldn’t have a chance to introduce the two of them. Yomiuri and I weren’t friends outside work, so she wouldn’t be coming over like Narasaka, and although the bookstore wasn’t far, Ayase wouldn’t be able to get a good feel for Yomiuri’s personality by simply visiting as a customer.

I was thinking about what a shame it was when Ayase, who had been playing with her phone in front of me, tilted the screen my way.

“Okay, I subscribed,” she said.

“So I see. You waste no time.”

“I’m the type that trusts my gut, and my gut says this lofi hip-hop is perfect for studying.”

“You can stop using it if it doesn’t help.”

“I know. Don’t worry, I wouldn’t pretend just to make you happy. I’ll give it a try. If it helps, I’ll keep using it, and if it’s no good, I’ll stop.”

“Okay. That works for me.”

Ayase relied on me when she could without holding back, but she wasn’t overly dependent. Our current relationship was exactly what I wanted. Her hot pot seemed to symbolize that—rich, but not so much that it gave me heartburn. Yomiuri would probably say a metaphor like that wasn’t sexy and subtract

points from my score, though.

Ayase finished dinner before I did. She ate a little faster than usual, probably to give herself more time to study. Once she was done, she picked up her phone and stood.

“I’ll start using that music tonight. Thanks, Asamura.”

“You’re welcome. Leave the used dishes in the dishwasher, and I’ll handle the rest.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Ayase took her bowls to the kitchen. Then flexing her shoulders, she muttered, “Here I go,” and went to her room.

I prayed things would work out in time for her retest and returned my attention to the great food she’d prepared, despite her busy schedule. I savored it, making sure not to rush.

*...Go for it, I said silently. Knock ’em dead, Ayase.*

## ● JULY 18 (SATURDAY)

I felt pain behind my eyes as I slowly opened them. The summer sun was pouring through the gaps in the curtains. I'd forgotten to shut them properly, and light was shining in my face, although the air conditioner was keeping the temperature down.

I glanced at the clock beside my pillow. No wonder it was so bright. As I watched, the rightmost digit changed. The time was now 8:33 AM. Somewhere in the corner of my mind, I idly wondered why digital clocks always seemed to be on double digits when I looked at them.

*...Huh? It's already past eight...thirty?*

I certainly couldn't call myself an early riser at this rate. I didn't have school that day, but I'd slept in more than I'd intended.

I began to wonder if the rest of my family had eaten breakfast yet. As soon as that idea hit me, however, I noticed something. I'd just thought of them all as my *family*. I had included Akiko and Ayase—my stepmother and stepsister—and the realization shocked me a little. We had only been living together like this for about a month, and already, they had become a regular part of my life.

I got changed, tiptoed to the bathroom, washed up, and opened the door to the dining area.

Dad and Akiko were there, elegantly drinking a postmeal cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Yuuta...", said my dad. "Or rather, good *late* morning."

"I slept in," I admitted. "Oh, it's okay, Akiko. Don't bother."

Akiko had set down her coffee as soon as she saw me. Before I could protest, she'd already covered a plate of ham and eggs with plastic wrap and thrown it in the microwave.

“Don’t worry about it, Yuuta,” she said.

“I’m not... I mean, thank you.”

I sat down in front of the ham and eggs she had reheated. There was also a slice of toast with butter and jam.

“Oh?”

That was when I noticed another full plate set out on the table. My stepsister, too, was nowhere to be seen. Did that mean she hadn’t eaten yet, either?

“Saki’s still sleeping,” said Akiko.

“Oh... That’s unusual,” I said.

“We have two sleepyheads this morning.”

The way Akiko tilted her head told me this didn’t happen often. Now that I thought about it, I couldn’t recall Ayase ever getting up after I did.

Akiko said Ayase was sleeping like a log when she’d checked on her earlier.

“The air conditioner’s on, too. She’ll catch a cold if she sleeps with her tummy exposed.”

Akiko sounded concerned, but I wasn’t quite sure how to respond. If Ayase was merely a girl from school, my thoughts might’ve strayed in an unsavory direction. It would be impossible to resist such an image of one of the prettiest girls in my grade sleeping in her bed. But Ayase was my stepsister. I couldn’t react that way and worry Akiko.

“It looks like we’re going to have another hot summer,” I said, scrambling for a benign response. Maybe I’d played it a little *too* safe.

“You be careful as well, Yuuta. Getting overly chilled isn’t good for your health, but the heat can be even more dangerous. Be sure to turn on your air conditioner, okay? They say you can even get heatstroke indoors.”

I nodded before starting my breakfast. It had been a while since I’d last eaten a meal that Akiko had prepared. A small bottle of soy sauce sat before me to go with the eggs, evidence of Akiko’s attention to detail.





Ayase, too, always remembered my preferences. I wondered if it was a family thing.

I'd assumed the ham, eggs, and toast were the whole meal, but as I moved my chopsticks, Akiko placed a cup down in front of me.

"Here you go," she said. "There's more if you want."

"Thank you... Is this potage?" I asked.

It was a warm, chunky white soup.

"It's clam chowder. You don't have to force yourself to finish if you don't like it."

"Don't worry."

Clam chowder was just a stew made with clam and milk, right? Even I knew that. I'd had instant versions many times.

"Akiko made it from scratch," said Dad.

"Oh, it isn't that hard," she protested.

I had noticed something during the past month: When Ayase or Akiko said a dish was easy to cook, Dad and I had a hard time accepting it. They still required preparation and creativity... Whenever I said as much to Ayase, she would offer to teach me, and I had tried to learn. It couldn't hurt, after all.

Anyway, as I looked into the cup, I saw various ingredients—red and white ones, and ones I could see through. They were chopped so finely that I didn't think they'd be easy to pick out with my chopsticks.

I lightly stirred the mixture, tilted my cup, and downed the contents. The grainy texture danced around on my tongue. I bit into the soup—a consommé thickened with milk—crushing the ingredients. The richness exploded in my mouth. The robust flavor of the clams blended with that of the bacon, carrots, and other vegetables.

"It's great."

I wasn't trying to flatter my stepmother. The taste was excellent, neither too strong nor too weak.

She smiled. "I'm glad you like it."

Dad looked as smug as if he had made the clam chowder himself. Why did he look so proud? Was he trying to show off how wonderful his wife was again? I wasn't interested in my dad's doting, so I looked away and focused on my breakfast.

As I did, Dad and Akiko started talking among themselves. The topic was Ayase.

"It seems she was up studying quite late," Akiko said.

I wondered how she could tell when all she'd done was take a small peek into her daughter's room. As it turned out, she'd caught sight of an open notebook on Ayase's desk. In addition, a pair of earphones still connected to her phone had been hastily pulled out and thrown on top of the notebook.

It was clear that Ayase didn't like other people seeing her notes or hearing the sound leaking from her earphones. Akiko clearly knew that and had concluded that her daughter had been studying right up until sleep overwhelmed her. When Ayase had finally given in to exhaustion, she'd simply thrown everything aside and jumped into bed.

Detective Akiko was probably right on the mark. Could it be that Ayase had made great progress in her studies? I hoped the lofi hip-hop music had helped.

"Hey, Yuuta?"

Dad suddenly turned to me, and I met his gaze. I didn't respond, because I was still savoring a delicious piece of ham. I figured it was better manners not to answer him than to speak with my mouth full.

"It's been a month since we started our new lives together. How are you holding up? Is there anything you need?"

"Hmmm... Nothing in particular," I said after swallowing.

Akiko posed the next question.

"How are things with Saki?"

"Uh..."

“It was just you men before we moved in. I imagine it must be causing you some stress.”

*Stress, huh...?*

That reminded me of a month ago when Ayase had approached me in her underwear. That had certainly been stressful.

I was lying in bed with the lights out when Ayase, wearing nothing but her underwear, came on to me. Her light-colored hair reached down past her shoulders, falling over her breasts and settling on her richly colored bra as she looked at me with lustrous eyes...

...Thinking of that scene alone was like opening a lid on the memory, and vivid images flooded out into my mind.

“Yuuta? What’s the matter?”

“O-oh, nothing, Dad. We’re getting along fine.”

I nodded to Akiko to assure her that all was well, though I felt a little guilty as I did so.

“Okay,” she said. “That’s...good.”

Akiko looked like she had more to say, but she let the discussion end and asked if I wanted a cup of coffee. I nodded, and she turned on the drip coffee maker. She had already added the beans. The wonderful aroma of the Hawaiian Kona coffee Dad had splurged on filled the dining room.

I let myself enjoy the slow summer morning along with the delicious scent of fresh coffee.

For us high school students, the Saturday after our final exams were over and we received our results was the beginning of the most relaxing weekend imaginable. I, however, spent my morning doing homework. Then when the clock struck eleven thirty, I started getting ready to go to the bookstore. For me, weekends were an opportunity to work full-time hours.

I got ready and was about to leave when I glanced at the door to Ayase’s room. It was almost noon, and she still wasn’t up.

Reluctant to disturb her, I said a quiet good-bye to Dad and Akiko and

carefully opened then closed the door as I left.

Once outside, I was hit by the strong sunlight. It was so powerful that the sensation was more pain than heat. I wondered for a moment if Japan had ceased to be a temperate region and had somehow become subtropical.

After getting on my bike, I began pedaling as fast as I could. The wind felt good, but I started perspiring like hell whenever I came to a stop.

I looked up at a thermometer displayed above the street. It was already over thirty degrees Celsius. Eager to escape the heat, I dashed into our building.

“Phew... It’s so nice and cool in here.”

I pulled a towel out of my bag and wiped myself. Body wipes didn’t cut it when it was this hot. Big towels seemed more practical.

I went into the changing room and put on my uniform and name tag. Then, greeting the coworkers who would be sharing my shift, I headed to the sales floor.

“Oh, hi, Asamura,” said my manager. “Put these new arrivals on the shelves, will you?”

“Okay,” I replied, taking a cart piled high with boxes.

Since it was a Saturday, we didn’t have any new books coming in. But ours was a decently large store, so we couldn’t instantly get all the new arrivals on the shelves.

I glanced at the boxes on the cart.

“Mass paperbacks, huh?”

I checked the labels as I pushed the cart into the forest of shelves. These smaller paperback books were stocked some distance away from magazines and new releases, near our comic books.

Around lunchtime on weekends, customers would start heading to restaurants. This was when we would take the opportunity to fill up empty shelves. Of course, we also did so in the morning before opening, so this would be the second round that day.

“Hey. Are you starting your shift now, too?”

A woman arranging books on the shelves turned toward me. A beat later, her long black hair settled on either side of her face.

“That’s right.”

“So we’re on the same shift again.”

The woman speaking was like a picture of feminine elegance. Anyone would agree she was more suited to a kimono than a bookstore uniform. It was Shiori Yomiuri.

“Rearranging shelves?” I asked.

“Yep. Hey, are those the new arrivals? Perfect. I wonder if *it’s* in there.”

“What now?”

“It belongs right here with these,” she said, pointing to the shelf in front of her. “It’s called *Gap in the Blue Night*.”

I looked inside one of the boxes.

“Is this it?”

“Oh yeah!”

The book in question was what you would call a light novel. The cover was a drawing by a popular illustrator, a little more realistic than what you might find in a manga. It showed a couple around high school age standing with their backs pressed together against a moonlit night sky. They had their fingers laced together, so it was probably a romance.

“How many have come in?” she asked.

“Uh...two.”

“Is that all? I ordered twenty!”

“That’s...quite a lot.”

“They always send less than we order anyway.”

“True.”

“But we can’t lay them flat in the display area with only two copies!”

In our bookstore, there was a flat table-like area at about knee height in front of the shelves. Instead of loading the books onto the shelf where only the spine was visible, setting them out on the table area allowed us to display the front cover.

“Didn’t this one come out about a month ago?” I said. “This is the mass-paperback version. Is it still selling?”

A mass paperback was a cheaper version of a title available after its initial release. A lot of people must have already bought the book in question, so it would be impressive if it was still doing well a month later. I remembered hearing about this one before.

“Is it that good?” I asked.

“It must be. I imagine the movie version is helping.”

“Oh... Yeah, that’s right.”

I’d thought the title sounded familiar. There was currently a movie out based on the novel. I adjusted my hold on the book so I could get a better look at its cover. A little paper wrapped around it featured photos and a catchphrase from the film.

It was a book I’d been interested in before my new life with Ayase and before our finals had distracted me. It had completely slipped my mind.

“It’s still selling,” said Yomiuri. “But we only have one copy left.”

“Plus the two that just arrived... You’re right, though. We can’t pile them up with just three copies.”

We had to put at least one copy on the shelves that were arranged by author, which meant only two were available for showcasing. That wouldn’t make much of a tower, and if we sold even one of them, there would be no tower at all. It would look strange surrounded by stacks of other titles. In cases like this, we usually just put them all on the shelf, showing only the spines.

“But I don’t want to do that,” said Yomiuri.

She was giving so much thought to this book. She must genuinely like it.

Working as a part-timer, I’d learned it was essential that we properly display

our bestsellers. Even people who didn't read much bought popular books, so it was better to have them some place where they were easy to notice. Novice readers didn't tend to scour bookstores looking for what they wanted, so if the books were too hidden, they might not be able to locate them. On the other hand, books that didn't sell in huge numbers but were sought out by dedicated readers would be found no matter where we put them.

"In other words, people like you," said Yomiuri.

"I don't only read unpopular books, you know..."

It was true that if you read a lot, you would end up with more niche books, but did Yomiuri think I was some kind of connoisseur of the weird?

"So what should we do?" she asked.

"Can we set up a face-out display on the shelves? These aren't new books, after all."

"I guess so."

We moved around some books on the shelf and made space, then placed the three books face-out so the front cover was visible. If we left them like that, however, they might slip and fall off the shelf, so we placed a stand underneath them. Since we only had three copies, though, it was possible they'd sell out that weekend.

I took the mass paperbacks out of the boxes and set them up on the shelf and the table, helping Yomiuri display her recommendations.

"Okay, done!" she called out.

"That movie is almost out of theaters, isn't it?"

Summer break started the next week, and that meant a new film season. This would be my last chance to see it. Unfortunately, I had requested to work full-time this weekend. A wry smile crossed my lips. I should've planned ahead.

As I returned to the back office with Yomiuri, I was filled with regret. She must've caught the look on my face.

"Hey, if you haven't seen it yet, how about going with me to a late show after work?"

“A late show? You mean at night?”

I hadn’t thought of that. But if it started at nine, it would go on until midnight.

“I get off at nine today,” she said. “So do you, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

Yomiuri seemed to be implying that since we got off at the same time, and since she was off the next day, she wouldn’t mind going to the movie with me.

“If you’re gonna party hard, Saturday is the night to do it!” she said.

“Don’t make me sound like a delinquent!”

“Huh? I’m only talking about going to a movie.”

Yomiuri was really something else. She’d say stuff like that like it was nothing, but I knew she did it on purpose. I was sure she paid special attention to making everything sound as incriminating as possible.

“We’ll just be going to see the movie, right?” I asked.

“Of course!”

She grinned broadly. Was she teasing me? Still, I *did* want to watch it.

“All right. I’ve been meaning to see it,” I said. “I’ll call my parents later and let them know.”

“You’re calling your parents?! Wow, what a well-behaved high school student!”

“It wasn’t that long ago that you were in high school.”

“I’m an adult in college now, though! ♪”

“So I guess you’re no longer well-behaved, huh?”

“Don’t make me sound like a delinquent!” She laughed. “But you know what, Yuuta?”

“What?”

“Isn’t there someone more important for you to contact?”

“Huh...? Who are you talking about?”



“Your younger sister. Won’t she worry about you?”

“I don’t think she’d...worry,” I said honestly. I couldn’t imagine Ayase being concerned about me getting home late.

“Is that so?”

It sounded like Yomiuri was trying to imply something, but I decided not to think too hard about it. Besides, if our roles were reversed, I would consider it rude to worry about Ayase when she was already in high school. I felt sure she was the same. After all, she would never do anything to trouble her mother.

...Then I remembered the crazy thing she’d done a month ago. I shook my head and cleared the thought from my mind. *That was an exception.*

I called Dad during my break and told him I was catching a late show with a colleague before coming home.

“*Are you going on a date with a girl?*” he asked, his excitement obvious.

“We’re just seeing a movie.”

“*So you’re finally becoming a man.*”

I didn’t think any of this required such an outpouring of emotion. Besides, wasn’t I already male?

“*But hey, you’re still in high school, so don’t overdo it.*”

“That’s not what’s going on here,” I said curtly before hanging up.

Dad didn’t reproach me or try to stop me, but that wasn’t because he didn’t care—it was because he trusted me. And I couldn’t betray that trust. I didn’t like having to meet other people’s expectations, but I didn’t want to let down the man who raised me.

After hanging up, I stared at my phone’s screen and wondered if I should send Ayase a message.

*No, there’s no need,* I thought. Ayase, Dad, and Akiko were all at home today, so I only needed to let one person know.

Ayase and I weren’t so close that I would tell her if I went to a movie with a colleague or update her about everything I did. Besides, what if she was

studying? I might break her concentration. It was more important to avoid disturbing her.

Time passed, my shift ended, and I changed out of my uniform. When I was done, Yomiuri practically dragged me out the door.

The wind was still warm, and I started sweating as soon as I stepped outside. That night was bound to be another trip to the subtropics.

The sky, or what I could glimpse of it between buildings, was already dark. But the lights had yet to go out in Shibuya. This was a city that stayed awake and busy all night. For a gloomy guy like me, the bright, cheerful nightlife only made me uncomfortable.

Normally, I'd be racing home on my bicycle. Who would have guessed I'd be walking around the city at night with a beautiful older woman?

This was the first time I'd seen Yomiuri up close in her casual clothes. She was wearing a soft-looking top in fresh, vivid colors. The folds of her flared skirt billowed softly, and her legs, wrapped in black tights, stretched elegantly beyond the hem.

Her style was calmer than that of the usual Shibuya party girl. As long as she kept her mouth shut, Yomiuri was like a traditional Japanese beauty. She didn't wear flashy clothes, but you could tell she had good taste, and I thought that was a fitting reflection of her personality. And on top of all that, she was mature—a college student. From my perspective, she was an adult woman.

Suddenly, I thought of Ayase at home, wearing her casual clothes. Her hair color remained eye-catching, but she would remove her jewelry and makeup. She still had a certain personal policy she adhered to, though. Even when she was lounging at home with us—her family—she never hung around in sweats, with that kind of cute sloppiness you sometimes saw in anime and manga.

She kept up the same atmosphere as she always did. The deep-red dress with the thin white line at the collar, sleeves, and hem that I saw her wearing at home the day before had been good enough to go out in.

To Ayase, clothes were her armor. She must want to keep up her defense and offense.

“Hey,” said Yomiuri, suddenly coming to a halt and turning around. “You shouldn’t let your mind wander when you’re walking with a woman.”

“I shouldn’t?”

She looked serious for a moment, then broke out into a grin. “I like your reaction. Very authentic high school boy.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

I had no idea what she meant.

“I’m saying that even though you’re a prince, you don’t react as your princess wants you to.”

“...Do I owe you an apology by any chance?”

“Nah, it’s okay. It’s your style to be neutral. Besides, it just means I can take it easy—I don’t have to put on an act.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. It was true that I didn’t want to have to worry about what someone else was thinking or have them do the same for me. But no one had ever pointed that fact out to me directly.

Actually, wait. Ayase had, hadn’t she?

“Come on, we’re late. Let’s go,” Yomiuri said and started walking again.

We made our way through the crowded streets for a few minutes before arriving at the movie theater.

“Yuuta, I’ll go buy our tickets. Do you mind getting us some drinks?”

“Okay. We’ll sort out the cost later. What do you want?”

“A Diet Coke... What are you laughing about?”

“Do you always have popcorn and Diet Coke at the movies?”

“I think it’s important to have a standard routine.”

“Got it. Any preferences on popcorn flavor?”

“It has to be caramel!”

She puffed out her cheeks a little when I smiled, then she walked toward the ticket machines. I hadn’t expected her to have a sweet tooth. Maybe something

had influenced her.

After watching her go, I went to the food counter. They gave me a cardboard snack tray with popcorn and drinks fitted in the holes. When I turned around, Yomiuri was running back to me with a little wave.

“Our movie’s showing on screen four,” she said.

“Okay.”

“Shall I carry that?”

“It’s okay. You can hang on to my ticket for me.”

“Sure thing! ♪”

We walked through the ticket gate and looked for screen four, watching the waves of people passing by. I noted that most of them were couples.

“There sure are a lot of people on dates,” Yomiuri remarked.

“Well, this *is* a romance.”

We passed through the heavy soundproof doors into a darkened screening room. It felt like someone had brought a part of the night indoors, and we both stopped talking for a moment. It was a strange sensation. This change in mood was why people came to theaters. From then on, we spoke in a whisper.

We looked for our seats and found them around the middle, with no one in front. They were the first seats in a rear block, up a step from the next section. We would be able to come and go without worrying about bumping into other people’s legs.

“I hope these seats are okay,” said Yomiuri. “I didn’t want to worry about accidentally kicking the people in front of us.”

“No, no. These are great.”

“Good.”

I set the drinks in the cup holders and passed the popcorn to Yomiuri.

“Oh, a whole carton!” she said. “You really know what you’re doing!”

“Is it too much?”

“You’re going to have some as well, right?”

“You go ahead. I don’t need to eat while I watch a film. I’ll finish any leftovers after.”

“Oh, come on, let’s eat it together,” she said, pushing the carton toward me. As a result, I glanced at the popcorn and caught sight of her thighs beneath her flared skirt.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s dig in.”

Not that it made any difference to me. I would simply focus on the popcorn. In real life, things like that happen, and you just move on.

I reached for the caramel-coated popcorn and tossed a piece in my mouth. It wasn’t too sweet. I didn’t usually eat at theaters, but the popcorn here was pretty good. I could see why people liked this kind of thing with their movie. The idea was already growing on me.

The lights turned down, and I quickly focused my attention on the screen. Yomiuri and I stopped talking. We were here to see a movie, after all.

A trailer began to play. It appeared to be a live-action film with robots fighting ninjas.

“That looks interesting...,” I said in a whisper. Yomiuri responded in a hushed tone.

“Yeah... It’s the fourth in a three-part series...”

“The fourth...in a three-part series? ...What?”

“Don’t ask... You’ve got to keep an open mind with stuff like this... Oh, it’s starting.”

She touched a finger to her lips, telling me to be quiet, and we both closed our mouths.

The film was starting.

A poster I’d seen before the showing had declared the movie would leave the audience in tears. The opening, however, was packed with laughs. But just as I’d come to the conclusion it was actually a comedy, the mood of the film did a

one-eighty in less than five minutes. I was completely sucked in.

After the first climax of the film, a short, funny segment provided something of a break. I exhaled and looked at Yomiuri. She was staring ahead with a straight face, not showing the slightest change of emotion. The light from the big screen illuminated her profile, and I could see she wasn't laughing, crying, or frightened. She just sat there, staring intently. She clearly hadn't been lying when she said she only wanted to see the film. I was sure all thoughts of me were now completely out of her mind.

I admired that about her.

And once again, I was struck by the fact that I was out watching a movie with a beautiful woman. Things like this didn't happen to gloomy high school boys like me in real life. Was this really me? Unable to fully believe it, I turned my attention back to the film.

I needed to pay attention. That was why I'd agreed to come.

The buzzer sounded, and the lights came back on.

I blinked, relaxed, and took a deep breath.

The movie was really good. The last part was such a surprise that I'd almost cried. I might have to buy the original novel after all.

"I may not eat tomorrow," said Yomiuri.

"Huh?"

I looked at Yomiuri and saw her holding the popcorn carton toward me at an angle. It was empty. She'd finished the whole thing.

"When you get really absorbed in something, don't you find your hands moving automatically?" she said.

"Yeah, I guess. But I'm not sure I would have eaten *all* of that."

"I should have had you hold it."

"I doubt even I would have been able to finish that much popcorn. Here, I'll take it."

As she picked up her bag, I hooked mine around my shoulder and grabbed the

empty carton. Couldn't leave a mess behind.

"Thanks," she said.

"I'll take that cup, too."

She handed me her cup, and I placed it in the carton and threw both away just outside the screening room. From there, we headed toward the exit, passed through the ticket gate, and left the cinema. We walked side by side to the train station, discussing the film. The streets were still crowded, and I found myself wondering if this city ever slept.





I collected my bicycle from where I'd parked it along the way, then continued toward the train station with Yomiuri, who'd waited for me.

"It's getting late," I started to say, about to bid her good night when she stopped me midsentence.

"Stay with me a little longer," she said, before starting to walk again in silence.

Despite some momentary confusion, I pushed my bike and followed her. We made our way around the train station, past a famous statue to our left, and continued walking.

"Is there some place you want to go?" I asked.

"My car is parked over here."

"Oh."

Yomiuri had told me before that she drove to the bookstore. *A car, huh?* You had to be eighteen to get a driver's license. She was in college, so it wasn't too weird for her to have one. But while she was certainly over eighteen, I wasn't sure if she was twenty yet—the age of majority in Japan.

It dawned on me that I could also get a driver's license after my next birthday. I hadn't considered that before.

"Do you think you'll start driving, Yuuta?"

"Hmmm. I don't know."

"Kids these days aren't too interested in cars, huh?"

"*'Kids these days'...*? How old are you, exactly?"

"That said, I've heard half of all men have a license by the age of twenty. Still wanna pass?"

"If one out of every two guys has a license, then I could just pay one of the other half for a ride."

Yomiuri's mouth fell open. I was surprised at how much she looked like a shocked manga character.

“Well, my wig and whiskers!” she said.

I couldn’t believe I was hearing a line like that out of a current college girl’s mouth. Even I barely understood what she was saying, and I was fairly well-read. Where in the world did she pick up these terms?

“Is that so strange?” I asked. “I think I’m just being rational.”

“There’s such a thing as ‘too rational.’”

“You think so...? I mean, I guess I’d have to make sure I paid them enough so they wouldn’t think I was being rude.”

“Pay them enough...? That’s not what I mean at all. For one thing, don’t you think it’d be convenient to have a car to give your girlfriend a ride home?”

I hadn’t thought of that.

“But first, I’d have to get a girlfriend,” I said. “For a gloomy guy like me, that might be a challenge.”

“They might start lining up if you had a car.”

“I don’t think I want to date a girl who’s interested in me for my car.”

Yomiuri began to laugh.

“Ha-ha-ha. Well, you’re not wrong there!”

As we spoke, I saw a small forest up ahead—or rather, a park.

“There’s a parking lot next to that green area,” she said. “That’s where I left my car.”

“This is pretty far from the bookstore.”

“Shibuya never has parking lots where you want them. That aside, it’s almost midnight. Why is it still so hot?” she said, waving her small hand in front of her face like a fan.

The trees in the park were covered with thick foliage, but their green color looked black in the dark, like a patch of void against the backdrop of the city’s neon lights.

There were fewer people around as we neared the park, and I could see why

Yomiuri had brought me there. Saying it was quicker to cut through, she slipped between a pair of parked cars and headed into the trees.

A few lonely streetlights lined a narrow, paved road. Their glowing cones continued uninterrupted, just barely illuminating our feet as the two of us made our way through the deserted park.

Suddenly, Yomiuri came to a stop.

“Wait here a sec,” she said.

“Sure.”

I did as I was told.

“I have to repay you for walking me here.”

“Oh, that’s okay. No need.”

“Just accept the thanks,” she said as she headed toward a vending machine beside the path.

A light flashed on the vertical screen, and a mechanical voice said, “*Welcome.*” Yomiuri reached into her bag, which hung from her left shoulder, and pulled out her phone. She pressed the button for a drink and pushed her phone against the machine. With a *clunk*, a can of fruit juice tumbled down into the dispenser. She did it all again before grabbing both drinks and offering one to me.

“Here,” she said.

“Thanks.”

Supporting my bicycle with one hand, I accepted the can with the other. It was cold. It seemed like the cooling function in the vending machine was still going strong.

“Oh, sorry, now you’ve got your hands full. Want me to hang on to yours while you pull down your bike’s kickstand?”

“I can manage.”

I opened the ring tab on the cool beverage while holding it with the same hand, rotated it halfway, brought it to my mouth, and took a sip. I could feel the

chilled, frothy liquid flowing down into my stomach. I stopped sweating for a moment and sighed. It was good.

“Wow, that’s quite a skill,” she said.

“I get a lot of practice.”

I often bought drinks from vending machines one-handed without getting off my bike, since parking it and pulling down the kickstand was too much of a hassle.

“Damn. I should have taken a video just now,” she said.

“And what would you do with a video like that?”

“Upload it so the whole world can see.”

“I’d like to request you respect my privacy, please. And it’s not some circus trick.”

“Are you sure? You might get a bunch of views.” Yomiuri grinned, then she fell silent. “You’re funny, and you’re nice,” she said at last.

“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?”

“Well, you see...,” she mumbled hesitantly as I waited.

The glow from the vending machine dimmed, and Yomiuri’s face fell into shadow. We both stopped talking, and silence permeated the midnight park. Beyond her, I saw buildings rising up like black tombstones.

“Hey, Yuuta. There’s something I have to tell you...”

“...Something you have to tell me?”

“Yeah. Something I want you to know.”

All I could do was wait for her to speak. She sounded so different from her normal, cheery self. The air felt heavy and suffocating.

“Yuuta... I only have six months left to live...”

I froze for a moment, unsure how to reply.

I simulated several response patterns in my brain: “You have got to be kidding.” “Why?” “What happened?” Yomiuri’s words had completely cut

through my thoughts, distracting me from what she'd actually said.

I simply stood there at a loss, staring back at her.

She fixed me with a testing gaze, but awkwardness began to creep into her face as the seconds ticked by.

"Uh...sorry, I was just pulling your leg. It was only a joke. Don't look so depressed."

"Did I look depressed?"

"Yeah, like you'd lost years off your life. I was pretending we were in a scene from the movie, but I guess it was in bad taste."

I gasped. I'd finally put two and two together and realized what she was actually saying. Hadn't I heard the exact same line somewhere before?

"Oh...the movie," I said.

"Yeah. I was thinking this place looked just like that one scene from the film."

"You're right... It was at a park at night..."

Why hadn't I realized it? It was just like in the movie.

"Ah well," she said. "It isn't as if I can re-create the scene that follows."

"And I can't exactly go back in time."

Yomiuri laughed.

"I was starting to wonder if you were expecting me to make a move on you like the girl in the film," she said. "But judging by your reaction, I guess you weren't."

"What are you talking about?"

"You kept glancing at me in the theater."

"Huh?!"

"What were you looking at? My face? My breasts? Or maybe something else...? Now spill!"

"I, um."

I was speechless. It was true that just for a moment, I had forgotten about the movie and stared at her.

“Ah. So you *were* looking at me.”

“Hey!”

*Did she trick me?!*

Come to think of it, her eyes had never left the screen.

“I’m not sure I approve of you staring at a tender young woman like that.”

“Mgh... I, uh... I’m sorry,” I said, bowing.

“Ha-ha-ha. No need to apologize. I’m just kidding.”

“But...”

I was apologizing because I thought I might have done something rude, but Yomiuri waved it off. Then she deliberately held out the palm of her hand.

“Uh, th-thanks,” I said, handing her my now-empty juice can.

“You took care of stuff at the theater, so it’s my turn now.”

As she spoke, Yomiuri tossed the two cans into a trash receptacle next to the vending machine. The machine lit up again when she stood near it, greeting her with the same robotic voice. This time, it sounded a little silly.

I got the feeling that Yomiuri had swallowed what she’d actually wanted to say to me. But I wasn’t sure I should bring it back up...

In the meantime, she started walking again, and I followed her while pushing my bike. Neither of us said a word until we reached the parking area. I kept looking for things to talk about and then stopping myself before I could put them into words. This continued until Yomiuri said, “I think this is far enough.”

In the end, I only managed to say something just before we went our separate ways.

“Oh, about the music you showed me the other day—thank you. Ayase was delighted.”

She laughed. “That’s all you could come up with?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Say hi to your sweet sister for me.”

With that, my coworker disappeared into the parking lot. I watched her for a moment, then turned my bike around and started home.

As I rode away, I thought about our exchange. I had no idea what I should have done or said...

The lights were still on in the living room when I got home.

Ayase was lying face down on the dining table. She was sound asleep, with one of her cheeks glued to a page in her open notebook. I could make out the faint sound of her breathing through the noise of the air conditioner.

*Why is she here in the living area instead of her room?* I wondered. *And the air conditioner's on full blast. What if she catches a cold?* I considered waking her up, but she probably wouldn't like it if she knew I'd caught her falling asleep in the middle of studying. I brought a light blanket and draped it over her shoulders. When I did so, I saw that one of her earphones had fallen out and heard lofi hip-hop coming out of the speaker.

*So she's really using it to study.* Though, I wasn't sure if it was actually helping her concentrate.





I wasn't fond of pushing my thoughts and values onto others, but I was truly glad she liked my recommendation. I felt like I was realizing how happy it made me for the first time. I hoped I'd been of help to her, though I still had a long way to go to repay her for that delicious French toast.

I fiddled with the air conditioner and raised the temperature a fraction, then started getting ready for bed. I bathed, brushed my teeth, drank some water, and used the toilet. Before retiring to my room, I peeked into the living area and saw that Ayase was still asleep.

I debated whether to wake her since she might get thirsty with the air conditioner on, but I decided against it. This was Ayase. She wouldn't stay asleep like that until morning. Plus, she'd already slept in the day before.

Then as I stepped into my room, I heard the sound of the alarm clock ringing on her phone.

Hearing her moving around in the living area, I hurried to bed. I didn't want her to find out I'd caught sight of her sleeping face.

Although I was only pretending at first, work and the movie combined seemed to have tired me out more than expected, and I was soon fast asleep.

In my dreams, I kept hearing old-fashioned music mixed with the sounds of nature.

## ● JULY 19 (SUNDAY)

I checked my bedside clock as soon as I was awake.

It was seven thirty. I was a little relieved—that was early enough for a Sunday morning. I decided to go ahead and get up. I might have gone to bed late last night, but I seemed to have had a deep sleep and was feeling clearheaded.

I went into the living room and saw that Dad and Akiko weren't awake yet. But just as I had expected, Ayase was already up. She was perfectly poised for another day, not a single hair out of place. She wore an off-shoulder top under a sheer pullover.

"Good morning, Ayase."

"Good morning, Asamura," she replied, standing up. The loose-fitting pullover was cinched around her waist with a bow made of the same fabric. Red hot pants completed the look.

"Oh, I can fend for myself," I said. "You've already eaten, right?"

She was drinking her after-breakfast coffee, and I didn't want to make her get up. I gestured for her to sit back down.

"I just finished. That's yours," she said, pointing to some food on the table.

"Okay. I'll reheat it."

I picked up the plate she'd pointed to, started for the microwave, and froze. Was I supposed to reheat this? Or should I eat it cold? The bowl of soup felt chilled when I touched it, and now I wasn't sure.

"Don't bother. It's better if you eat it cold," Ayase explained. "In fact, I just took it out of the refrigerator."

She must have heard me get up and brought it to the table for me. Ayase was

always so attentive.

I looked at the soup. It was thick and yellow.

“What kind of soup is this?” I asked.

“Pumpkin.”

“...Aren’t pumpkins harvested from the summer into the fall? I didn’t realize you could eat them so early in the season.”

“Oh, really?”

“I remember reading somewhere that pumpkins are picked in summer and eaten in fall. Something about them not tasting good freshly picked, so they’re left to mature. You set up jack-o’-lanterns at Halloween and wait for the Great Pumpkin to arrive, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you know *Peanuts*? How about ‘Snoopy and Charlie Brown’?”

“Oh. The one with Linus’s security blanket.”

“That’s what you remember...?”

Charlie Brown’s best friend, Linus, never lets go of his favorite blanket. This behavior is sometimes called the “Linus Syndrome.” It’s true that everyone has favorite treasures, even if those things look like garbage to someone else. I bet Ayase, too, had something like that.

An adult might look at a child’s treasured item and think it’s filthy and try to throw it out, but that only makes the item more precious to its owner. Unexpectedly, my mother’s angry face popped into my mind. I shook my head to dispel the image.

“...Well, these days, vegetables are available year-round, so I guess it’s not that strange,” I said. “I didn’t know you could make such a beautiful soup from pumpkins, though.”

It looked like the cloudy sacred wine used in Shinto offerings, but with a touch of color added to it.

“You just heat pumpkins and onions, add milk and cream, and put it in a food

processor,” Ayase said, noticing my interest.

People didn’t start loving to cook just because they were a little interested in a dish. But even if my life of takeout and ready-made meals didn’t change, knowledge like this might come in handy someday. I made a mental note of the recipe and tossed some bread into the toaster.

“Two slices on a Sunday morning? That’s unusual for you... Sorry if I sound nosy.”

“You and Akiko not only cook for me, but you also pay attention to my preferences, so I don’t consider questions like that nosy.”

Ayase looked at me sheepishly.

I knew her as someone who always remembered how I liked my food, but she probably wasn’t like that with everyone. That was evident in how few people she was close with as well. She truly cared about her friends and had no desire to be popular with everyone.

Maybe I was only important to her because I was her mom’s new husband’s son. But I felt honored to be someone she cared about, and I would never think of it as a nuisance.

“I was just curious,” she added almost inaudibly. Was it my imagination, or did she look a little embarrassed?

It was a scene that, alone and out of context, might show up in a light novel or an anime, but real life wasn’t so cute or sweet. Kind actions and embarrassed expressions were often the result of simple goodwill or someone’s gentle heart, and misinterpreting that could result in one-sided feelings or a rejection of honest friendliness.

I was careful not to misread Ayase’s actions. I was always on the lookout, so I tended not to make mistakes, but I would have understood if someone else did. Real life isn’t like anime or manga. Yet it’s easy to get the wrong idea when we encounter similar situations. Errors like that are human nature. My mind had gone blank the night before when Yomiuri told me that she didn’t have long to live. Even I couldn’t cope with surprises.

“Now, about those two slices of bread,” I said playfully as I sat down, “I get

hungry after a full-time shift. I made a grave mistake yesterday when I had a single slice in the morning and skipped lunch. My stomach was growling the whole time until break.”

“You’re a hard worker,” Ayase noted.

“It’s no big deal.”

Thanks to our exaggerated exchange, the air between us returned to its usual neutral state. It was like performing a ritual to eliminate the awkwardness.

In addition to the two slices of toast and the soup, a huge bowl of lettuce-and-chicken salad sat at the center of the table. The green glass bowl sparkled in the sunlight pouring through the window.

“Use whatever dressing you like,” said Ayase.

“Okay. Thanks.”

She returned to her cup of coffee, looking at her phone in her other hand. She wasn’t wearing earphones. Maybe she was researching something.

*All right, I thought. Maybe I’ll start with the pumpkin soup.*

I took a spoonful and brought it to my mouth. I smelled a faint aroma as the liquid passed under my nose, but once it landed on my tongue, I could clearly taste the pumpkin. Ripe pumpkins were soft and tender already, but once they’d been run through a food processor, they changed to the consistency of a smoothie. Though it was sweet, it went down nicely. Ayase was right; this soup was best served cold. This was a soup I could really see myself craving during the hot months, regardless of whether pumpkins were in season.

“Hey,” Ayase said as I stuffed a piece of chicken into my mouth. I looked up at her questioningly. “You’re the one who covered me with a blanket last night, right?”

“Oh, um, uh-huh.”

I didn’t want to admit it, since that would mean telling her that I’d seen her sleeping. But I also knew hiding the truth would be a bad move. It was only a month ago that I’d broken out in a cold sweat after accidentally seeing her underwear hanging in her room. Not that my “*Oh, um, uh-huh*” was the best

response, either. It was all too clear I hadn't wanted to answer.

"I thought so," she said.

"I know you're studying hard because you don't want to take extra classes at school, but I didn't want you to get sick with your retest coming up."

"Right. Yeah... Thanks."

"No need to thank me for something like that."

When you really got down to it, I was the one who should be thanking her for taking care of all our meals. In that case, though, why wasn't I helping her? But I'd come to exactly that conclusion a month ago, and Ayase had casually refused my support.

Things were straightforward if we were both helping or if neither of us was helping, but in situations like this, I wasn't sure how to balance the equation.

Give-and-take with an emphasis on giving—it was easy in theory, but difficult in practice. I wondered if there was something else I could give her other than music to improve her studying efficiency.

"So," Ayase said, "you went to a movie last night, huh?"

I choked at the unexpected question.

"Um...yeah. I caught a late show since there was film I wanted to watch that was leaving theaters this weekend. How did you hear about it?"

"Taichi said it was the first time you were spending a night out on the town. He sounded super happy about it. He said you were always so serious, a real square, and he'd been worried about you. He was delighted to hear you were finally growing up. You were all he talked about during dinner..."

"You're making me sound like a loser!"

Actually, wasn't Ayase's memory for detail a little amazing?

"You went with your coworker, right?"

"Yeah, but it wasn't exactly a 'night out on the town'—that's exaggerating. We just happened to have a movie we both wanted to see. Or rather, I never even thought about catching a late show until she mentioned it."

“Hmm.”

“Have you ever heard of a novel called *Gap in the Blue Night*?”

“Oh,” she said, nodding. “Yeah, I’ve heard about it. I think I saw a commercial for the film.”

“You don’t even watch TV, though.”

“I saw it on the internet.”

This time, it was my turn to nod. Ads were placed wherever there were customers. Our generation may have stopped watching TV, but we checked the internet, and so the ads inevitably followed.

“How was it?” Ayase asked. She had to be talking about the movie.

“Huh?! Mm...it wasn’t bad.”

I told Ayase what I remembered about the film.

It was based on a light novel—a romance about two high school students who met by chance. It was a funny story with a lot of laughs that gradually grew serious, and the twist at the end sucked me right in.

“There’s a girl the boy can only see once a week at midnight in the park. She goes to his high school but pretends she doesn’t know him when they run into each other during the day. They’re only close when they get together at midnight, and she acts like a different person. As they continue to meet, they gradually grow attracted to each other. Then one night, she tells him...” —I paused for effect—“...‘I only have six months left to live.’”

Ayase swallowed. *Yeah, it’s shocking when someone says that all of a sudden. I was stunned when Yomiuri said it to me, too.*

“Then comes the climax, but I won’t tell you how it goes and spoil the ending.”

I might not be like Maru, but I’d started speaking quickly without realizing it. It seemed I didn’t just think it was all right; I actually found it pretty moving. Though, I suppose that should have been obvious, since I was considering buying the novel.

“Thanks for the summary,” said Ayase. “It sounds interesting. That gives me a general idea of the film.”

“Good. I would have suggested seeing it since today’s the last day it’ll be showing, but your test is coming up.”

“I’ll have to wait until my exam is out of the way.”

“Right.”

“Since it’s based on a novel, maybe I’ll check that out. I have to start reading properly to improve my skills in Modern Japanese.”

“I doubt a light novel would be on your test.”

“But I’ve never done much reading—manga or novels. Wouldn’t I improve if I read more?”

“You have a point.”

But to be precise, Ayase didn’t have a problem understanding modern writing. She had trouble with texts written by people who thought differently from her. For example, a character calling someone they liked stupid or declaring they’d kill them instead of professing their love.

When I told her as much, she looked a little unhappy.

“People should just say what they think,” she said.

“There are as many ways for people to behave as there are people. That’s what creates drama.”

A lot of times, if two people in love told each other how they felt at the start, that would be the end of the story. There were tons of novels, manga, and anime like that. Misunderstandings occurred because the characters *didn’t* discuss and coordinate their thoughts. That, in turn, could result in either comedy or tragedy. Dramatic love stories were often one misunderstanding and missed connection after another.

“I just don’t get stuff like that,” Ayase said.

“Well, that’s why your strategy for the test is to treat all that like a black box you can’t understand, then to try to figure out the answers by getting a handle



on peripheral information. So how's it going? Think you're ready?"

"I'm doing practice exams and getting better scores than before. I think you were right. There are a lot of explanations of literary works around to look at, and memorizing the relevant historical background helps me narrow down the answers."

"It *is* a test, after all," I said. I wanted to make that point clear.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I'm saying our tests don't have questions that can't be answered. Are you familiar with the English term *open-ended*?"

"Well, *open* is the opposite of *closed*, and *end* is the opposite of *beginning*, so..."

"You're just translating each word."

She was probably serious, which made the whole thing even funnier.

"Sometimes, a movie ends without telling us what happens to the protagonist," I explained. "*Open-ended* refers to endings that aren't clear, that leave things to the audience's imagination."

"I don't like those types of stories. They stress me out."

"I thought you'd say that. But those don't come up on our tests."

It wasn't just endings. A lot of things could be left to the reader's imagination, and there were still debates about how to interpret many masterpieces. But we weren't tested on stuff like that, because every reader had a different answer; scoring would be impossible.

"I guess you're right," she said.

"So it makes sense we would be tested on things that aren't open to interpretation—or at least, things that have limited interpretations. A famous teacher at some cram school once said, 'When a test is multiple-choice, you can always choose the right answer.'"

Problems requiring longer, written answers and meant to test your creativity, individuality, or ability to analyze were another matter, of course.

“That’s a blunt way to put it,” said Ayase, “but yeah, that makes sense.”

“See?”

Still, ambiguity was also one of the joys of reading. Leaving things open stimulated a reader’s creativity.

I was the type of guy who liked to keep things neutral and avoid speculating or making assumptions about other people. Reading, however, provided me with more than just knowledge; it gave me an understanding of different perspectives. Not only did it keep me from narrowing my view of the world, but it also deepened my thinking and encouraged me to be more creative. When I read, I got the sense my horizons were being broadened.

That’s why I didn’t want Ayase to read only to gain knowledge. That said, I didn’t intend to force her into my way of thinking.

“So are you and Yomiuri dating?”

I almost spat out my coffee. What did she mean, “So”?

I realized she was staring at me and sat up straight. I felt like a defendant being interrogated by a prosecutor and was strangely compelled to answer truthfully.

“Yomiuri and I aren’t like that.”

“You aren’t?”

“No. We just work together.”

“Huh.”

“She likes to read, and we get along.”

“You do read a lot. I guess that’s the difference. Yeah... I should read more... Maybe I’ll go out and buy some books.” Once she’d said that, her expression abruptly turned flustered, and she started mumbling, “Well, maybe.”

“I’d love to welcome you into the wonderful world of reading. But first, I think you should focus on your exam.”

“Huh? Oh, um...yeah.”

After giving me a vague answer, Ayase returned her attention to her phone.

She put in her earbuds and opened her notebook. Apparently, she was back in study mode.

As for me, I took the dishes into the kitchen, threw them in the dishwasher, and returned to my room.

I had another full-time shift starting in the afternoon. Because I'd gone straight to bed after getting home last night, I had to do my homework now while I had time.

The assignment I was working on was due the next day, and I was getting a little desperate. I was so focused that I didn't realize it was almost time to leave for work until the alarm on my phone went off.

I'd missed lunch again.

I left my air-conditioned apartment and plunged back into the summer heat.

The blazing sun made me blink. I smelled asphalt burning. It wasn't yet noon, but the temperature was already over thirty degrees Celsius—the third such day in a row.

It was another crowded Sunday in front of Shibuya Station. I arrived at the bookstore, went around back, got changed, and came out onto the sales floor.

I was working from noon to nine again.

"Hey, Yuuta."

Yomiuri greeted me as soon as I arrived. She gave no indication that we'd attended a late show together the night before, which made things easier for me. She was a real ace at interpersonal relationships.

"Hey, Yomiuri. Are you restocking?"

"Yep. Want to help?"

"Sure."

She was pushing a cart piled with boxes of books. I took a look at the boxes and saw they were filled with heavy-looking magazines.

Once again, I'd managed to avoid working the cash register. My job for the day consisted mainly of restocking and organizing the books on the shelves.

When I finished doing that, I folded the paper covers for the books we sold and put anything to be returned to the wholesaler in boxes. I might only work part-time, but the tasks at a bookstore were endless.

I wasn't allowed to fill in order sheets, but if I earned enough trust, I could suggest books to restock, like Yomiuri did.

"Those are all women's magazines," I said. "...Looks like another busy day for you."

"That's right. These things are definitely in my top three most dreaded."

"Especially with those big gifts that go with the magazines."

In recent years, women's magazines often included large extras. You could tell which magazines were for women by their angular print logos and the female models on the cover, whose age or style usually matched the target audience. Magazines like this tended to be big, thick, and heavy by themselves, and as if that wasn't enough, they also included big bonus gifts—something like an eco-bag, sample cosmetics, or a fancy makeup container.

It was our job to combine the magazine and the gift so they didn't get separated. There were two main ways to do that. The first was to tie them with string or tape, and the second was to attach them with rubber bands. Naturally, each method had its pros and cons. String or tape was more stable, but if they were tied too tightly, it could damage the magazine. Rubber bands were easy but tended to come apart. And if we sold a magazine without noticing that the bonus was missing, customers would complain. The issue would be resolved if we shrink-wrapped the whole thing together, but not many stores did so with magazines and gifts more than a few centimeters wide. It probably cost too much.

"It's great that the publishers make the gifts the same size as the magazines so they're easy to tie together," said Yomiuri, "but they never consider the weight balance. Here, hold this."

"Hey! Warn me first... Ugh, this one's tilted."

"Exactly."

The bonus in question was in a thin cardboard box, and most of the weight

was at the front.

“What’s inside?” I asked.

“I think it’s a jewelry box.”

“What?”

I examined the cover, and sure enough, the gift was a container for storing accessories. Would you really put jewelry in a box that came free with a magazine? The copy on the cover made it sound extravagant, but I was sure it was something tiny for small items only.

“Isn’t this a little misleading?” I asked.

“It’s probably fine. Look, it says here that it’s only ‘*like*’ a jewelry box.”

“Oh, come on.”

What kind of joke was that?

“The outside box may be big,” she said, “but the gift only takes up about a third of the front part. That’s why it isn’t balanced.”

“Why didn’t they put it in the middle?”

“Maybe they made the external box first and then discovered that the item was heavier than they’d thought.”

“Ah...”

I couldn’t be sure, but Yomiuri’s hypothesis was convincing.

“The magazine is heavy enough as is, and this gift only makes it worse,” she said.

“They’re a nightmare to stack.”

“But we still have to do it since they sell so well.”

“Okay, let’s get to it.”

When we arrived at the display table, I groaned. It was just as we’d expected.

We took the magazines out of the box and stacked them one at a time. We could only pile them about two-thirds as high as the next magazine over. Any more than that and we’d have magazines slipping toward the front. I managed

to catch a few just before they fell. The covers were smooth, hard paper, so the tower collapsed easily when the balance wasn't right.

"This isn't working," said Yomiuri.

"It's impossible," I agreed. "It might work if we alternate placing them facing up and down."

"No way. If we do that, people won't see the text on the cover."

"I guess you're right."

That's why these were such a pain.

After mulling it over, we set one copy facing down about halfway up the tower to secure the balance, then piled more magazines on top of that. That way, we could just bring out more once a few copies sold, preventing the one that was upside-down from being on top. And when stock started running low, we could just rebuild the lower part of the tower. It meant extra work, but it was the only way to make it look nice and have it fit in with the other magazines on the table.

We then proceeded to replenish the other towers that were getting low.

"Okay, that should do it for now," I said, after finishing a stack. Yomiuri didn't respond, so I turned toward her.

She wasn't looking at me. She was staring toward the corner of a magazine rack.

"That girl is searching for something," she said. "I'll go and help her."

I followed her gaze and saw that she had her eyes on a shelf farther back than the rack I thought she was staring at. There, a girl was walking back and forth with her head tilted.

She had brightly colored hair and pierced earrings that sparkled in the light. As I wondered where I might have seen her before, Yomiuri approached the girl in full work mode, voice loud and clear.

"May I help you?" she asked.

The girl's back twitched, and she turned around.

“Oh, um, I’m looking for a book...”

“Huh? Ayase!”

Yomiuri turned around when I blurted out my stepsister’s name, as did Ayase, who stood farther back. For a moment, she didn’t seem to recognize me. I couldn’t blame her. She’d never seen me in my work uniform before.

Her mouth hung open, and Yomiuri was already lunging toward her like a ravenous beast pouncing on its prey. My coworker never missed a chance to take a bite out of something interesting.

“You must be looking for a book,” she said. “Please let me assist you.”

“Um, yes,” replied Ayase. “Thank you.”

“Leave it to me!”

The girl in the flashy outfit was awfully polite, while the serious-looking, bookish clerk’s voice thrummed with curiosity.

*Yomiuri, your true nature is showing...*

Pushing the now-empty cart, I rushed to the scene.

“Hey, you’re his little sister, right?” Yomiuri asked, pointing at me.

“Um, yes. I am, I suppose. And, um, you are...?”

“The name’s Shiori Yomiuri. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, so you’re Yomiuri,” said Ayase.

“Wow! You really are pretty, just like he said! So cute!”

“Yomiuri, you sound like an old man at a bar...,” I said.

“Oh-ho. Are you saying you’ve been to a bar? Aren’t you a minor?”

As I came up to the two of them, Yomiuri started joking with me. If I gave in, I’d lose, so I shrugged her off, saying I was only referring to a stereotype.

“Ayase, what are you doing here?” I asked.

She wasn’t up to anything strange, but I found myself confused, since I’d assumed she’d be busy studying all day.

"I came to buy a book," she said.

"Yuuta. Why don't you take that around back first?" Yomiuri pointed at the cart, and I gasped.

*Oh yeah.* I was on the job. I had to prioritize my duties. Though reluctant to leave, I pushed the cart to the back. As soon as I was done, I returned to the sales floor at top speed. Ayase and Yomiuri were still standing there talking.

"...That big, huh?" said Yomiuri.

"Isn't that normal?" Ayase replied.

"People who say they're normal generally aren't..."

What were they discussing?

"Oh, Yuuta. That was quick," said Yomiuri. "You made it back in two minutes flat!"

"W-were you timing me?" I said, still panting. Didn't she have anything better to do?

"It was just an estimate."

"That doesn't count. And hey, weren't *you* the one who brought out the cart?"

"I hate kids with good instincts like you."

"Tell that to Edward Elric... So. Have you asked Ayase what she's looking for?"

"Not yet."

*Get to work!*





“Um, Asamura, I came to look for a reference book,” Ayase explained. “I need it for my retest. And that movie you told me about—I thought I’d buy the novel while I was here...”

That seemed like a good enough reason to stop studying and go to a bookstore—or at least, that was how a dense protagonist in some anime or manga would think. But humans weren’t so simple that a single motive would drive them to action. That wasn’t how real life worked. Ayase probably wasn’t lying, but in this case...maybe she was also wondering about my workplace. She seemed to have been curious about Yomiuri as well.

“Oh, are you interested in that movie, too?” Yomiuri asked. “Today’s its last day. Want me to go with you to a late showing?”

“Oh, um, that’s okay,” said Ayase.

“She has to study,” I said. “Please don’t lure her down an evil path.”

“The flowers of evil are beautiful because they feed upon human blood...”

“That’s simply not efficient,” I shot back. “Regular flowers that only need light and water are clearly superior.”

“Oh, that stings! Okay, enough joking around.”

“You’re the only one who’s joking around.”

“As bookstore clerks, we have a job to do.”

“And you’re the one who stopped working first.”

“Yuuta. We don’t have time to chitchat while we’re on the clock. We need to help this customer as soon as possible!”

“...No objections here.”

Did she realize that other customers were listening to us talking and giggling? I was itching to get out of here as fast as possible.

“So, dearest sister of Yuuta,” Yomiuri began, “about that book you’re looking for...”

“My name is Saki.”

“Hmm?”

“Saki Ayase.”

“Ayase?”

“Saki Asamura is fine, too. But then you might get me confused with my brother, so please feel free to call me Ayase.”

I was pretty sure this was the first time she’d called herself Saki Asamura. The sound of it was certainly unfamiliar and fresh to my ears. But when I thought about it, there was also a chance someone might call me Yuuta Ayase. What if I introduced myself like that? Would Ayase feel the same way I did now?

“Hmm. I guess that’s why Yuuta calls you Ayase. I’ll call you Saki, then. Now, about that reference book. It should be over there in the academic section, so why don’t we start by finding your novel?”

“Okay. And...Asamura?” Ayase turned to me. “I want you to tell me about any recommendations you have—anything you think might be fun to read.”

“Me?” I asked, and she nodded.

“I trust you, since you read a lot. Movies are too expensive, but I can afford a stack of paperbacks, and I can use them to improve my reading comprehension.”

“Precisely!” chimed in Yomiuri. “One of the best things about novels is their cost-effectiveness! You really know your stuff, Saki!”

“You can also watch movies with a streaming subscription these days, you know,” I added.

But that made me realize something. Most people decided whether to buy a book based on the cost. Because I had a part-time job, I had money to spend on my hobby, and the cost was the last thing I worried about. Unless you were talking about an academic book, the price would never be over ten thousand yen.

Of course, I thought that way because I was such a booklover. Maru had told me in the past how appalled he was at my lack of interest in anything else. I wasn’t into fashion like Ayase, and as a result, I considered brand-name clothes

expensive. In other words, what constituted a reasonable price varied from person to person. However, Maru was hardly one to talk, since he bought one crazy expensive anime Blu-ray box set after another.

“I’m not sure I have anything to recommend off the top of my head,” I said. “I don’t know what kind of stuff you like, either.”

“If *Gap in the Blue Night* sounds interesting to her, why don’t you recommend something similar?” Yomiuri suggested. “She can consider what to read next based on how she ends up liking that one.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea...” I gladly jumped on Yomiuri’s advice. She *was* an experienced bookstore employee, after all. “Okay, I’ll pick a few titles from our light novel collection. I’ll try to stick to things that aren’t too fantastical...but first, we need to find the novel you’re after. I wonder if we still have a copy.”

“You did a great job setting those up yesterday, but we’ve already sold too many to keep the face-out display,” Yomiuri said. “You’ll have to look for the spine. A lot of customers miss it if we only have one copy, so there’s still a chance.”

That was when our assistant manager called for Yomiuri. She switched to work mode and was met with a ruthless order to help out at the cash register. With a look of resignation, she replied, “Coming.”

She left us with a polite bow. *Be strong, Yomiuri. I won’t forget what you’ve taught me.*

“Is it hard to work at the cash register?” asked Ayase.

“In my opinion, yes. It’s an endless string of short exchanges with no hope for mutual understanding.”

Ayase grimaced and clutched her arms, rubbing them. *Okay, it’s not that scary.*

From there, I took her to the light novel section and searched for *Gap in the Blue Night*. I wasn’t sure if I should be happy or sad that the book had failed to stand out on the shelf, but the last copy was still there. Apparently, no one had been able to find it.

“You might take a look at these books next...,” I suggested.

“Oh, I’ve read a manga with this title,” said Ayase. “I didn’t know it was based on a novel...”

“I was hoping it’d be easier for you to pick up if it was a famous work with a few different adaptations.”

Of course, not everyone would like the same book, even if it was popular. You had to click with the story.

“The academic books are over in that section. Do you see the pillar with the ad calling for part-timers? It might be hard to read the text in this lighting, but you want the shelf to the right.”

“Oh, okay. Got it...I think.”

“Ask one of our staff if you can’t find it, or you can come back here, and I’ll show you where it is.”

“That’s okay. I know you’re busy.”

“All right, then I’m going back to work.”

“Work, huh? That uniform looks good on you.”

“Oh, uh...thanks.”

Rather than happy, her sudden praise left me a bit confused. I wanted to take her to the academic section myself, but I’d already spent a lot of time talking with her, and I really needed to get back to my job.

Holding *Gap in the Blue Night* and two other paperbacks I’d recommended under her arm, Ayase headed for the academic section. After checking the ad I’d mentioned, she disappeared behind the shelf on the right. Once I saw her off, I went back to organizing.

I lost myself in my work for a while, until Ayase suddenly approached me from behind. I turned around and saw her holding a thick reference book.

“I’m buying this and heading home. Thanks for helping me out despite how busy you are.”

“Not at all.”

I watched her go up to the cash register and was about to turn back to my work when someone else approached me, this time from the side.

“Excuse me. Can you tell me where the cash register is?”

I turned around and saw an older woman holding a thick magazine. Her arm was trembling from the weight. She was pulling a carry-on suitcase with wheels but must have thought she should pay for the magazine before stowing it away. I wondered if she could manage.

“The cash register is straight up this aisle and to your left. Uh...shall I carry your magazine for you?”

“Oh... I wouldn’t want to trouble you... Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“It’s no problem.”

The woman was holding a copy of the women’s magazine with the bonus jewelry box. No wonder it was heavy. I carried it to the cash register and then said good-bye to the woman.

“Thank you, young man,” she said.

“Not at all. Thank you for your purchase!”

The older woman put the magazine in her bag, gave me a quick bow, and left the store.

“One moment, please.”

I heard a familiar voice from the next cash register over and glanced in that direction. It was Yomiuri ringing up Ayase’s purchase. She’d already paid, and Yomiuri was sliding a tray filled with change toward her. Then she began to smoothly put paper covers on each of the novels Ayase had purchased.

“You’re fast,” Ayase said, sounding impressed. Neither of them seemed to have noticed me.

“Mm, you get used to it. Yuuta’s pretty fast, too, you know.”

“Yuuta... Oh, right, Asamura.”

“Here are your three paperbacks. Would you like a cover on your reference book, too?”

One moment, Yomiuri was chatting like a friend, and the next, she was an employee politely addressing her customer.

“Oh, no need,” said Ayase.

“Okay, ma’am. Yuuta’s the only new addition since I started working here, you know. That makes him my only junior coworker. Well, thank you for your patience, ma’am,” she said, tossing all four books in a plastic bag and handing it to Ayase.

“Thanks.”

“Thank *you*! Do come back soon if you want to see Yuuta at work!”

“That’s not why I’m here.”

“My smiles are free of charge for you, Saki!”

Was she planning to charge the other customers? Without responding to Yomiuri’s chitchat, Ayase left the store. The next customer was already in line, so I returned to the shelves without comment.

Later, when it was time to leave, Yomiuri came up to me.

“Your sister’s cute.”

“Are you still talking about that?”

“At my age, I have to find young girls to suck the essence out of, or I’ll dry up into a husk.”

What was she, a vampire?

“You aren’t that much older than her,” I said.

“You don’t get it, do you? There’s a difference between high school and college students. A biiiig difference.”

“I may never get it.”

“She was genuinely cute, though. Her reactions were so unguarded—every time you came up, she’d make this adorable expression... Yuuta, this may be serious.”

“Serious?”

“Yep.”

For a minute, I had no idea what she was saying. But when I saw the playful look in her eyes, it dawned on me.

“You can’t mean... No way.”

“Oh yeah? You sure?”

“I keep telling you—she’s my *sister*.”

I wasn’t supposed to look at her that way, and I was sure Ayase didn’t see me like that, either. There was no way.

I went straight home that day. My parents were still up, and we had dinner together. It was a late dinner—almost ten o’clock—but they had been eating snacks and waiting for me. It had been a while since Akiko last cooked, and she put her culinary skills on display by making fried chicken. Dad went on and on about how delicious it was. It was amazing to me that a guy his age could keep going on like a newlywed for over a month.

Ayase wasn’t there at dinner. Dad and Akiko told me she had already eaten and was studying in her room. I went to sleep without catching so much as a glimpse of her.



## ● JULY 20 (MONDAY)

It was the morning of the start of the following week.

My classroom was completely devoid of vitality; it was obvious the moment I stepped inside. It was almost like a black-and-white movie with the colors drained out. I could make out my classmates' conversations, but their voices were much softer than usual and their mood lazier.

I knew why—our summer break started midway through that week. The atmosphere was on a whole different level from the week before. Our holiday was right around the corner. Asking us students to take school seriously now was like asking a sports team to give it their all in a throwaway match.

I was curiously observing the scene before me, where even the flow of time seemed to slow, when a groggy-looking boy stepped into the room.

"Morning, Maru. It must be tough having practice so early every day," I said.

"Hey, Asamura..."

He looked and sounded exhausted.

Few of our school's athletic teams were standouts at the national level, but we had a lot of rigorous clubs that ranked around the middle of the pack. The baseball team, which Maru belonged to, was one of those; he practiced twice daily—once in the morning and once after school—and I'd heard it was pretty grueling.

But even under those conditions, he usually didn't show any stress, thanks to his natural talents. So why was he so exhausted?

"You look like crap," I said. "Did something sap all your energy?"

"We lost in the second round of the district tournament."

“So you’re depressed.”

“No, that’s not it. This means our summer practices are going to be a lot more intense.”

“Shouldn’t it be the other way around? Normally, I’d assume your practices would be more demanding if you were still in the tournament.”

“No matter how hard we practice, there’s a limit to how much we can improve in a short period, so it’s better to rest and recuperate. And our coach wouldn’t want to risk anyone getting injured, so we don’t have to practice that hard while competing in the tournament.”

“That makes sense.”

“Yeah... Ugh.”

Maru sat down weakly, looked around the classroom, and furrowed his brow. He glanced at the other students lazily talking about their summer plans and muttered, “I envy those guys who get to enjoy their break.”

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“Of course it does. Free time is the best asset you can have. Though, of course, I’m the one who decided to spend my time playing baseball, so I’m not complaining.”

“Then why do you envy them?”

“It doesn’t look like I’ll have time to go to the movies. The distributors target families and couples on long vacations, and they always show a bunch of big titles during the summer, but I won’t be able to go if I’m always practicing.”

Maru sighed deeply. I chuckled to myself—this was just like him. I didn’t think it was a good idea for him to binge on movies during a tournament just because practices weren’t as tough, but we were talking about Maru, here. Of course he had different concerns from your average baseball-playing high schooler.

“There are a bunch of movies I’m interested in,” he said.

“Like *Gap in the Blue Night*?”

“What? That’s just your typical tearjerker. It might be all right for girls who

need a good cry or couples who want a reason to make out, but it's not gonna cut it for a film buff like me."

"I thought it was pretty good. I don't think a self-proclaimed film buff should be criticizing a movie they haven't even seen."

"Oh, you saw it?"

*Crap.* Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it. I chose my next words carefully, hoping he wouldn't get too curious about why I went, under what circumstances, and with whom.

"I was interested because the novel it's based on was selling so well at the bookstore where I work, so I caught a late show by myself."

"Asamura...you went on a date, didn't you?"

"Huh?! I don't know what you're talking about."

"Why did you say you went alone when I didn't even ask? I know you do things alone. There's no reason for you to tell me that."

"Playing detective, are you? You're overthinking things." I spoke calmly, but I was sweating.

Maru watched me intently with the sharp eyes of a hawk. It was uncomfortable having someone read your mind, and I wondered if it might be easier to simply tell him I went to the movie with Yomiuri.

Maybe criminals felt the same way when detectives grilled them. Not that I intended to find out.

"Narasaka, Ayase... Asamura, you certainly seem to be getting around lately."

"It's all a misunderstanding. Nothing is going on."

"Are you sure? Quite a few people have said they've seen you talking to Narasaka. I think the last time was in front of the library."

"What? Am I being watched now? I don't like how much you seem to know about my life."

"People's eyes are everywhere. Bad deeds will always be found out."

Walls have ears. People will talk. I was starting to realize the truth behind

those sayings.

“I don’t think talking to Narasaka could be considered a bad deed,” I said.

“That’s a serious crime if you ask a guy who’s in love with her... Don’t tell me you went to that movie with Narasaka?”

“I didn’t go with her...or anyone.”

I almost finished the sentence suspiciously early but quickly corrected myself.

I heard Maru click his tongue. He was good at making me talk. He might be my best friend, but I couldn’t let my guard down around him.

“Well, whatever,” he said. “Let me know if you’ve awoken to the joy of dating, though, and don’t be shy. As an expert in interpersonal relations, I’ll make sure everything goes smoothly.”

He flashed his bright, healthy-looking teeth and gave me a thumbs-up. Maru’s resourcefulness was a little terrifying, but he was also the most reliable friend a guy could have.

“I will. When the time comes.”

“Okay.”

With that one-word response, he let the subject drop. Thanks to his sharp powers of observation, Maru had realized I’d gone to the movie with someone. But rather than satisfy his curiosity, he deferred to my feelings and stepped back. I considered that a sign of his maturity. He was genuinely a good friend.

...Not that I would tell him that. It’d be way too awkward.

Once the school day had ended and I’d watched Maru leave for baseball practice, I stayed seated at my desk, watching my classmates take off one after another and idly scrolling the news and social media on my phone.

Ten minutes later, everyone was gone except for two students jabbering away about something or other. A mild summer breeze blew in through the half-open window as a cicada chirped somewhere far off, making me nostalgic for nothing in particular. Maybe all Japanese people were hardwired to feel homesick when presented with a summer scene like this. I wasn’t immune, even in the middle of the city.

After mulling over such pointless observations for a while, I exhaled and decided to get up.

I hadn't been wasting time for no reason. Since Ayase and I became stepsiblings, we had made it a rule to go home at different times. Because we were headed to the same destination and took the same route, it was possible we might accidentally run into each other. I wanted to avoid making Ayase uncomfortable...but that day, my one-sided thoughtfulness backfired.

"Hey, there's Asamura!"

"Huh?"

I had put on my shoes and was about to leave the school building when I heard a voice from behind. I turned around to find a girl with light-brown hair casually tapping me on the shoulder.

"How's it going? What a coincidence. We're headed home at the same time!"

"Narasaka."

It was Maaya Narasaka. I could see another student standing behind her—Ayase.

*Wait, why are they together after school?* As I wondered that, Narasaka made a suggestion.

"Let's walk home together!"

"Uh...why?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'why?' Because...why not?"

"I have no idea what you're getting at. Are you headed in the same direction?"

"I am. I'm going to Saki's place."

"What, now?"

I shot Ayase a questioning look, and she clasped her hands together in apology.

"Maaya's going to help me study," she said.

“Oh, I see. But, Narasaka, wouldn’t you rather we walk separately...?”

“No way. There’s no reason not to go together.”

She denied it like it was nothing. She *was* the most cheerful girl at school with a hundred friends. It seemed she didn’t even hesitate when it came to talking to boys. I’d had almost nothing to do with her type before, but it wasn’t all that rare for boys and girls to hang out together. Maybe Ayase and I were just being paranoid about people misunderstanding our situation.

“We’re headed to the same place, so we might as well walk together. Right, Saki?” she said.

“Well, I guess...,” Ayase said, glancing at me.

...It seemed we didn’t have much of a choice. I nodded in resignation. Ayase sighed like she’d given up.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have asked Maaya to help me,” she grumbled.

We left school together. Walking right next to two girls was making my throat dry out. I couldn’t stop worrying about people looking at us strangely.

But Narasaka was right. We passed by other students as we made our way to the school gate, but no one stared or even glanced at us. It appeared the combination of one guy and two girls wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. Someone seemed to have told Maru about seeing me with Narasaka, but maybe we didn’t stand out as much in a threesome.

Once we left the school grounds, we started along the road from Shibuya to Daikanyama. The local terrain had a lot of slopes and hills, and the sun was still high in the sky, burning the asphalt under our feet. Sweat pooled under my uniform, making me feel awful.

Walking next to me, Ayase was wiping her neck with a handkerchief. Even a girl like her, who never lost her cool, was feeling the heat. Observing this obvious fact, I felt like a scientist making the discovery of the century.

Just then, I heard a peppy electronic chime and turned around. Narasaka stood there, a few steps behind Ayase and me, grinning as she aimed her phone at us.

“Oh, don’t worry about me. And don’t turn around. Act natural!”

“Are you taking photos?” asked Ayase. “You need to ask permission first, even among friends.”

“I’m not taking photos. This is a video.”

“Either way, you need to ask our permission. Give that to me so I can delete it.”

“Heeey! Don’t take my phone!”

Ayase mercilessly snatched up Narasaka’s smartphone. She checked the image before my eyes and deleted it on the spot.

“Saki, you never let me take photos of you. I would have deleted it right away anyway. You didn’t have to do that.”

“I don’t like having my picture taken. I’m not photogenic. And I’d get upset at you if you didn’t delete it. That’d be a pain. And besides, I don’t want to doubt you. It’s better to take care of it myself so I can relax.”

“Asamura, help! Saki’s picking on me with a sound argument!”

Why was Narasaka turning to me? I didn’t mind being included, but I wished she would have picked an easier subject for me to contribute. Either way, my answer was already decided.

“I’m with Ayase,” I said.

“Big Brother’s a traitor!” Narasaka exclaimed. “I know you two are siblings, but you don’t have to think alike!”

“I don’t recall forming an alliance with you, and I wish you’d stop calling me ‘Big Brother.’”

Her argument was invalid, since Ayase and I weren’t related by blood, but it was true that I was noting similarities in Ayase’s and my values and habits as we spent more time together. Perhaps that sort of thing happened naturally.

“Never mind that,” said Ayase. “What were you even doing? Why take a video of us?”

“Oh, I thought you two looked good together. You should become YouTubers,

as a couple. Have you ever thought of that? You can call it *Blond Hottie and Gloomy Guy Become Siblings!*”

“Never. Who would watch something like that?!”

Ayase looked appalled by the suggestion, and I nodded.

“I couldn’t agree more...and, Narasaka, I may be gloomy, but it hurts when someone says it to my face.”

“Hey, don’t get me wrong. I didn’t mean to criticize you. There are a bunch of attractive guys on Instagram who use the *gloomy boy* tag to post moody selfies. Girls love it.”

“Actually, wait. Hearing someone call me attractive just makes me squirm. It’s such an obvious lie.”

“Oh, don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying you’re a natural hottie. I just meant you could go pretty far with a little makeup.”

Either way, wasn’t she just calling me average? Narasaka didn’t seem to mean any harm, which only made it harder for me to complain.

“And there *are* people who’d watch it,” she continued. “There’s quite a demand for couple videos on YouTube. It might be too late to start a trend since there are already a lot of videos available, but sibling videos are rare, so I think it’d be a hit! If it does well, we could buy a luxury, high-rise apartment with advertising revenue!”

“Advertising revenue... You can make money doing that?” asked Ayase.

Narasaka’s use of the word *revenue* had caught her attention.

“Sure you can! If your video gets popular, *bam*—big moola!”

“‘*Bam*,’ huh...”

“Wait a sec, Narasaka. Ayase, stop right there.”

I cut in as the two girls were getting excited and brought them back to earth. It wasn’t very cool of me to throw cold water on their big plans, but I would’ve felt bad letting them race toward a dream I knew was doomed from the start.

“More and more people are uploading videos these days,” I said, “including



celebrities and big corporations. It isn't easy to succeed...or so I heard in a video made by someone in the know."

I'd looked into advertising revenue from video-streaming sites back when Ayase had asked me to find her a high-paying part-time job. It was a field that had previously made people millions, and it still ranked among the top careers children wanted to pursue when they grew up. But despite the success of some, countless others suffered mental breakdowns thanks to the fierce competition and obsession with viewer counts and ultimately failed. And those making videos as a couple faced even more problems.

"Even if a channel becomes successful," I said, "keeping something like that up is an even bigger challenge. A couple might put in a lot of work, but if they break up, they'd have to stop making videos, despite their hard-earned success."

"Mgh. Well, yeah, but that's exactly why you two are perfect," protested Narasaka.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Unlike romantic couples, the two of you are siblings. You can't break up! Can you think of a better setup for viewers to enjoy you two getting lovey-dovey? You can't, can you?!"

"You're starting to make sense..."

"No, she isn't," Ayase cut in. "Asamura, why are you letting Maaya sway you?"

"Sorry."

Ayase glared at me, and I apologized.

They say starting immediately and moving quickly are the keys to success, but I think such advice is more useful when you've failed at something. As soon as I feel the mood has gotten awkward, I forget about everything else and apologize right away. *Apologize instantly*—that should be my motto. Though, this kind of communication might be possible specifically because Ayase and I had decided not to lie about our feelings or hide our discontent.

Ayase twirled a few strands of hair around her finger and sighed.

“I’m not doing it. It would never work.”

“Oh, come on,” said Narasaka. “It would, too. You and Asamura are both smart.”

“That doesn’t sound like praise from someone who got better scores on her exams than either of us.”

“Test results don’t matter. How should I put it? I mean like Zhuge Liang type of smarts—you’ve got strategy.”

“Whatever, I can’t do it. Who knows how long it would take if we were serious? I wouldn’t have any time left to study.”

“That’s too bad. I think you’d be a hit for sure. I want to see you guys get lovey-dovey, too!”

“That’s just how *you* feel...and I keep telling you we’re not like that.”

“We can’t do it in any case,” I said. “Even if our channel got big, we’d have other problems.”

Narasaka was the only student at school who knew Ayase and I were stepsiblings. If we did this couple YouTube thing and it became popular, everyone would know about us. Besides, if we put up videos that made our relationship out to be romantic, how would we explain it to Dad and Akiko?

Of course, Ayase was super pretty, smart, considerate, and able to maintain a comfortable distance. She was an ideal person to live with. If we had a romantic relationship, that might be really nice.

But Ayase was my stepsister. This wasn’t fiction, either. She was my stepsister in real life. I couldn’t even start considering that.

“Oh well,” said Narasaka. “You know, it doesn’t have to be YouTube. You could do something else. If you can establish yourself, you might land a high-paying job! For starters, Asamura, you should make an Instagram. I’m not kidding!”

“Why? I have no eye for photography.”

“Just put up a bunch of photos where you look cool and tag them with *gloomy boy*! You’ll do great!”

“I said no.”

I may have said that, but I was already standing with my back to Narasaka, downloading the Instagram app. I walked behind the two girls as they continued chatting and set up a trial account, then created a profile according to the directions in the tutorial. If I managed to get popular without too much effort, and it looked like it might make some money, I could tell Ayase about it.

...But despite checking around the app the whole way back, I couldn’t even figure out which users had the most followers. I got the feeling I wasn’t going to end up doing much with my account.

Once home, I went into my room and closed the door. The tension in my muscles began to relax—I could feel it seeping out from my fingertips.

Walking home with Ayase and Narasaka was too different from my routine. I couldn’t help getting nervous.

I locked my door to keep Narasaka from wandering in by mistake, turned on the air conditioner, loosened my tie, and took off my uniform. The cool air felt good against my sweaty skin, but I stopped myself at the last second from commenting on it out loud. I had to remember that Narasaka was over.

I was already careful about the sounds I made on a daily basis on account of Ayase. That went double for a total stranger like Narasaka. It was then that I realized something. The idea that Narasaka was a total stranger implied there were strangers who weren’t *total* strangers.

Ayase was a stranger, but she was different from other strangers. Did the existence of that distinction in my mind mean I’d come a little closer to considering her family?

I got changed and exited my room. On my way to the kitchen to grab a drink, I saw Ayase sitting with her books open and Narasaka coaching her. Ayase was still wearing her school clothes. Maybe she didn’t want her friend to be the only one in her uniform.

They both looked serious. Even Narasaka, who had been clowning around on

our way home, was helping Ayase with an earnest expression on her face.

Taking great care not to disturb them, I opened the refrigerator, put some ice in a glass, then poured out some barley tea. Making as little noise as possible, I slowly returned to my room.

I placed the glass of tea on a low table, sat cross-legged on the floor, and launched a manga app on my phone. I'd been saving up a few series over the past two weeks while I was busy with exams, and now I was finally able to catch up. I didn't have work today, so for once, I was free to spend my time as I wished.

About an hour later, I finished reading most of the manga on my list. I decided to look for a series Maru had recommended to me some time ago, tapped the search button, and froze.

The time displayed at the top-left hand of my smartphone read five o'clock.

Phone in hand, I stood up. I needed to prepare dinner.

Ayase usually handled our meals, but the following day was her big retest for Modern Japanese. I wanted her to use every minute she had to study.

I went into the living room, and Ayase looked up at me.

"Oh, sorry, it's about time I started making dinner," she said. "I hope you don't mind something simple today."

"It's okay. You keep studying. I'll make dinner."

"Huh?! Really...?"

I smiled to reassure her and headed into the kitchen. Ayase, who had put down her pen and stood up, returned to her seat, looking surprised.

"I'm off work today, and your test is tomorrow," I said. "You should focus on studying."

"...Thanks. I appreciate it." Her voice was soft, and she sounded a little bewildered, but she offered a firm thanks.

Narasaka, who had been watching the exchange, said, "Aha." She touched her chin like a detective solving a case and narrowed her eyes like a cat.

“Nice, Asamura. You’ll make a good husband.”

“Who are you pretending to be now?” I asked.

“An art critic!”

“I don’t follow.”

As I carried on this meaningless exchange, I fiddled with my phone and brought up a recipe site.

Had I been alone, I would have microwaved something for dinner. As I looked through the cupboards, I found some packs of instant curry Dad and I bought before we started living with Ayase and Akiko. The label read *Extra Spicy* in bright red. Ever since our family had grown, Akiko and Ayase had been cooking most of our meals, and we hadn’t eaten as much instant, microwave, or frozen food as before. This curry was a remnant of Dad’s and my old life. We’d never thought twice about something like spice level.

The food that Ayase and Akiko had made this past month tended to be mildly flavored. Nothing was overspiced. Even dishes that were supposed to be spicy had been adjusted to pack less of a punch. That probably meant “extra spicy” was a no-go.

If I had time to wonder about such things, I might as well ask her. But Narasaka was here, and that made me hesitate. Spice tolerance was a matter of pride for some people. Not liking spicy food could be considered childish.

*That decides it. No curry.* I’d just have to consult the experienced homemakers of the World Wide Web. I was lucky to have been born in an age where you could access countless recipes right from your phone.

“Okay, let’s get to it.”

I psyched myself up and got started on the task at hand.

In the end, however, I failed. Well, not exactly. To fail, I would have had to actually do something. I’d really underestimated how far I could get with zero cooking experience.

Every word that came up in the recipes I found was a mystery. What was “cake flour”? Was it different from the flour we had at home? How did I

“season” meat? A recipe might say to put the meat on a tray when it was done, but how was I supposed to tell if it was done? Everything was too vague. “Stew for five to ten minutes”? There’s a big difference between five minutes and ten. How did you know which was right?

It was no use. I had too little basic knowledge and couldn’t even understand what the recipes said. To me, cooking seemed several times more difficult than Ayase’s Modern Japanese retest.

...I figured I might as well start by cooking some rice. Even I could wash rice and put it in a rice cooker. And if worse came to worst, we could eat steamed rice with something like preprepared seaweed paste.

I decided to put off the more complicated tasks and start with the things I could do. With that thought, I emptied my mind and started washing the rice. I could feel the cold water numbing my hands.

About the time I’d finished washing the rice and was punching the buttons on the cooker, someone stepped into the kitchen.

“Aasamuuura!”

“Oh, Narasaka. Help yourself to the drinks in the fridge if you’re thirsty.”

“That’s not why I’m here. I came to check on you! You look like you’re having a little trouble.”

“Where did you set up the hidden camera?” I glanced around.

“I’m not filming you! I noticed you were suddenly cooking rice and wondered if you might not be used to this.”

“So you usually...don’t cook the rice first...?”

“Some families might, but since rice only takes an hour to cook, we prepare the other dishes first at my house.”

“I see... This is kind of embarrassing, but...”

I told her I had assumed I could come up with something by looking at recipes, but when I’d tried, the terminology was like a foreign language. Figuring it would take some time to translate, I’d decided to start with something I knew how to do—cooking rice.

Narasaka nodded, then returned to the living room.

“Hey, Saki? You’re good to review without me, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, thanks to all your help,” Ayase replied.

“Okay, keep at it! I’ll go and assist Asamura in the kitchen.”

“Oh, really? Isn’t that asking too much?”

“It’s no problem. It’ll give me a chance to show off my skills as a homemaker. Hee-hee-hee! ♪”

“You sure? Well, thanks. I’ll be looking forward to the results.”

Ayase threw me an uncertain glance. I could see my reflection in her eyes. I appeared just as lost as she was.

“So, Big Brother. I’m here to rescue you with guidance and encouragement! Let’s get to it!”

“Oh...th-thanks.”

Narasaka rolled up the sleeves of her uniform, revealing her bare arms. She was full of energy and raring to go as she approached me. I nodded meekly, a little overwhelmed. I didn’t have the strength to chastise her for calling me “Big Brother” again.

“Okay then, first things first,” said Narasaka. “What’s the concept behind what you want to cook?”

“Concept...? I don’t know, but I’d like to help Ayase clear her head for the test tomorrow, so I was thinking something with a lot of nutrition and protein.”

“Got it. It’s standard, but sweet-and-sour pork should do the trick. Let’s see... Yep, looks like we have everything we need,” she said, opening the refrigerator and taking out some pork.

Just then, something occurred to me.

“Can you use what we have for sweet-and-sour pork?” I asked. “The meat needs to be in small chunks, right?”

“Yeah. It’s easy if you have thick slices like you’d use for cutlet. But thin-sliced meat will work fine. A lot of recipes on those sites even suggest it.”

I did a quick search, and indeed, I was able to find several recipes for sweet-and-sour pork using thin-sliced meat.

“It all depends on how you cut it,” Narasaka said proudly, like a master instructing a novice. I couldn’t complain.

Narasaka’s cooking skills were excellent. She pulled out the ingredients and seasonings from the fridge without even looking at a recipe and laid them all out in the blink of an eye. Then she set about preparing the meat and vegetables, teaching me the steps along the way.

Because she fully understood what she was doing, her instructions were easy to understand, even for a beginner like me. Learning as I worked proved especially helpful, and before I knew it, I was doing it myself.

“Wow, Narasaka, you’re amazing. You’re just like a home economics teacher.”

“Whaaat?! Can’t you use a cooler example? How about a first-rate chef who’s just returned from France?”

“But then you wouldn’t be a teacher.”

“I guess that’s true!”

She smiled as if she didn’t have a care in the world.

“You’re amazing, too, Asamura. You’re a super-fast learner. It makes me want to teach you more and more.”

“I think it’s just that you’re a good teacher... But hey, Ayase’s a good cook, too. Is there any chance that all our classmates can cook like this, and I’m the only one with no idea what I’m doing?”

My voice faltered at the possibility that I was more naive than I’d thought. Two samples might have no statistical value, but it was enough to form a hypothesis.

“Ah-ha-ha. Come on now. The whole class? I don’t mean to brag, but I think I’m a pretty good cook.”

...Good.

Narasaka’s cheerful voice pushed away my doubts. That could have been



really embarrassing.

“I have a bunch of younger brothers, and both my parents work, so I have to do a lot of stuff around the house,” she explained. “I could come over because Mom’s home today, but that’s pretty unusual.”

“Now that you mention it, you stopped by last month...but you haven’t been over since.”

“That’s right. Once a month is about the limit.”

So Narasaka could only go out once a month. That was pretty inconvenient for a high school student.

Despite that, her grades were excellent. She was either an exceptionally hard worker or even more naturally talented than Maru. Lately, I’d been wondering if she was something of a weirdo, what with how excitable she was. Now I needed to rethink things.

“Asamura, let me ask you a question. Is there really nothing going on between you and Saki?”

As I finished preparing the sweet-and-sour sauce according to her instructions and began to mix some miso paste into a pot of hot water, Narasaka sprang this simple question on me completely out of the blue.

“Of course not,” I shot back. “We’re siblings.”

“But you’re basically strangers. It’s not like you’re blood relatives.”

“We’re siblings according to our family register, so it’s out of the question. Why are you so interested anyway?”

“I’m not sure exactly, but I get the feeling that Saki’s changed.”

“That’s just your personal opinion, though...”

“It is. But aren’t all conversations just people sharing their opinions?”

“...I guess you’re right.”

She had me there. In ordinary conversations, only people like me who weren’t good communicators needed to sort through their thoughts logically. Someone like Narasaka, who was always herself, didn’t need to worry about getting on

someone else's page. She could probably manage on instinct and reflex alone.

"For example, Saki has been using more perfume lately," she said. "Have you noticed?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Good. It'd be a little creepy if you had."

"Stop trying to trap me."

I was glad I'd been living a life of integrity. Obviously, I was very aware of the new girl in my home, but that was why I did my best to keep myself from staring at her or paying too much attention to how she smelled.

"So what can you tell from the amount of perfume someone wears?" I asked.

"It's summer now—a tricky season for us girls since everyone sweats, even just from walking. We use a lot of towel wipes and strongly scented shampoos, and we generally put in a lot of effort...once we start becoming interested in boys, that is."

"I see."

"Last summer, Ayase only used towel wipes. She's not the type that sweats a lot, so that was enough for her. No problems there."

"But you're saying she's doing more this year."

"Right! It's like she's doing everything she can. And my detective instincts are telling me that she's interested in someone. Don't you agree, Watson?"

"I see."

"What do you mean, 'I see'? Is that all you have to say? I'm telling you a super-cute girl might be paying attention to you, and you're totally unmoved?"

"Well...I think it's natural for her to pay attention to me..."

"Aha! So the feeling is mutual!"

"No, that's not what I meant," I said, stopping Narasaka in her tracks. "We're basically strangers sharing the same home. It makes sense that we'd be careful not to stink around each other. That's simple courtesy."

I was the same way. I used to walk around with bed hair, puffy eyes, and smelly pajamas. When it was just Dad and me, I thought nothing of it. But I couldn't do that anymore. I wasn't brave enough to show up looking disheveled in front of Ayase and Akiko, two women I hardly knew... In fact, I'd been thinking about that a lot lately.

"You really think that's all it is?" asked Narasaka.

"I'm sure you'll know what I mean when you move in with someone—probably."

"Hmm... Oh!"

Narasaka, her lips in a pout, looked toward the living room and gasped as if she'd just noticed something. She poked me in the side and started whispering excitedly.

"Did you see that? Saki was looking this way."

"She was?"

I glanced over at Ayase, and our eyes met. Her mouth hung open for a moment, then she quickly looked away.

Aside from the slight movement of her eyes and mouth, nothing about her expression changed. She was the same as always—cool as a cucumber, her beautiful face looking down at her notebook, engrossed in her studies.

"She probably noticed that we were talking about her," I said. "You have a loud voice, Narasaka."

"You're wrong. It's definitely the power of love at work."

"Okay, okay. That's enough gossip for now. This isn't a manga. You'll just annoy Ayase if you push her too far."

"Nice try. Saki's already annoyed with me. She couldn't possibly get more annoyed than she already is."

"Are you really trying to bait me with an argument like that?"

I truly didn't understand her jokes. It must have been a cheerful-person thing. I knew she meant well, but I couldn't change who I was.

Meanwhile, we finished making the miso soup and were all set for dinner. It was six thirty when I checked the clock, and an electronic ping announced that the rice was done.

“Purr-fect timing,” Narasaka said with a strange intonation. “That marks the conclusion of Maaya’s Special Cooking Class.”

She had been wearing Ayase’s apron while she instructed me, but now she took it off and headed into the living room.

“You are temporarily relieved from study duty, Commander Saki,” she said, hugging Ayase from behind. “It’s time for a mess break.”

Ayase must have been listening to music as she studied. She removed her earphones, sounding a little exasperated.

“Why am I suddenly a ranked officer? ...But thanks for helping Asamura make dinner.”

“No problem. Anyway, it’s time I got going.”

“Huh? Aren’t you going to eat with us?”

“It’s Mom’s day to look after my brothers, but we make it a rule to eat dinner together. It’s one of the rare days I get to enjoy Mom’s cooking.”

The fact that she could casually say a line like that with a smile was proof that she had a close-knit family.

To me, a guy who had grown up listening to his parents argue, Narasaka’s home life was unimaginable.

She packed up her things, waved, and said good-bye quickly and efficiently, as if to match her military jargon from earlier. As she was about to pass me where I stood by the door, she flashed me a suggestive smile and whispered so only I could hear.

“I’ll leave you two alone now! ♪”

“As I keep saying...”

“Okay, see ya. ♪”

She waved vigorously as if to cut off my protests, and then she was gone.

I was standing there blankly, watching her go, when Ayase came up beside me and asked suspiciously, “What’s the matter? Did she say something weird?”

“...No, it’s okay. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“...I think she’s a little strange.”

“Me too.”

Ayase agreed with me. That may well have been the very moment we were most in sync since becoming brother and sister.

“Oh, this is delicious.”

The time now was seven PM. We’d wound up eating alone, as usual. As Ayase put a chunk of sweet-and-sour pork into her mouth, she widened her eyes.

Rather than excitement, the first thing I felt in response was a deep sense of relief.

“I’m glad you like it,” I said.

“Sweet-and-sour pork, huh? It seems like you were thinking of me when you picked what to eat.”

“...Sharp as usual, aren’t you?”

I wondered if someone who cooked daily could easily tell what I was going for.

“Thanks,” she said. “I appreciate the thought.”

“You’re welcome. That said, maybe you should thank Narasaka, not me.”

“Did she make all this?”

“Technically, I did. But she stood next to me and explained every step, though she pulled back and let me do most of the important parts... I think she’d make a pretty good teacher, actually.”

“I know what you mean. If it were me and I saw a beginner stumbling, I would have just done everything myself.”

“Yeah. And it’s safer that way, too.”

But Narasaka never stepped out of teacher mode. I bet she'd make a good kindergarten teacher. Or considering her excellent grades, an instructor at any level. I imagined Narasaka caring for young children with a smile on her face, and it felt right.

"How's your studying coming along?" I asked.

"Fine, thanks to you guys. I had no problem solving the additional questions Maaya made up."

"That's good."

"She was a little surprised by my study method, though. She said it sounded convoluted and was probably a lot less efficient."

"I don't think it's the quickest strategy, either."

You didn't need to fully understand a text that'd been given as part of an exam, and it was fairly easy to answer the questions if you understood the basic intention of the author. But that method only worked for certain people, and it was only considered the "correct" way because it happened to make sense to a majority.

Extreme, even pathological, reliance on logical thinking was equated to a lack of flexibility. But that was the type of person Ayase was, and it seemed that her brain automatically shut down when she tried to answer a question without full understanding. For that reason, we had to resort to a convoluted, drastic way of studying in order for her to eliminate the ambiguity she felt and improve her Modern Japanese.

In the past, Ayase had praised Narasaka's high degree of flexibility and suggested that was probably the reason she was so popular at school. They say opposites attract, so it made perfect sense for Ayase to be Narasaka's antithesis.

And there was one more thing that had started to make sense to me. Ayase was very stubborn about recognizing diversity. She hated stereotypes and assumptions, and she went almost too far trying to communicate in the most appropriate manner. I'd previously thought this was due to the way her father had used his own biases to abuse her mother. But that was probably not the

only reason.

This was just something I'd thought of on my own. I hadn't asked her, and I was only coming up with crude theories to sate my curiosity, but...

...I thought she must be fighting.

Fighting against her own blood—the blood of a father she didn't respect and his hard, rigid thought process. Her tendency was to resist ambiguity, to make things black-and-white, to see everything from her own perspective and draw hasty conclusions.

That was why she wore that thick armor. It was an attempt to remain flexible.

...Of course, like I said, that was only my own theory.

"Don't worry," I said. "You've made good progress. You'll do great tomorrow."

"...Uh-huh."

She'd misunderstood my silence, and now she was smiling and trying to reassure me. I couldn't tell her what had just gone through my mind, though, so I didn't correct her.

Instead, I said only, "I'm rooting for you, Ayase."

"Thanks, Asamura. I've done what I could. Now I'll simply wait and see what destiny has in store for me."

Then she gripped her chopsticks, picked up another piece of sweet-and-sour pork, and put it in her mouth.

"It's delicious," she said.

All through dinner, she kept remarking on how good the meal tasted and thanking me.

The retest that would decide Ayase's fate was upon us. Whether she'd have time to do as she pleased over the break, or if she'd be tied down with obligations—everything was riding on this test.

It had nothing to do with me, but it felt like my own problem. It was strange, but I tucked those feelings away and cheered with all my might for my

stepsister, who had worked so hard for this.

*...Knock 'em dead, Ayase.*



## ● JULY 21 (TUESDAY)

A serious problem concerning the earth's gravity must have occurred on Tuesday. The surprisingly slow passage of time was proof of it. I was so fidgety, I was ready to believe this was one of those extreme weather events caused by advances in human technology. I was practically ready to become an environmental activist.

School was over. I felt like it'd taken forever. It was finally time for Ayase's retest.

This was the last day of classes before our school's closing ceremony, and the teachers' uninspired lectures went in one ear and out the other. I didn't remember what Maru had talked about during our breaks or even how the bread I ate for lunch had tasted. I sat alone in the classroom after everyone left, intent on hearing the results as soon as Ayase was finished. That was when I suddenly came to my senses.

*...Hold on a second. Isn't this overstepping a little bit? It seems kind of creepy.*

It was true that I'd been helping Ayase in various ways these last few days in preparation for her test. But that didn't give me the right to march in and demand to hear how she did.

I'd be seeing her at our apartment anyway. I didn't need to rush things.

"Besides, I have to go to work. I'd better head home."

Alone in the classroom, I whispered to myself, cooling my head. I didn't make a habit of talking to myself, but speaking aloud helped me gather the resolve to leave.

Feeling somewhat embarrassed, I packed my things and hurried out of school.

As it turned out, I couldn't focus on my work and made a mess of things at the

bookstore. I kept hitting the wrong button at the cash register. It was like it was my first day on the job. I hadn't had to apologize to a customer for something I truly did wrong in ages.

"Yuuta? Are you okay?"

"...Probably. Anyway, I'm off. Good night."

Yomiuri approached me, looking concerned, but I couldn't bring myself to elaborate.

Knowing I couldn't zone out on my bike, I pulled myself together and managed to arrive home without crashing. I noticed I was putting a little more force into my pedaling and accelerating more than usual. Could it be that I wanted to hear Ayase's results that badly? Why? I was never this interested in my own test results.

As I thought this over, I reached our apartment, got into the elevator, and headed to our unit.

*...Ker-chak!*

When I tried to pull open the door, I heard a loud noise and felt like I'd dislocated my shoulder. The door should've opened, but it didn't. It was stuck. It seemed to be locked.

*Strange.*

When Ayase was home, she would often estimate when I'd arrive and leave the door unlocked for me. I'd told her not to since it wasn't safe. But she'd reminded me that our apartment's front door was self-locking and the building's design was intended to keep people from wandering in. Besides, she'd said, it would be more trouble if I lost or forgot my key and she had to stop what she was doing to answer the doorbell. Ultimately, I'd accepted her argument.

She'd spelled out her reasoning with logic, but I got the feeling she was doing it out of consideration for me, so I would have one less thing to do when I came home from work exhausted... That might have just been my imagination, though.

At any rate, the door was locked. I got my key and inserted it in the keyhole, and it unlocked easily. There didn't seem to be a problem with the mechanism.

"I'm home... Ayase?"

I called out to her as I stepped indoors. It was dark inside the apartment.

I turned on the light, then walked down the hall and into the living room. It was pitch-black there, too, with no sign of anyone around. I looked in the kitchen, but there was no trace of Ayase having made any dinner preparations.

Wondering if she was sleeping in her room, I turned around, but the door was closed, and I couldn't see inside.

I returned to the entryway and checked the shoes, but the ones she usually wore weren't there. I didn't see Dad's or Akiko's shoes, either. They were all out, and my sneakers were the only pair.

That meant I was alone.

I checked my phone. It was nine thirty. Ayase had never stayed out this late without telling me.

A shiver ran up my spine.

Had she been shocked and disappointed with her test results and done something awful...? Maybe it was because I'd recently watched a romantic movie with a tragic ending, but I started expecting the worst.

I wanted to believe she wasn't in any serious danger. But Ayase was so hard on herself. I could see her driving herself into a corner.

The reason I had been fidgety all day and desperate to hear her results—even getting uncharacteristically involved in her affairs—was because I had a hunch.

Her excessive, pathological reliance on logic, and her own distaste for that trait in herself. Her stubborn desire to be more flexible. That kind of self-denial had to be terrible for her mental health.

Getting help from Narasaka and me with her studies had probably been going a step too far in her book. And what if, after doing all that, she'd still failed her retest?

“.....Tch.”

Before I knew it, I was running my fingers over my smartphone, sending her a text.

Where are you?

I was being clingy. This was one of several phrases I'd promised never to use with Ayase, in order to keep our family relationship smooth. But now I couldn't help it. I didn't want to regret my actions. If that meant losing face, then so be it.

Five seconds... Ten... Thirty...

A minute went by, and nothing appeared on my screen.

It was no use. I couldn't wait. I couldn't just sit here twiddling my thumbs.

I leaped into action. Throwing on my shoes, I yanked open the door with such force that I surprised myself, then stepped out into the hallway.

The elevator was on the ground floor. I pressed the button and impatiently waited for it to come up.

*Tap, tap.* My toes hit the floor every other second, and my right foot was so restless that it was almost comical, despite my reminding myself that tapping my foot wouldn't make the elevator arrive any faster.

Nonetheless, the noise continued—*tap, tap, tap*—and even grew quicker.

Adults often lamented that young people these days were too influenced by fiction. It was true—I read too much, and I saw too many movies, and now I'd gotten some strange idea in my head that I needed to be a hero. Even though the tragic event I was imagining didn't often happen in real life.

But the fact remained that some two hundred Japanese high school students chose to die each year. Many did it for reasons no one else understood. Two hundred out of a population of three million students. They were in the minority, and it wasn't very likely you'd run into one of them. But did Ayase look like she belonged to the majority? *No way.*

Maybe I only thought that because I didn't have much experience dealing with strangers. But her personality and behavior seemed a little different to me.

Different enough that I thought it was possible she was in that group of two hundred.

*Ping.* Oblivious to my frustration, a tiny chime rang out, the same sound as always.

The elevator had arrived, and I almost crashed into someone leaving as I dived in.

“Whoa!”

“Oh...!”

The two of us tried to avoid each other, both striking a weird pose as we scooted away.

The other person backed up into the elevator while I stepped in from the side. The result was that we were both inside the closed space of the elevator.

My body froze, and so did my thoughts. We looked each other in the eye, and once I was sure, I spoke.

“Um... Ayase?”

“Asamura... Where are you going at this hour?” The high school girl’s eyes were wide. She stood at the back of the elevator in her uniform, holding her schoolbag in one hand and a shopping bag in the other.

“Oh, um. Well, um, I...”

I didn’t know how to answer. I couldn’t tell her I was worried about her and had dashed out of the apartment to save her from some tragic fate.

I heard the silly sound of the elevator door closing behind me.

*Oh yeah.* Ayase was calm and cool, nothing like a fictional little sister. Events that occurred in real life were trivial and boring, and the lead character could go running all he wanted, but he was never going to end up in a romantic spot with a wonderful view to enact the perfect final scene.

Reality didn’t happen on the highest floor of some building with a panoramic view of the city, and it didn’t happen on a hilltop at night. It happened inside a crappy elevator in my apartment building.

"It's late," I said. "You weren't home, and I couldn't get a hold of you, so I thought maybe you'd failed your test and were out crying somewhere..."

I tried to tone down my words. Now that I knew she was safe, admitting I had imagined her life in danger would exceed my shame threshold.

"Ha-ha-ha. I guess I had you worried. Sorry about that." She slumped a bit and said, "About my results. Well, to be honest...I'm a little disappointed."

"What?"

So the results weren't good after all?

As I fretted over this, she set the shopping bag on the floor and pulled out a sheet of paper from her schoolbag.

The score was 94.

I thought she told me the passing score was 80.

"You *did* pass!" I said. "Don't scare me like that."

"You got a 96, right? I was hoping I'd beat your score."

"Oh, is that what you meant?"

She pouted unhappily as I exhaled in relief.

I was right; she really was too hard on herself. She was competing with me in my best subject, right after failing it.

"Sorry I worried you. I went shopping at a different supermarket today," she said, picking up her bag again and cradling it in her arms. It sported a logo from a department store in Shibuya.

"You went to a department store?"

"Yeah. They have high-quality items at lower prices than I can find at the usual supermarket. Don't worry, I only bought things that were on sale, so I haven't gone over my regular budget."

"You certainly are reliable."

"I'm acting as a temporary housewife, so it's the least I can do."

"A temporary housewife? That's a strange way to put it."

“I think it about sums up the situation. I don’t plan to do household chores forever, but that’s mostly what I’m doing right now.”

“I guess that’s true. Yeah, it fits.”

I hadn’t expected Ayase to start making up labels. It was a little shocking to have her suddenly start acting like Yomiuri. I would’ve liked a warning, at least. Though, I suppose my track record with Yomiuri had already proved a warning wasn’t much help.

“But that doesn’t explain why you went to a department store,” I said. “Did you want to celebrate completing your retest?”

“Fifty points. You’re half right and half wrong.”

“What’s the model answer?”

“I wanted to show you my appreciation... This may sound condescending, but I mean it,” she said in a monotone, glancing away from me.

“I haven’t done anything that warrants a thank-you gift,” I said. “I still owe you, since I haven’t been able to give you any of the things you wanted.”

“You did a lot to prepare me for my test. You told me about lofi music, gave me tips on studying Modern Japanese, and you even made dinner last night.”

“I don’t think that comes anywhere near the efforts you’ve put in, cooking most of our dinners for over a month.”

“I told you. I like to give more when it comes to give-and-take and pay back twice what I receive. A famous banker once said that.”

“I think that line is about revenge, actually.”

“It’s essentially the same thing. It just comes down to whether the payback is positive or negative. I want to serve you the most luxurious meal I can.”

“Ayase...”

*How conscientious can you get?*

From my standpoint, Ayase had been giving me too much, and I needed to figure out how to repay her. But leave it to Ayase to give more before I could even get started.

How could I make this stepsister of mine stop giving and start accepting? This was a pretty nice problem to have, and all the older brothers in the world dealing with selfish, bratty little sisters would probably trade me in a heartbeat. Nevertheless, the problem consumed me. That was when Ayase lowered her voice and spoke.

“Or...do I have to be older than you for you to trust me?”

“What?”

I hadn’t expected her to say that and responded without thinking. I could only come up with one person she might be talking about—Shiori Yomiuri.

*...Huh?*

What was happening? I could feel a hazy discomfort rising inside me. Ayase’s expression filled me with an awkward emotion.

“Are you talking about Yomiuri?” I asked. “What does she have to do with this?”

“She’s someone you rely on. As far as I know, she’s the only person you trust that way.”

“Well, we do work a lot of shifts together.”

My throat felt drier with every word. I was supposed to be telling her the truth, but it seemed like I was making excuses, and I felt guiltier and guiltier.

I shook my head. What the heck was I thinking? Was this just a reaction to my imagination going wild with worry a little while earlier? I felt my heart skipping beats.

Maybe I was the one who was going to die like a character in a movie. Damn, there went my imagination again. I was truly hopeless.

“You can count on me at home just like you count on her at work. Will you do that? Consider it your younger sister’s selfish wish.”

She bent her head slightly to one side like a real little sister. I was surprised to see her acting like that, but I couldn’t help laughing inwardly at what a selfless “selfish” wish she’d made. Though, as her older brother, I thought I had to give in if she felt that strongly.



“If I allow you to treat me to a meal, will that complete your current mission?”

She nodded with satisfaction. “Yeah. That would make me happy.”



It seemed strange for her to be happy about it when she was the one doing me a favor.

But this was reality. Fiction tended to have logical actions and equal reactions, but reality wasn't like that. It was like how natural objects, unlike man-made ones, were often warped. The unevenness was what made reality real.

"...I wonder how long we're going to stand here," I said.

"It's a good thing no one else pressed the button for the elevator."

The elevator had remained on our floor while we stood inside it. If we stayed much longer, someone was going to think we were pulling a prank.

Standing in that little box together for no reason began to seem ridiculous, and we exchanged smiles and pressed the button to get out. The fact that we escaped so easily was yet another reminder that we were in the real world.

Once we got back to the apartment, Ayase started preparing a late supper, and I noticed something.

"Hey, can I ask you just one more thing?" I said.

"What?"

"I sent you a text message. Why didn't you answer it?"

"Oh, that."

She laughed as if it was no big deal and handed me her phone. It was turned off, the screen dark. I tried to turn it on, but it showed no sign of returning to life.

"It's that lofi hip-hop you told me about. I'm hooked on studying with it, but playing it on my phone drains the battery. It's been dying on me lately."

"Oh...I see."

Real life was always boring.

If I had truly been calm at the time, I would have noticed the big lie in our exchange and an uncomfortable feeling I should have pointed out. It never occurred to me because I was so distracted by my worry and then by the relief that my stepsister was okay. The emotional roller coaster had numbed my

thoughts.

The realization hit me when I was going to bed that night. The question stayed like a lump in my throat, but it was too late to ask, and the truth disappeared forever into the darkness.

The only way to find the answer would have been to read Ayase's diary.

I knew that the department store in Shibuya was farther away than our local supermarket. But if that was really all she'd done, there was no way she'd have come back at *nine thirty at night*.

## ● JULY 22 (WEDNESDAY)

Gigantic thunderheads stretched up into the sky as if to outdo the city's tall buildings. Behind the white clouds was a clear sky like a computer's blue screen.

Summer was finally in full swing. The semester at Suisei High School ended that day, and we were having our closing ceremony.

The slack air in the classroom had changed. Now the room buzzed with excitement, full of students eager to leave for break, and even the teacher's shouts couldn't quiet us down.

"Okay, dismissed! Don't get carried away and let loose just because you're on break!"

With those words as our cue, the classroom plunged directly into summer vacation. Our teacher shook his head and walked out the door, looking exasperated, but no one paid him any attention.

"All right, I'm off," I told Maru as I stood up.

"Got it. You're sure in a hurry."

"I have to go to work."

He looked surprised.

"Already? It isn't even evening yet."

"I'm starting my shift an hour early. One of the older employees quit, and they wanted me to come as soon as I could."

"That's tough."

"So I'm going home early today to get ready."

"I'm rooting for you; you're an example to us all!"

Maru had no more questions for me, and I had no time to spare, so I dashed out of the classroom.

I was only reporting an hour early, so I wasn't in that much of a hurry, but unexpected things tended to happen when you did something for the first time. I wanted to avoid being late after offering to reschedule.

My fears were unfounded, however, and I arrived at the bookstore on time.

After getting changed, I stepped onto the sales floor and noticed something. There were a lot less customers than usual.

I checked the time. I was an hour earlier than usual. Did an hour really make this much difference? I took a good look around and noted the absence of office workers. That made sense, as most of them were just about finishing up at this hour, and the crowd had yet to arrive.

"Hey, Yuuta. You're early today."

I turned around and saw Yomiuri smiling and waving as she approached me.

"Oh, hi, Yomiuri. Yeah, I had my shift adjusted. I see that you're early, too."

"We've been out for the summer since Monday."

"That's college for you."

"One of my friends complained that she has to do experiments all summer and has no time for fun and games. Science students have it rough."

"You seem to have a lot of time on your hands, though."

"That's why I'm here. Hey, are you working full-time during your break?"

"That's the plan."

Yomiuri smiled happily when she heard my answer. I wish she'd stop smiling at me like that. People were going to get the wrong idea about us.

"All work and no play, huh?" she said. "As your mentor, I'm glad we'll get to spend more time together."

"Please stop teasing me."

"Oh, I'm not teasing you. I'm immersed in the joy of toiling away with my

fellow part-timer, though maybe you'd like to do your toiling with that pretty younger sister of yours."

"You *are* teasing me."

"You can tell, huh?"

She stuck her tongue out like a devilishly flirty heroine from some story, but once a senior staff member dragged her away to the cash register, she looked like a beleaguered office worker again. Of course, I only knew about such things from reading novels.

I took a minute to think about what Yomiuri had said. This was my first long break since becoming stepsiblings with Ayase. We might go to the same school, but we were in different classes and rarely saw each other, aside from the joint classes we'd had ahead of Sports Day.

During summer break, however, we'd both be home and might see each other more often.

Or maybe not, since I had my job.

I was scheduled to work through most of my vacation. That meant I wouldn't be home and lessened my chances to spend time with her—not that I particularly wanted to spend time with her. Right?

I shook my head to rid myself of those silly thoughts and switched into work mode. I had things to do.

First, I needed to organize the shelves and restock new titles.

After a little while, my back started hurting. Working at a bookstore was really hard on your back since you had to pick up heavy books, carry them around, and stoop to tend to the lower shelves.

I took a deep breath, clasped my hands, and stretched. I heard a *crack*. I was rotating my shoulders when I thought I caught a glimpse of a familiar hair color out of the corner of my eye. I quickly turned around and saw a girl in an outfit I recognized heading toward the staff entrance.

*Isn't that...?*

"Hey, Asamura. Don't overdo it. Take five if you're tired."

I turned back to see our store manager addressing me.

“Uh...who was that girl who just walked into the office?”

He saw the direction I was pointing and said, “Oh, right. We’re interviewing someone who wants to work part-time for us.”

*It’s a godsend since we’re understaffed, as you know.*

*She’s a regular high school student who wants to start this summer.*

*I think she goes to your school.*

I was hearing our manager’s voice coming from somewhere far away.

“What’s her name?”

I’d asked the question on impulse, and his answer, at least, was loud and clear.

“Her name is Saki Ayase.”



● EPILOGUE  
SAKI AYASE'S DIARY

**July 16 (Thursday)**

Now I've done it. I was never much good at Modern Japanese, but who would have thought I'd flunk?

I hate questions about novels.

I don't want to give up on subjects I'm not good at, and I worked through tons of mock exams, but in the end, I didn't have enough time during the real thing.

I think too much.

I should take Asamura's advice and focus on getting the gist of the text without worrying about understanding everything. But I can't seem to do that.

The way other people fret about things or miscommunicate makes no sense to me. I can't begin to figure out the thoughts behind the words they say.

People should get everything out in the open and work through their differences. How are two people supposed to understand each other, much less find romance, if they hide their real feelings?

...I know. I'm just a weirdo.

But wow, Asamura's a great coach.

I'd given up, but thanks to him, I think I'm starting to see a ray of hope.

Thanks, Asamura.

**July 17 (Friday)**

The lofi hip-hop Asamura told me about is really great.

The noise that sounds like rain is especially cool.

Now that I think about it, I've always been fond of the sound of raindrops dancing on the streets.

Am I the only one who finds it easier to focus in bad weather?

I had no idea music like this was popular in other countries.

I'm really grateful to Asamura for finding it for me.

Oops, I was too focused, and now it's almost morning.

I have to get ready for bed and catch some Z's.

I think I heard somewhere that sleep is important for improving your learning capacity and staying up late isn't good for your brain or your health.

But man, I never thought my focus could improve so much.

This music is fantastic.

It's strange.

When I slip under the covers and close my eyes, weird thoughts enter my mind.

I have to give my brain some rest, but it won't stop swirling.

Lofi hip-hop.

Asamura's pretty coworker told him about it, right?

Not that I care.

So why am I writing about it in my diary?

Nothing makes sense.

**July 18 (Saturday)**

I don't understand why I'm writing what I'm about to write.

No matter how I think about it, it doesn't make sense.

I don't have the right to say something like this.

But I'm doing it anyway.

It's just for my own satisfaction, so why not? A diary is a place for self-indulgence.

Asamura was late coming home.

When he gets off work at nine, he's usually home by nine thirty or ten at the latest.

But it's ten thirty, and he still isn't home.

Since I was going to the kitchen to get a drink, I thought I'd ask Mom and Dad if they knew where he was.

Today was unusual, because they were both home all day.

I found them watching TV and chatting.

It's rare for my parents to have time off together, and I didn't want to intrude too much, but I didn't have a choice.

I asked them about Asamura.

I said it was getting late and asked if he was okay.

This is what Taichi said:

"Asamura's going to a movie with a girl he works with."

*A girl he works with.*

He didn't tell me about it.

No, wait. I know he doesn't have to report to me.

He might get chewed out for going out at night without telling his family, but if he contacted his dad, then it would be selfish to expect more.

Asamura has other relationships, too.

It would make sense for him to know a girl or two.

Is it her?

Is he with the pretty coworker who recommended lofi hip-hop to him?

I don't like it.

I'm filled with regret. It doesn't seem to come out right when I put it down in words. That's not what I'm really feeling.

Of all the phrases I can come up with, the closest is *I don't like her*, but how

could I feel that way about someone who works at a bookstore who I don't even know?

This is terrible.

I'm sick of myself for being so negative about a total stranger, based only on fragments of information and my own preconceptions. I'm disgusted with myself.

I feel uneasy.

I wanted to say hi to Asamura when he got home and decided to study in the living room.

I continued studying after Mom and Dad said good night and went to their bedroom.

\*I'm adding this a day later.

Damn. I fell asleep.

It was probably because I went to bed in the morning yesterday and then woke up before noon.

That's the downside of not getting enough sleep.

As a result, I couldn't stay up until Asamura came home. I couldn't even greet him.

I was covered with a blanket when I woke up. It was probably Asamura who did it.

The uneasiness I felt last night seemed a little better when I thought about that.

I don't know why, though.

What the heck?

**July 19 (Sunday)**

So she's the pretty coworker Asamura mentioned. I was surprised by how beautiful she was.

I decided to buy a reference book and some novels to improve my Modern

Japanese skills, and without even thinking, I went to the bookstore where he works. I think it just made it seem like I was fixated on him, and now I regret going.

Shiori Yomiuri.

She has a pretty name.

It's the kind of name that suits someone who loves books, is loved by books, and is loved by people who love books.

And maybe it's because she's a college student, but she seems very mature. In addition to being beautiful, she's very charming.

She was getting along great with Asamura.

They really suit each other. I think Asamura would be very happy if he dated a girl like her.

Come to think of it, didn't I see a poster asking for part-timers at that bookstore?

Part-time work at a bookstore, huh?

Maybe it's not an efficient and high-paying job, but it might be nice to try something steady without worrying about shortcuts.

But how would that be? Would it be weird? We may only be stepsiblings, but a sister wouldn't normally go to a job interview at a place where her brother works, would she?

But wait a minute.

This wasn't the time to worry about part-time jobs or anything else.

First, I have to pass my test.

Come on, concentrate.

**July 20 (Monday)**

Today is my last chance to study before my test.

I genuinely appreciate Asamura's and Maaya's help with my studies.

I'm making this entry short tonight since I want to go to bed early, wake up

refreshed, and take the test with a clear head.

The sweet-and-sour pork was delicious.

Thanks, guys.

## **July 21 (Tuesday)**

I passed the test.

It's easy to say now after I've received my results, but I was already sure yesterday that I would pass.

I could feel it, like I was unwinding a tight knot in my mind.

It's all thanks to Asamura. And Maaya.

Anyway, it looks like I can spend my summer vacation doing what I want. I can study while saving up by working part-time at a steady job.

After finishing my test, I decided to go to Shibuya on my way home.

I thought I'd return to the bookstore by the station where Asamura works.

I wanted to take a good look at the ad for new hires and check what it said.

Asamura wasn't around. Maybe he was doing his job, but I didn't want to run into him, so I stayed as far away from the cash registers as possible and steered clear of the staff.

I didn't want him to think I was some kind of stalker.

I quietly crept around the store and checked the ad.

As I did, a man who seemed to be the manager approached me.

He asked me if I was interested in working there.

Was it that obvious? And here I thought I had a poker face.

Impulsively, I said, "Yes, sir."

There's no going back now.

My interview is tomorrow. I was told to bring a résumé.

I've never been to a job interview and figured I should practice. I went to a karaoke box.

I could have practiced at home, but it would have been awkward if Asamura had been there.

I would die if he heard me practicing for my interview.

I wouldn't be able to explain it.

If he asked, I wouldn't be able to tell him why I wanted to work at that bookstore.

How could I? I can't figure it out myself.

I checked sample questions on my phone and practiced.

A staff member would come in now and then, and it was awkward when they saw that I wasn't singing. But oh well. I won't worry about it since they're strangers. I'll never see any of those people again.

Asamura, I'm sorry if I worried you.

I thought about contacting him when I realized I'd be late getting home, but then I'd need to explain why I was late, and I couldn't very well tell him I was at his workplace, then went to a karaoke box to practice being interviewed.

I really need to face this recent uneasiness head-on and try to figure out what it is.

I decided to make him a sumptuous dinner to compensate for it as best I could.

Since I was in Shibuya, I stopped by a department store.

I bought nice ingredients to the extent my budget allowed so I could serve Asamura a luxurious meal. That way, maybe he'll forgive me.

And if he doesn't... Well, I'll just have to accept it.

I'll say I was late because I went to the department store. And that I couldn't be reached because my phone battery was dead. I can think of any number of logical excuses.

I knew Asamura would worry about me. It must have been the first time I saw him so upset.

We talked about a lot of things after the elevator door closed.

We were alone in a small, enclosed space.

An elevator in an apartment building isn't anything special, but I got nervous being cooped up with him.

I hope he didn't think I smelled sweaty.

Anyway, I gave Asamura the excuses I'd come up with. I'm glad he believed me, but this budding sense of discomfort grew in my mind as I continued to lie.

Wasn't I doing the same thing as the character in that novel?

Rather than work out my feelings of uneasiness with him, I was keeping it inside, putting a lid on it, and lying to get through the situation.

There was no reason to do any of that.

I could have dealt with him honestly from the beginning. Then we wouldn't have had weird incidents or misunderstandings, and we could've proceeded down the right path.

I'm scared.

I'm scared of how I feel. I have a pretty good idea of what it is, what's happening to me, and how I think of him.

And I'm hesitating to put that emotion into words, even just writing it down in my diary.

This is too ironic. I'm becoming like the character in that novel.

## **July 22 (Wednesday)**

I've done it, I've done it, I've done it. I've done it, I've done it.

Who would have thought I'd get the job so easily?

Asamura and Yomiuri were on duty. I rushed home so they wouldn't see me, but I wonder if they did anyway.

But no, I'm only delaying the inevitable at this point.

I can't run anymore.

I have to explain things to Asamura. I have to tell him why I want to work where he works.



I'm afraid.

I'm afraid, but a part of me is also relieved.

Of course I'm relieved. I can finally be freed from this uneasiness.

There's a side to Asamura that I don't know, and I don't understand his relationship with Yomiuri.

If I can see those things, I think this uneasiness will go away, at least a little.

...I can't believe it.

Why am I letting him control my actions?

And he isn't even doing anything. I'm the one who's going ahead and letting him tie me down. I'm the one who's allowing it.

It's so funny, I want to laugh.

Since I don't plan to let anyone read this, I might as well write this down clearly to remind myself.

It'll be okay if I lock this diary and shove it in the back of my drawer, won't it?

Here's a question for me, Saki Ayase.

Q: Sum up this ugly sentiment you're experiencing in a word.



A: Jealousy.

## AFTERWORD

Thank you for picking up a copy of *Days with My Stepsister*, Volume 2. I'm Ghost Mikawa, author of the original YouTube and novel versions. This volume focuses on an unexpected weakness of Saki's. She's rational, calm, and collected, but she's a little too serious. If you think about it, many of you might be able to relate.

In this volume, Yuuta introduces her to lofi hip-hop, which heals and supports her. I'm thinking of sharing the tune that Saki listened to on the *Days with My Stepsister* YouTube channel, and I hope you'll check it out. It's perfect for work or study.

I'm happy to announce that this series will also be adapted into a manga! It will be drawn by the artist Yumika Kanade, and I'm looking forward to seeing it. Please check my Twitter account or other sources for information.

Here are the acknowledgments. Thank you, Hiten, the illustrator; Yuki Nakashima, who plays Saki on YouTube; Kouhei Amasaki, who plays Yuuta; Ayu Suzuki, who plays Maaya; Daiki Hamano, who plays Maru; and Minori Suzuki, who plays Shiori in the special in this volume; not to mention the video director, Yuusuke Ochiai, the staff members of the YouTube version, everyone who has been a part of this project, and most of all, you readers and fans of the videos. I hope you will continue to enjoy *Days with My Stepsister*.

MANGA ADAPTATION  
**DAYS**  
*with my*  
**STEPSISTER**

Art by  
Yumika Kanade



VOLUME 1 RELEASING WINTER 2024!





## How will Saki's and Yuuta's lives

gradually  
shift...

It's Saki and Yuuta's first summer vacation since becoming siblings, and their relationship begins to expand beyond their family's apartment. Saki applies for a part-time job at the same bookstore as Yuuta and prepares to start work. What could she be up to?



As Yuuta steps into the role of senior coworker and puts aside his brotherly connection to Saki, he discovers a new side to her that he hasn't seen before. One day, Yomiuri, who is working the same shift, notices something ominous in Saki's behavior.



*DAYS WITH MY STEPSISTER, VOL. 3*

"She's so hard on herself, and she refuses to rely on others. That serious attitude of hers is going to lead to a breakdown one of these days."



...in the next installment of this true-to-life romance between siblings?



Yuuta is forced to make a decision. He agreed not to expect anything or overstep and interfere.

Should he break his promise and intervene in Saki's life and her style? What will he choose, as her brother, and where will it lead...?



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