

Ghost Mikawa

Illustration by Hiten

DAYS with my STEPSISTER


DAYS with my STEPSISTER
Ghost Mikawa
Illustration by Hiten


HALLOWEEN (AS IMAGINED)


"Ready to go?"
FIRST DATE


"I'm glad I get to be with you this year."
HALLOWEEN NIGHT

SAKI AYASE



BIRTHDAY
December 20

LIKES
Music, history and historic buildings, aquariums, sweets, fortune-telling

HAS TROUBLE WITH
Men, horror, the paranormal

FAVORITE PHRASES
"Self-reliance."
"Heaven helps those who help themselves."

DISLIKES
Having her photo taken

SPECIAL SKILLS
Fashion, makeup, cooking, memorization

FIRST IMPRESSION OF HER STEPBROTHER
Looks smart

YUUTA ASAMURA



BIRTHDAY
December 13

LIKES
Books, trivia, spicy food, fishing, quiet places

HAS TROUBLE WITH
Women, fashion

FAVORITE PHRASES
"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."
"A hedge between keeps friendships green."

DISLIKES
Talking behind someone's back

SPECIAL SKILLS
Building small, detailed models (good manual dexterity)

FIRST IMPRESSION OF HIS STEPSISTER
An aloof beauty

DAYS with my STEPSISTER

5

Ghost Mikawa

Illustration by **Hiten**

YEN ON
New York

Copyright

DAYS with my STEPSISTER 5

Ghost Mikawa

Translation by Eriko Sugita ● Cover art by Hiten

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Afterword

Frontispiece and illustrations by Hiten

If divine guidance is necessary to bring about a fateful encounter, then devilish temptation is essential for proving one's affection.

● PROLOGUE—YUUTA ASAMURA

I was walking down the hallway at Suisei Metropolitan High School, taking in the hustle and bustle of our annual cultural festival.

It was the second week of October, slightly past noon.

I looked out the window at the autumn sky. It got chilly even during the day around this time of year, making you crave a warm drink.

Outside, I saw droves of students climbing the gentle slope up to the school gates. They were swallowed up into the building, like little ants being sucked into a nest.

It seemed this year's cultural festival was going to be another success. The students were filled with excitement, and cheers and applause could be heard from all directions—not a normal feature of school life.

People from other schools in unfamiliar uniforms were scattered about, as well as parents and guardians. Children ran around, shrieking in high-pitched voices as their moms and dads scolded them.

Just then, I spotted a man and a woman walking around, holding hands.

I didn't recognize them. Yet strangely, I couldn't take my eyes off them as they huddled together happily.

They had to be a couple, holding hands like that in public.

As I watched them, I thought, *People like us can't act like that in front of others.*

There was only one girl on my mind:

Saki Ayase. My sister—or rather, my stepsister.

Four months ago, our parents got married, making the two of us siblings.

Because of my experiences with my mother, I'd stopped expecting things from women. Meanwhile, Ayase had become aloof and distant for similar reasons. Still, we cherished the parents who had taken us in, and we tried hard to get along as family—as brother and sister.

The problem was, I'd begun to see her not as my sister, but as a woman…

It was at the end of September that we finally discussed what we were feeling.

We never officially agreed to start dating, but we decided on a compromise: a secret relationship that allowed for the kind of intimacy that extremely close siblings might share but that we couldn't let others see.

Walking around school during the cultural festival, holding hands? Maybe a regular couple could do something like that. But not me and Ayase—at least not out in the open.

I didn't mind if people found out we were siblings now. When our grade had parent-teacher conferences, Ayase and I had decided it was better to come clean about it than to continue burdening our parents. But that meant we couldn't let anyone start thinking we were a couple.

After all, brothers and sisters weren't supposed to date.

Legally, there was no issue as long as we weren't connected by blood, but society was still biased against such relationships. There was no reason for most people to know the law in any detail or to study up on it just for our sake. And without knowing any better, they'd start whispering behind our backs that we were breaking some vague taboo. Just thinking about it was a pain, and I wanted to avoid dealing with that situation if at all possible.

After procuring coffee and tea (both hot) from a class selling bottled drinks, I quickly left the noisy hallway.

From there, I headed to the top floor of the special classroom building. At the far end of the hall, I went out a door and exited onto the fire escape.

A female student sat there, looking bored.

"Here's your drink, Ayase."

"Thanks."

The top of the fire escape was the farthest place in the school from the festivities. People seldom went there, and so we

weren't likely to be seen, even from outside. It made perfect sense as our meeting place.

I gave Ayase the bottle of tea and sat down. "Well?"

"Well…what?"

"Are you enjoying the festival?"

She frowned and thought for a moment. *Was that a tough question?*

"Yeah, I think I'm enjoying it," she said at last. "What about you, Asamura?"

Oh… There it is again.

"Hmm? What's the matter?" she asked.

"Oh… It's nothing."

Before I knew it, Ayase had started calling me "Asamura" again, instead of "Big Brother." These days, she only referred to me as her brother in front of our parents.

"I'm enjoying it, too… I think."

I didn't like crowds or noise, but the atmosphere of the cultural festival wasn't so bad.

"Did you see anything interesting?" she asked.

"Uh… Not really, I guess."

"Ah."

"Oh, but I think I'm the problem. I just don't know how to have fun."

"How to have fun?"

"I mean, like…how I perceive things."

"Hmmm?"

I was being vague, and Ayase hadn't quite understood.

On my way back, I'd seen a fortune-telling booth, a haunted house, and various little games, and I got the impression they'd be several times more enjoyable if you went with a friend or a date. But if I said that to Ayase, it'd sound like I was blaming her.

We'd discussed beforehand whether it made sense to go around the festival together as siblings, and after some discussion, we'd decided to simply find an isolated corner and chat.

I was fine with that. The problem was, the cultural festival wasn't much fun to walk around alone.

"What about you?" I asked.

Ayase was sharp, so I had to move the conversation along before she could figure out what I was thinking.

“Over there,” she said, pointing to one corner of the school grounds.

A stage and seating area had been hastily set up near the four hundred–meter track, and music was blaring from large speakers nearby. It was outside and there was no roof, so the sound wasn’t great, but you couldn’t expect much better from a high school cultural festival.

“Did you see one of the bands?”

“Yeah. Some kids in my class performed. They have this *visual kei* band and a classmate wanted to go, so I went along.”

“Oh. I’ve heard of *visual kei*, but I don’t know much about it.”

I just knew they were bands where the members dressed up in wild costumes and makeup.

Ayase said she’d asked a classmate what it meant once before and gotten a whole explanation. According to that person, *visual kei* bands placed emphasis on both their music and their look in order to create a unique worldview.

The people in Ayase’s class who had performed were all good-looking guys, and sure enough, they’d dressed up in flashy outfits and put on makeup. Even girls from other schools had come to see them perform.

I didn’t know much about fashion, hair, and makeup and was genuinely impressed by people who were good at it. I could never do that stuff and go up onstage. Of course, I wasn’t good-looking and I couldn’t play any instruments, so there was no reason for me to do any of that to begin with.

“Oh, Ayase. Do you have to help out your class? What are you guys doing anyway?”

“A maid café.”

“A…maid café?” Those were three words I’d never expected to hear from Ayase.

“Maaya suggested it.”

“Oh…”

“And when Maaya suggests something, everyone follows her lead.”

“No surprises there.”

Maaya Narasaka was Ayase’s friend. She was a brilliant communicator and one of the most popular girls in school.

“Oh, then Maru might drop by later,” I said.

“That friend of yours?”

“Yeah. Don’t you think there are a lot of novelty cafés this year? He said he was going to visit all of them.”

Ayase’s jaw dropped. “Are they that appealing to him?”

“Well, I guess it’s an unusual experience.”

An image flashed through my mind of Ayase dressed as a Victorian maid, saying, “Welcome home, master.” *I’d kinda like to see that.*

“I don’t do things like that,” she said abruptly.

“Ha-ha. Got it.” *Was I that obvious?*

“My job was to help with the preparations, and I finished up this morning.”

“Good work.” *Hmm… Too bad.*

“I can’t do friendly customer service, like, at all,” she said.

“You can’t?”

“Well… It’s definitely not something I’m good at.”

“Oh, okay.”

“That’s what customers are paying for, and I think it’s what they should get. I’m just not cut out for the part.”

“I see.”

As far as I could tell from her work at the bookstore, Ayase wasn’t rude to customers or anything. If I had to describe it, I’d say she treated them normally. She must have meant that she wasn’t good at acting exceptionally friendly.

I had to admit, it was difficult to imagine her using ketchup to make a heart on someone’s omelet rice.

Exceptionally friendly, huh? Was that anything like the relationship between a boyfriend and girlfriend?

Not that I had much experience with that…

A shadow passed over the fire escape. The sun was behind a cloud, and in the cool of the dark, I shivered at the autumn wind.

Ayase, sitting next to me, shivered too.

“Do you want to get going?” I asked.

“Not yet.”

I’d started to get up, but I plopped back down at her reply.

To be honest, I also wanted to stay a little longer. I looked at Ayase’s small hand beside me on the step. It looked cold, and I felt the urge to warm it up with my own. But would that be all right?

As I wondered, Ayase lifted her hands and wrapped them around her bottle of tea. “I guess it *is* a bit chilly.”

“I wish it was a little warmer, just for today,” I said as I looked up at the sky. “You don’t have to force yourself to stay out if you’re cold.”

“I’m fine,” Ayase said.

She shifted, closing the distance between us. I did the same, and our shoulders met. We were just shy of touching, but I was sure I could feel Ayase’s body heat.

I thought back to the end of September, when Ayase gave me that hug. We’d shared even more heat then.

I began to blush. But after all this time, that feeling of being wrapped up in her warmth had grown vague and hazy. We hadn’t touched since.

I’d been filled with anxiety, and she’d been trying to soothe me. It was a special situation—I knew that. It wasn’t something we were going to do constantly without any thought.

We’d discussed our feelings at the time. We knew we had affection for each other, but we weren’t sure if it was romantic for both of us yet. It had seemed like a big deal, but in reality, not much had changed. All we’d done was tell each other how we really felt.

We hadn’t increased our physical contact because for now, at least, we were content with what we had.

Ayase knew how I felt about her, and she had accepted those feelings. For me, knowing that was the most important thing, and touch was simply one method of expressing that truth.

But part of me wanted to spend even more time with her, even if we weren’t holding hands.

Maybe I’ll invite her out somewhere.

But was that something Ayase would want to do?

Lately thoughts like this would cross my mind.

But wait—should I be thinking about this all on my own?

Wasn’t it wrong to guess other people’s thoughts and expect them to guess mine? That was the kind of self-centered communication Ayase and I hated.

Just be honest and talk things out with her, I reminded myself.

“The sky seems so high up,” Ayase said, gazing out into the distance.

“That’s because it’s autumn.”

“Yeah, right. It’s already here…”

“Though when the wind blows, it feels like winter’s just around the corner.”

“No way. It’s still early days.”

“But you know, as it gets colder, it’ll be harder to go out, don’t you think?”

That was all it took for Ayase to figure out where I was going. But I wasn’t about to leave her guessing. I needed to properly talk things over with her.

“I was thinking, uh…I’d like to go out somewhere with you sometime.”

My heart sped up as I waited a few seconds for her reply.

Ayase’s expression shifted. She seemed slightly—ever so slightly—pleased.

“Okay,” she said.

I exhaled in relief and my shoulders relaxed. I felt a weight lift off my heart.

A thought crossed my mind—if we were just regular high school kids, just a regular boy and girl, we’d be doing just that here at the cultural festival. We’d walk around the school together, making memories.

Yet here we were, meeting in secret, sitting side by side without even holding hands, talking about how we’d like to go somewhere together.

Our relationship was awkward and half-baked. We weren’t even sure if it was closer to romantic love or familial affection.

But one thing was for sure: I felt comfortable here, far removed from the noise of the festival, sitting up on the fire escape with Ayase, talking about nothing in particular.

If Ayase felt the same, then I couldn’t imagine anything that would make me happier.

The clouds parted, and the sun came back out.

Around the time my tense body had finished relaxing in its warmth, Ayase and I finally stood up and walked down the fire escape. We made sure to time it so we wouldn’t be seen leaving together.

We didn’t see each other again until after the announcement declaring the end of the event.

And so our time at the cultural festival came to a close without anything special to report.

● OCTOBER 19 (MONDAY)—YUUTA ASAMURA

I woke up at seven AM on Monday to discover I had an unread message on my chat app. That was pretty unusual. After deactivating sleep mode on my phone, I opened up the message.

It's from Narasaka?

It had come in at 2:07 AM. *What?! Two in the morning?*

"She's up awfully late."

I'd never be able to wake up in the morning if I went to sleep that late. And what on earth had she texted me about in the middle of the night?

Important Notice from Maaya:

Hey! Would you believe the 21st of this very month is the day that Maaya Narasaka was born into this world?!

And so she will be holding a birthday celebration!

It's short notice, so don't worry about presents!

I look forward to seeing you there!

So basically, she's inviting me to her birthday party.

Did people really throw birthday parties for themselves? I didn't think I'd ever heard of a party where the host was also the guest of honor. But what would I know? I'd never hosted a birthday party…nor had I ever been invited to one.

And I wasn't that close with Narasaka, for that matter. She was Ayase's friend, not mine. I'd only seen her a few times, so I was more like a friend of a friend. Why would she invite *me*?

As it turned out, the answer to my question was in the very next line of the message.

Saki's coming, too.

When I saw Ayase's name, my heart began to beat a little faster.

…What? Why would she go to the trouble of pointing that out? Has she sensed the change in our relationship?

I've got to calm down. Narasaka invited me on that trip to the pool because I'm Ayase's brother, right? Plus, she's the type to consider anyone she has a single chat with a friend. She probably didn't mean anything by it.

But that wasn't all I had to think about.

"A bunch of other people are bound to be there…just like at the pool."

I thought back to the other students in our grade who had come along on that trip. Some of them were from Narasaka and Ayase's class, but some of them Narasaka had met elsewhere. Most of them were totally new faces to me, and about the only thing they had in common was that they were all outgoing—all except me anyway.

I started thinking about Ayase's friends and acquaintances I didn't know about, and I began to feel uneasy in a way I hadn't in some time.

Was this jealousy?

I felt pathetic. I thought I'd worked through these emotions when Ayase and I shared our feelings, but they were still there, growing inside me. That said, I felt I'd matured somewhat in that I could now recognize them the moment they appeared and quickly nip them in the bud.

I wasn't sure how to act around that Shinjou guy I'd seen with Ayase in front of the convenience store, but I figured I should just do my best to blend in like I had at the pool and try to avoid being noticed.

Just then, I came to a realization.

"Wait a minute."

Would this really be like our trip to the pool?

I stared at Narasaka's message and tried to figure out why I felt so uneasy.

When she invited us to the pool, Narasaka had told us all to come in our school uniforms, probably out of consideration for one of the participants. But there was nothing like that this time.

And there was one more thing that concerned me: Suisei High was a famous Tokyo prep school with strict rules, and it was risky to bring unrelated items to class. Narasaka had said not to worry about presents, but wasn't it usually expected that

you'd bring something to an event like this? That meant the participants would probably be going home first before heading to Narasaka's place.

"And that means…"

There was a high probability that everyone would be changing into street clothes.

If I was the only one who showed up in his uniform, I would stick out like a sore thumb. I was glad I'd realized this in advance.

As I sighed in relief, I noticed a note at the end of the message. It read, Big Brother, make sure you dress up to match Saki.

Apparently, my prediction had been right on the mark. But now it was more than wearing street clothes—I had to *dress up*. The bar had just been raised sky-high. Narasaka had assigned me a momentous task.

I liked to think of myself as an average high school student, but when it came to fashion, I lagged somewhat behind.

Unlike Ayase, I'd never considered clothes to be a form of armor. I didn't think of my daily life as a battlefield, so I'd never felt like I needed armor in the first place.

But now I was beginning to understand her point of view.

When I imagined everyone else who would be at the party, the idea of going there in boring, unfashionable clothes began to make me anxious. Was this how a soldier would feel going into battle unarmed?

I wasn't going to be fighting or competing with anyone, of course. But as I pictured stylish Ayase blending right in while I stuck out from the crowd in my tasteless clothes, I started to feel restless.

Fashion, huh? Maybe I'll check out some magazines. "Know your enemy, know yourself, and you shall not fear a hundred battles," as they say.

I settled my racing thoughts and sent Narasaka a brief reply: I'll discuss it with Ayase.

Somehow, as I sent the text, I felt like I was playing right into Narasaka's hands.

I got ready for school, then headed to the kitchen. *Oh? Ayase's not here.*

Had she slept in?

Dad was sitting at the dining table, looking bored. He was the only one there.

“Waiting to eat?”

“I figured I should hold off until everyone was ready.”

“Ah.”

I couldn’t really imagine him dragging Ayase out of bed and making her cook for him. He’d already dished up the rice and set it on the table, along with several side dishes.

“Though I was just thinking I’d better start eating if I want to make it on time.”

“Is your work still pretty busy?”

“Hmm? Oh… Yeah, it is. But things are settling down.”

Dad’s job had been busy since the beginning of autumn, and he often worked overtime and came home late. I sometimes caught Akiko mumbling that she was worried about him, but he never let his stress show and acted the same as always around the house.

“Do you want me to reheat the miso soup?” I asked.

“It’s already cooked, so you can go ahead and serve it.”

“Copy that.”

After heating it just a little, I put the soup in a bowl and placed it in front of Dad.

“Thanks.”

Now let’s see what Ayase prepared for us for breakfast this morning. Hmm. Ham, natto, and toasted seaweed. There were also small bowls filled with a green food I recognized as boiled spinach and something white I wasn’t sure about. Was that whitebait?

As I watched, Dad added the whitebait into his natto, poured in a little soy sauce, and began stirring the mixture vigorously.

Whitebait with natto dressing, huh?

“That’s an interesting dish,” I said.

“Yeah. Akiko used to make it for me all the time. It’s so easy; I wonder why I never fixed it myself.”

I knew why, of course. Dad didn’t see any point in making delicious food when he was eating alone.

He poured the whitebait-natto combination over his rice and dug in.

I couldn’t tell if Dad was just anxious to get to work or if he really loved this dish, but he put away his food at an impressive speed.

“This is good, you know,” he said. “The slippery natto combines with the rough texture of the fish nicely on your tongue. You can add green shiso to it, too. Or you can replace the natto with enoki mushrooms.”

This was starting to sound like a cooking show.

If my dad hadn’t married Akiko, he’d probably still be eating plain white rice with an egg and some soy sauce whenever he was in a hurry.

“I’ll try that later, too,” I said.

But as I watched Dad gulp down his food in a hurry, I started thinking.

“Dad?”

“Hmm?”

“Oh, you can keep eating. I was just wondering—have you ever been worried about how you dress when you’re with Akiko?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Akiko’s always dressed up, right? But you, well…”

“I’m cool in my own way.”

“Wow. Sounding pretty confident, huh?”

A goofy grin appeared on Dad’s face. “I’ve changed a little since I started seeing Akiko, but I’ve always dressed like an average businessman.”

As his son, I felt like it was my duty to say, “Shouldn’t you try for a little above average?”

“Okay, to be honest with you, I don’t like to push myself to look stylish. I just try to make sure I’m well-groomed, and that’s it.”

“Yeah?”

“Akiko has to dress up for work, but I think that as long as you maintain a clean appearance, that’s enough.”

As he ate, Dad explained that he looked at maintaining a certain appearance as a businessman and dressing to accentuate his sex appeal as two totally different things. He paid attention to the former but felt it was no longer necessary to worry about the latter.

I asked him if he was concerned about the other men around Akiko, and he stopped eating and thought for a moment.

“Not really. When I was in college, I worried about the people around the girl I liked—her friends and other guys. I

don’t know when I stopped, but it was pretty soon after I started working.”

“Once you became an adult? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yeah. Or maybe I should say that once I had a job, I started worrying about other things. And I don’t have the kind of job where how stylish I am determines my salary.”

“Oh, is that what you meant by your appearance as a businessman?”

“I’ve been in sales before, you know. And I guess, to be honest, I no longer have the room to think about things like that.”

“Oh, I see.”

Of course.

I didn’t think about it as a child, but now that I was in high school, I was starting to understand. My dad might make simple breakfasts like egg on rice, but I’d never once felt like I lacked anything or was deprived at home. The fact that he’d maintained that standard of living all this time was actually pretty impressive. Though he was kind of useless around the house.

“Things were different when I was still a student,” he said. “I had to be aware of how the other guys dressed. After all, when you go to a coed school, you have a bunch of eligible young men and women crammed into a tiny campus, right? I think being in that kind of environment naturally made me conscious of how I compared.”

What was I supposed to say to that?

“Is that how it works?” I asked.

“Well, yeah. It’s the same for you, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know…,” I said vaguely, and Dad sighed. He sounded a little worried.

Did even my dad think I was bad at fashion?

So things change once you become an adult, huh? I wasn’t there yet, so I had no way to know if my dad’s statement was true.

“Though I suppose if Akiko had been my coworker, I might have started dressing like a rapper just to stand out from the other guys.”

“I’m glad I didn’t have to see that, Dad.”

We kept up this back-and-forth until he finished his breakfast.

“Thanks for the meal,” he said.

“I’ll do the dishes, Dad. You can just leave them.”

“I appreciate it. Okay, then—I’m off to work.”

With that, he hurried out of the apartment and headed for his office.

I glanced at the clock on the wall.

It was about time Ayase got up. I headed for her room, planning to call out to her through the door.

But just as I got there, it swung open.

Ayase jumped out in a rush, only to freeze right in front of me. She stood unmoving, like a video put on pause. Her hair was sticking up in all directions, and she was still in her pajamas. I’d never seen her in such a state before—not once since she moved in.

After a few seconds, she started moving again. She immediately ran to the bathroom and slammed the door as if deliberately shutting me out.

“Uh…”

I’d just seen Ayase in her pj’s with bedhead, and yet *I* was probably even more nervous than she was.

We’d been living under the same roof for a while now, but this was the first time I’d ever seen her hair all mussed up. The image made my heart race. At the same time, I was once again impressed by how long she’d managed to go without accidentally letting her guard down. She was such a perfectionist.

Well, I guess she’s out of bed.

“…I’ll make you some toast, if that’s all right,” I called out.

After a brief silence, she replied, “Sorry to trouble you. Thanks.”

I headed back into the kitchen and tossed a slice of bread into the toaster oven. I set the timer, then turned on the electric stovetop to heat the miso soup. After that, I took some sliced ham out of the refrigerator and put it on a plate.

The bathroom door opened again, and Ayase jumped out and ran back to her room. I intentionally faced away from her, assuming she didn’t want to be seen.

Once it was done, I took the crispy toast out of the toaster and added it to the plate, then set it out on the table in front of Ayase’s seat. Making sure to turn off the stovetop just before the

soup came to a boil, I poured it into a bowl, then set it beside the plate. Toast would probably go better with a more Western-style soup, but she'd have to settle for miso since we didn't want any leftovers. There was no need to worry about matching cuisines at home anyway.

After observing her for a while, I'd realized that Ayase didn't eat natto in the morning. I wasn't sure if it was a girl thing, considering the smell, or if it was her individual preference. Either way, I decided to leave it in the fridge.

Around the time I finished making breakfast, Ayase appeared in her uniform and sat down at the dining table. I mentally applauded her; she was once again in a perfect suit of armor.

"Thanks," she said. "Sorry I made you handle everything."

"It's nothing. And you're the one who prepared it all last night anyway." I glanced at the refrigerator. "Is that enough? Do you want more of anything?"

"This is plenty. Thanks."

"Not at all. But it's unusual for you to sleep in so late."

"I had a long call with Maaya last night and stayed up."

I was suddenly reminded of the text message from that morning.

"I got a text from Narasaka last night, though I'm sure she probably told you."



“Oh… Yeah.”

“What do you want to do about her birthday party?”

I asked the question without much thought, but as soon as I did, Ayase froze. She had a clump of spinach grasped in her chopsticks, but for some reason, she moved her mouth toward her toast. She seemed to notice what she was doing a second later. In the end, she dropped the spinach onto her toast, placed a piece of seaweed on top, and ate it that way.

It seemed like an unusual way to eat toast, and Ayase made a strange face as soon as it was in her mouth. Apparently, she hadn’t been conscious of what she was doing.

“…Well, it *is* her birthday. I thought I’d go celebrate it with her. What about you, Asamura?”

“We’re not that close, but I wouldn’t mind going, as long as I’m not intruding. She said we don’t have to bring a present, but isn’t it kind of rude to show up empty-handed?”

“Oh, right. Yeah. We’re still just high school students, though. I don’t think it has to be anything expensive.”

“I see. But that makes things a little tough. I’ve never given a gift to a girl before.”

“You haven’t?”

“No.”

“Huh. Well, then I guess we have no choice. Um… Do you want to go buy something together?”

“I guess so. Oh, but wait…”

I poured tea into my cup as I spoke. I shot Ayase a glance, silently asking if she wanted any, but she shook her head. *I guess green tea with toast is a little strange, huh?* I slowly drank my tea and waited for her to finish eating.

This was just my personal preference, but as long as there was plenty of room at the table, I tended to wait until everyone was done to start clearing away the dishes. I worried that if I started cleaning up, the other person would feel rushed, and it would be harder for them to enjoy their food. It probably didn’t really matter; it was just something I liked to do.

“…If we go shopping somewhere nearby,” I said, finishing my earlier thought, “someone from school might see us together.”

“Oh, right. Do you think that would be bad?”

She was asking if I thought that was something siblings might reasonably do together.

I mulled this over. “I think it’s normal for siblings to do stuff like that, as long as they’re on good terms.”

“Yeah, I agree. But I’m not sure if…I want to do that.” Ayase’s speech faltered a little, like she was carefully choosing her words. “I mean, if we’re going to go somewhere together, it would be a shame to have to worry about other people spotting us.”

“Oh yeah… Good point.” It might not be a date, but we were going to be out, alone together. It would be nice if we could relax and enjoy ourselves. “Okay, then how about we go shopping somewhere a little farther away after school tomorrow? I can’t make it today since I have to work.”

“Okay.” Ayase nodded as she nibbled on the crust of her toast.

She usually ate quickly and headed out before me in the morning, so it was rare that we got to talk to each other alone like this. I was glad we’d been able to discuss our plans.

Thanks for sleeping in for once, Ayase.

“Do you remember what we talked about at the cultural festival?” she asked.

“Of course.”

We’d promised to go somewhere together, and it seemed we’d be getting an opportunity much sooner than I’d expected.

It was Monday morning after homeroom, and the classroom felt chaotic. The atmosphere was split between Monday lethargy and the animated chatter of friends catching up after the weekend. I was one of the lethargic ones, incidentally. How did my classmates have so much to talk about?

Just then, Tomokazu Maru sat down in front of me with a thud.

“You look tired this morning, Asamura.”

Maru was a size bigger than me, and it felt like a bear had jumped out of the woods right before my eyes.

“Hey, Maru. I was just wondering how everyone has so much energy.”

“You sound like an old man.”

“This morning tired me out.”

I’d gotten caught up in my thoughts and wound up having to race to school at top speed.

“Sorry to bug you when you’re so tired, but can I tell you something that will exhaust you even more?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You have a stalker apparently, and he’s been bugging me nonstop. He wants me to arrange it so he can talk to you.”

“Which manga are you imitating now?”

“I’m serious, man. Don’t try to pass this off as a joke.”

“You’re serious…? I doubt anyone would want to stalk me, though.”

I didn’t know that many other students. Aside from Maru, there were the people I went to the pool with, Ayase, and Narasaka. That was it.

But the answer soon presented itself. Maru turned back toward the hallway and waved, and the student who had been waiting there trotted into the classroom, smiling.

“Thanks for the introduction, Tomokazu. And…it’s been a while, Asamura.”

“Huh? Oh… Hi.” After a short delay, I returned the greeting.

Our visitor had short, bleached hair and looked smart and athletic. His name was Keisuke Shinjou.

He was one of the other students I’d gone to the pool with over summer vacation. He was also the boy I’d seen with Ayase outside the convenience store. Witnessing them together had caused me no small amount of distress, and I had to be careful not to let that show now.

Maru explained, “He wants to be your friend and was trying to find out who you hung out with. Kinda creepy, right?”

“Really? But we already know each other,” I said. “You could have come straight to me.”

“I still don’t know much about you,” he admitted, “so I wasn’t sure if suddenly acting like we were tight would put you off.”

“He found out that you and I were pals and asked me to serve as a go-between,” Maru said, clearly a little fed up.

That was when I realized that Shinjou was calling Maru by his first name, “Tomokazu.”

“Are the two of you close?” I asked.

“Not really,” said Maru. “But we went to the same junior high school. We both play sports, so we sometimes exchange information.”

“Huh. Small world.”

I was honestly surprised. Two people I'd met under completely different circumstances had known each other the whole time. It felt like when the pieces of a puzzle come together in a mystery novel, like a long-running plot thread finally coming to light in real life.

I turned to Shinjou. "So what were you so anxious to talk to me about?" I had no clue what he wanted.

"Oh yeah. Uh… Got a minute?"

Shinjou bent down slightly so he could look me straight in the eye. Then he gestured to me and Maru to come in closer. It seemed like whatever it was, he wanted to keep it on the down-low.

Shinjou began talking in a whisper. "Tomokazu. Since you and Asamura are close, you probably know about him and a girl named Ayase from my class."

"Mm…" Maru glanced at me. He seemed to be asking if it was okay to share what he knew. I nodded silently, and Maru said, "Of course. Asamura's dad married Ayase's mom, and now they're siblings… What about it?"

"That means Asamura knows Ayase better than anyone else does."

"Well, I guess so," I said.

…*Huh?!* What was I saying? That wasn't how I felt at all.

It would be extremely arrogant and conceited to think that I knew everything about Ayase just because we lived in the same apartment. I mean, this morning was the first time I'd ever seen what she looked like right out of bed, without all her armor in place.

I wondered if I'd spoken out of some shallow sense of competitiveness I felt toward the other boy.

"I thought if I got to know you better, then maybe I would understand Ayase better, too."

"Heck, Shinjou," said Maru. "Are you after Ayase?"

"Uh, well… Yeah." Shinjou scratched his cheek sheepishly.

Watching him from the side, I thought about how nice it was that he could speak his mind. Strangely, it wasn't jealousy I felt, but envy.

"Huh. You too? She's been getting pretty popular since summer break. Well, she *is* pretty, and I guess now that we know those nasty rumors about her weren't true, it makes sense the boys are interested."

“Hey, don’t talk about me like I’m some insect,” said Shinjou.

“But to a brother, the boys coming on to his little sister are nothing but pesky bugs, right, Asamura? Are you gonna forgive this con man who just wants to be your friend so he can get at your sister?”

“Wait a minute! This isn’t just some scheme. I mean, sure, I was hoping I’d have a chance with her. But I was also curious about what kind of guy Asamura is. I mean, he seems to get along so well with Ayase as her brother.”

“Ha-ha-ha. You don’t have to make excuses like that,” I said.

The panicked look on Shinjou’s face was so funny that I couldn’t help smiling. He must have been really serious. If he’d had any other agenda, I’m sure he would’ve come up with a better story.

“We can always hang out at school like this if you want,” I offered.

“Really…?! That’s great. Thanks, Asamura!”

“But only at school. I’m too busy with my part-time job to do stuff after class.”

I wasn’t making up excuses to avoid him. I rarely saw Maru outside of school these days, either. The only exception was the time he took me to that anime specialty shop during summer break.

“But isn’t it a little weird that you’re calling Maru by his first name and me by my last name?” I asked.

“Then I’ll call you Yuuta.”

“And I’ll call you Shinjou.”

“What? But my first name is Keisuke!”

“Don’t overthink it. I call Maru by his last name, too. I’m just not used to calling people by their given names.”

“Oh, I see… Well, whichever makes you feel comfortable. Anyway, happy to be friends with you!”

“Yeah, same. Anyway, while we’re here, I have a little question for you. You too, Maru.”

“Sure. Ask me whatever you like. I’ll answer anything within my power.”

“No need to lay it on so thick, man…,” said Shinjou. “Well, whatever. Go ahead, Asamura. Ask away.”

Shinjou was a tidy dresser who probably knew a thing or two about fashion. Maybe making friends with him was just what I needed. I hoped he could pass on some of his knowledge.

It did occur to me that I'd be asking advice from a guy who had a crush on Ayase, but I figured I could compartmentalize. This and that had nothing to do with each other.

"Say there's a girl you're a little interested in—maybe not in love with, per se—but you're going to a party she'll be at. I'll leave it to your imagination who I'm talking about."

"Hmm. And?"

"What would you wear to the party? Would you go in your usual clothes or wear something different?"

Maru opened his bag and began preparing for class as he thought about this.

Shinjou also appeared to be giving the matter serious thought. I barely knew the guy, but the fact that he'd taken me seriously instead of joking around made me think he had to be a good person.

"I don't know if I'd go out and buy a whole new outfit," he said at last, "but I'd probably wear the best clothes I had."

"I see."

It sounded typical of Shinjou, who seemed to be very fashion-conscious.

"Yeah," said Maru. "I agree."

"Really? You do?" I asked.

"Is that strange?"



“I figured you’d wear the same clothes you always do.”

“I wouldn’t want to overdo it, but I would want the girl to know that I’m making an effort.”

“Huh. Wouldn’t that just put pressure on her, though?” I asked. Maru’s answer had surprised me.

“It depends,” he explained. “Usually, I’d agree with you. People who really care will do their best to make sure you don’t even notice their efforts. But this situation is a little different. You should always keep time, place, and occasion in mind. In this case, the occasion calls for a change in strategy.”

“After all, a girl you like is going to be there,” said Shinjou, joining in. “If you don’t try to look nice for her, it would be impolite.”

“Shinjou is absolutely right,” said Maru, nodding. “If you have a crush on someone, it’s important to let that person see that you’re making an effort. Look at animal behavior. They all perform courtship rituals for their targets.”

“C-courtship rituals?” I stammered.

I hadn’t been expecting to hear a word like that from Maru, and I hesitated. He promptly seized the opportunity to strike back.

“I’m surprised you’d ask about something like that,” he said, grinning. “Have you finally found a love interest?”

“No, it’s not like that. I was just wondering.”

“Spill it.”

“Sorry. There’s nothing to tell you.”

“How did you meet?”

“I’m telling you—nothing is going on… I just wanted to know what you guys thought about fashion.”

“Pfft…! Ha-ha. Ah-ha-ha!” Shinjou suddenly burst out laughing. “Yuuta, you’re a riot.”

“Huh? Did I say something funny?” I asked, taken aback.

“You give everything so much thought. I’d never really worried about what clothes to wear when going out with a girl, but here you are asking all formally… It just struck me as funny.”

“…Doesn’t everyone think about what they wear?”

“Nope. I’d never thought about what I was doing until you asked.” Shinjou laughed again. “It’s interesting to consider.”

Apparently, Shinjou hadn’t been doing the kinds of things that came natural to me. And on the other hand, I would need

to make a conscious effort to develop the kind of fashion sense that came naturally to him.

I'd always thought of myself as lacking in certain areas, but maybe this was a case of always thinking the grass is greener on the other side of the fence.

"Actually," said Maru, "Shinjou may look stylish to you, Asamura, but he's really cheating."

"T-Tomokazu, don't say it!"

"Cheating?" I asked.

"Ngh…" Shinjou scratched his cheek and looked embarrassed. "I, uh…have a younger sister. She's in ninth grade, and whenever we go shopping for clothes, she always says my choices are lame."

"She does?"

"Yeah. She might be my sister, but she's still a girl, right? So she looks at clothes from a girl's perspective, and I have to admit, she helps me out a lot."

"So you're saying a guy doesn't need to be fashion-conscious himself but that he can get help from someone else? Huh. I never thought of that."

"Yuuta, if you're worried about your appearance, you could have your sister check your outfits, too."

"Ayase? I'm not sure that's a good idea…," I said, a little flustered.

"What are you, a fool?" said Maru, poking Shinjou in the ribs. "A girl from your school isn't the same as a sister you've grown up with since she was a baby."

Maru must have jabbed him pretty hard; Shinjou was holding his side like it hurt. "I—I guess you have a point. Okay, then… Do you want to ask *my* sister for help?"

"That makes even less sense," I said. What would his sister think if some random guy wanted her to check his outfit?

"Actually, a lot of girls enjoy doing stuff like that. She likes looking at photos of my friends from tennis club and offers pretty good advice on their hair and clothes."

"Sh-she does all that? Oh… So that's why."

Ever since I was in junior high, it always seemed to me that kids with siblings had a lot more acquaintances in other grades.

I'd always wondered why, and now I knew. Those with extroverted siblings probably met new people by doing things like this.

Maybe the reason why the guys around Shinjou all dressed so well was that they weren't just talking about shared interests but passing around fashion tips and useful contacts.

"I'd be happy to help you out, Yuuta," he said. "I do it for lots of other guys. Send me a picture of yourself, and I'll forward it to my sister right away."

"I don't have anything to send right now, but… Yeah, if something comes up, I'll do it."

"That's about what you can expect from a guy," said Maru. "If he has good fashion sense, he was probably either blessed with good opportunities to learn, or he studied like crazy for some specific reason. Otherwise, he'd be hopeless. You can learn the skills anytime. Don't start comparing yourself to others and panicking."

Maru made a good point. He didn't know any of the details, and yet he offered me sound advice as if he'd read my mind. He was the kind of friend a guy could count on.

Maybe it would be better to avoid talking to him about Ayase. I had a feeling if I kept this up, he'd make me confess everything one day…

Just then, Maru turned to Shinjou. "Hey. The warning bell just rang. Hurry up and go back to your own classroom!"

"Dang, is it that late already?"

We briefly exchanged contact info before saying good-bye.

"It was fun talking to you guys," he said. "I'll be back to see you again, Tomokazu, Yuuta!"

"Don't force yourself." Despite Maru's dismissive attitude, Shinjou waved cheerfully as he headed out the door.

"See you later!"

I was glad we'd gotten to talk, too.

I'd thought that Shinjou and I were so incompatible we might as well be from different species. But it seemed we had more in common than I'd thought. *Maybe I'll give fashion a try after all.*

As we entered the second half of October, the sun began to set earlier in the day.

Instead of going home after school, I went straight to the bookstore on my bike.

By the time I got there, the sun had dropped close to the western horizon. Today, the sun was supposed to set around

five PM. *Only two more months until the winter solstice.*

We were right in the middle of fall. Soon, the first winter winds would be blowing, and then it would be too cold to ride my bike without a thick sweater on.

I changed into my work uniform, stepped into the office, and found Ayase and Yomiuri already there. The three of us had the same shift today.

“Mornin’, kiddo.”

Yomiuri was the first to turn around and greet me.

Clad in our workplace’s subdued uniform, complete with an apron, she was a Japanese-style beauty with long black hair. Her personality didn’t exactly match her looks, however…

“Good mor— Wait a minute—it’s not morning. It’s almost evening!”

“Don’t you know? People in Japanese show business say ‘good morning’ no matter what time of day it is.”

“I’m pretty sure we’re in the book business, not show business… Anyway, what’s up?”

“Come on, bite! Adults like it when kids act like kids. You’re making me cry over here.”

Way to make yourself sound like a child.

“Saki and I are working the cash registers today,” said Yomiuri, getting back on track.

“Oh.”

No wonder Ayase had a sour look on her face.

The cash register was one of the most tedious positions in a bookstore, though I didn’t really mind it. These days there was a lot to do behind the counter.

Ayase sighed. “There are so many things to remember when working the register.”

“But, Saki, you learned almost everything in your first two weeks,” protested Yomiuri.

“Almost everything, but I still get confused.”

“Don’t worry about it; you’re doing great! It took me a whole three months to get used to working here. And these days the work is even tougher than when I started.”

“Really?”

“There are a lot more payment methods. More and more customers are using credit cards and even paying with their phones. Oh, but I heard management is going to install a new machine that can do all of it in one place.”

“Oh, finally?!” I said.

That was great news. I was sure it would save us a lot of time and effort.

“Of course, there are other payment methods that are starting to go away. Take book coupons, for example. We hardly ever see them anymore.”

Ayase tilted her head curiously. “What’s a book coupon?”

“Druuuh!” Yomiuri made a weird sound. *Did that come from her throat or…?* “Exactly what I’m talking about! You can feel the generation gap! Did you hear her just now, kiddo? That’s a high school girl for you. The younger generation has arrived!”

“I’m not sure age has anything to do with book coupons…,” I muttered.

“Woe is me. That’s it—the end of the line. To think I’d be called an ancient old bag at work. I think I’m going to cry again.”

“Please calm down. You know, I think it’s my first time hearing anyone say, ‘Woe is me,’ in the wild.”

“Yeah? Then here I go again: Woe is me.”

I guess I’ve heard it twice now.

“Um. So what are these book coupons?” asked Ayase.

I knew a little about them—they were a popular payment method in Japan around a generation ago. I spent the time left before our shift explaining them to Ayase, but she didn’t seem to get it.

It was true that coupons for books and stationery, as well as other paper vouchers, were becoming more and more rare. And when was the last time I saw a magnetic card, like the kind used to make calls from public phone booths?

I watched the two girls head behind the counter, then I rolled a cart toward the bookshelves and started making space for new books.

On top of the cart was an empty cardboard box for packing books to be returned to the wholesaler. With a list of titles in hand, I sighed and got into the swing of things.

“Okay, then…”

I’ll start with the bigger sections.

They say the trick to cleaning up is to get the big stuff done first before you get tired or bored. It gives you a sense of accomplishment and keeps you motivated.

Conversely, starting with the smaller stuff will leave you feeling like you're moving slower and discourage you.

At a bookstore, it was the chunky magazines that took up the most space.

I went through all the issues piled up on the flat display areas and removed the ones due to be switched out for the new issues the following day, then packed them into the cardboard box.

I had to watch out, because the ones that had only one or two issues left had already been moved to the shelves. Those took extra time to check since only the spines were visible.

As I worked, my eyes kept being drawn to the men's fashion magazines. They all featured stylish men in cool, angled positions on the front. The covers were big and colorful and made with high-quality paper that looked like it could slice right through your hand. In fact, when it got cold in the wintertime, I'd sometimes get cuts.

Books in the same genre tended to be released on the same dates. It was just a coincidence that the new fashion magazines were coming in tomorrow. I must have seen them come and go many times in the past and simply hadn't paid any attention to them

Okay, so these are the types of clothes that are in fashion right now… Of course, there wasn't much I could learn from just glancing at the covers.

Come to think of it, magazines like this were split up between those intended for men and those for women. Were both types mostly concerned with appealing to the opposite sex? Or were they more about polishing their readers' individual fashion sense?

In the same way that, as a guy, I had never found the weird hairstyles in women's fashion magazines cute, I wasn't sure that women would necessarily see the guys in the men's magazines as cool and stylish.

I'd gotten a male perspective on fashion from Shinjou and Maru, but I thought I'd like to hear the female perspective as well. And conveniently, Yomiuri was at the bookstore today.

After completing my assigned task, I returned the cart and headed over to the register.

Ayase saw me move behind the counter and stood up.

“I guess it’s time to switch places. I’ll start on maintenance,” she said, quickly leaving for the sales floor. Was it my imagination, or was she acting a little distant? I thought I saw her glance at me as she passed…but I wasn’t sure.

It was right around dinnertime, and the customers were thinning out.

Inevitably, there was a lull at the register with no one waiting in line. It was just me and Yomiuri behind the counter, so I figured it’d be okay if we chatted a little.

“Yomiuri, what were you and Ayase talking about?”

“Oh, nothing in particular.”

“…Okay.”

I knew I shouldn’t pry, but the idea that they might have been gossiping about me made me a little nervous.

“Hmm? What’s the matter, kiddo? You look like a sleepy frog.”

“And what does a sleepy frog look like?”

“Like, *yawn*.”

Yomiuri narrowed her eyes, tilted her head back, and opened her mouth like a baby bird waiting to be fed.

…What the heck is she doing? Do I really look like that?

I decided to go ahead and ask my question before she took control of the conversation.

“Um. Say, for example, hypothetically, that you meet a guy, and you go out on a date.”

“…Tee-hee!”

Huh? Why did she laugh just now?

“Uh… Would you want your boyfriend to be fashionable?”

“Hmm.” She put a finger to her chin and looked up at the ceiling—the very picture of a cute, innocent college girl. *Hard to imagine this same girl was just doing a sleepy frog impression.*

“If my boyfriend was too stylish, I might crack under the pressure.”

“Pressure?”

She probably meant that she’d feel pressured to look just as good. That made sense.

“But, well…”

“Hmm?”

At the sound of Yomiuri’s voice, my attention shifted back to her.

“I don’t really care if he looks cool or not. But I think I’d be happy that he was trying.”

I gasped.

Maru and Shinjou had said something similar that morning—that it was important to show that you were making an effort. And according to Yomiuri, even if a guy wasn’t that stylish, she’d be happy if he dressed up for their date, because it would mean he cared about looking good for her. She even said she’d find it *cute*.

“That makes perfect sense. Thanks for the advice. Just one thing, though. Is *cute* a compliment?”

“Oh? Does it sound negative to you?”

“I don’t know how happy I’d be if someone called me cute…”

“Kiddo, words only have meaning in context. You should know that if you claim to be a book lover!”

“Context… Yeah, okay. So what does *cute* mean in this particular context?”

“Precious!”

“I was a fool to ask.”

“Just kidding. Isn’t it obvious…?”

Spotting a customer walking toward the register, Yomiuri instantly switched into work mode.

But just before she did, she answered my question so quickly that there was no room for argument.

“It means, *I love you, jerk*.”

I was amazed that she could say something so embarrassing with a straight face, but her delivery had been so even that I didn’t feel like second-guessing her. Those must have been her genuine feelings, though some women might disagree, and I couldn’t be sure what Ayase thought.

I decided I’d have to secure one of those fashion magazines for reference…

It was around ten PM when Ayase and I left work and headed home.

I pushed my bicycle along the road while Ayase walked beside me. She looked cold. Her hands peeked out of her winter coat, and she rubbed them together for warmth. Temperatures dipped significantly after sundown these days.

“Didn’t you bring gloves?” I asked.

“It’s too early for that. It’s still October, after all. But…it *is* a little chilly today.”

The street thermometer set up in front of Shibuya Station read nine degrees Celsius. It was colder than usual for this time of year.

“Do you want to get something warm at the convenience store?”

“It’s okay. We’ll be home soon, and it’d be a waste of money.”

“Hmm… Well, okay.”

What was the best thing for me to do in this situation, considering our relationship?

I wanted to hold her hand, but I was gripping the handlebars of my bicycle. I recalled an embarrassing scene in a comic book I read a long time ago where a boy stuffed a girl’s hands in his own pocket. I wondered if that was something people in relationships did.

If it were me, I’d be too embarrassed to do it in public. But did that mean I liked Ayase as my stepsister and not as a girlfriend? Were my feelings truly romantic?

I still didn’t have a clear answer to the question she’d asked me the other day.

As I thought this over, Ayase stuffed her hands into her own pockets.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

I couldn’t exactly tell her what was going through my mind, so I tried to think of an excuse. Meanwhile, I casually looked over Ayase’s appearance, trying not to be too obvious. *Speaking of which…*

“Winter clothes…,” I began, then trailed off.

“Huh?”

“We were wearing summer clothes when we first met. It’s different and kind of refreshing to be in winter clothes now.”

“Do mine look weird?”

“No, um… Your outfit suits you.”

Ayase pulled away slightly and turned to face forward. “Praise isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

“It’s my honest opinion.”

“I see. That’s very you…”

I wondered what she meant.

“I can’t wait for school to end tomorrow,” she said.

“Yeah.”

That was the end of our conversation, and Ayase and I walked in silence the rest of the way to our apartment.

One by one, we passed through the circles of light cast by each streetlamp, and Ayase’s pretty face glowed faintly in the dark. I stole a glance at her profile as she straightened up.

She’s so beautiful.

It didn’t bother me that we weren’t talking.

I treasured the short, mundane trip with her from the bookstore back home.

● OCTOBER 19 (MONDAY)—SAKI AYASE

It was past midnight in the wee hours of Monday morning.

I realized I'd been thinking about that promise—though it probably didn't qualify as anything so big as a promise—that Asamura and I made at our school's cultural festival.

We'd decided to go somewhere, just the two of us.

Ever since, I'd been thinking about where we should go, how I'd ask him, and what we'd do when we got there.

But Asamura's behavior hadn't changed a bit. It was like he'd forgotten all about it, and that made me uneasy. It felt like I was the only one thinking about it, getting all nervous and excited… moping in bed like I was now. *Crap, I won't be able to sleep again if this keeps up.*

It was already Monday. In only a few hours, I would have to get up and go to school.

I pulled the blanket over my head and squeezed my eyes shut. *I'm going to sleep.* Just as I made my decision, I heard a faint ringtone.

"Oh, geez."

I looked at my phone and saw a notification. I'd received a message from Maaya.

"Doesn't she realize what time it is…?" I mumbled as I opened the message.

I can't sleep.

You too, huh? I sighed and sent her a brief reply.

Go to sleep.

I've started thinking, and now I can't stop! I was just watching a video, and this guy was saying some weird stuff.

…What weird stuff?

He said, “I’ve confirmed it, and it’s for sure!” Isn’t that strange? If you confirmed something, doesn’t that mean it’s for sure? It’s like saying you fell off a horse while on horseback or referring to the bygone days of yore. Our language is becoming a mess!

Was this something she needed to stay up for?

So I mulled it over and came up with a solution. I thought maybe we could say, “I’ve confirmed that it’s for sure.” That way, you’re just saying what you confirmed, right? Instead of restating. But then I realized I was changing the meaning of the sentence, and now I’m wondering if the original wasn’t fine as is.

This was starting to sound less and less important.

Go to sleep.

Don’t be cruel! Think with me!

Why are you watching a video at this hour anyway?

I’d asked without thinking, and Maaya’s response proved quite substantial.

Maaya’s messages were always long—so long that I wondered how she typed such lengthy blocks of text on her phone.

In short, she had watched a late-night anime she was looking forward to, and that had woken her up. Then she started watching video streams, which only made the situation worse.

I wished she’d left me, her poor friend, out of it.

These days, you could watch most anime via streaming anytime you wanted. Maaya herself had declared to me that it was great not to be tied down to a TV station’s airing schedule.

So why did she have to watch late-night anime in the middle of the night?

I use streaming services, too, but I also like watching shows in real time! It’s supercool to think I’m watching and being moved by the same show as other people all over the world!

You don’t know if other people are being moved.

Ooh, you're such a spoilsport, Sakikins! Maaya is disappointed in you!

Now she's calling me Sakikins…

…Oh, my fingers are getting tired. I think I'm getting finger cramps.

What the heck?

How about we talk if you're still up?

I really wished she wouldn't involve me in this…

I sighed. I'd been just about to go to sleep. But after a moment, I realized there was something I wanted to ask her.

Okay.

As soon as I hit SEND, my phone started to ring. She was quick. She must have been waiting with her finger right over the call button.

"Aloha, Saki."

"Have you moved to Hawaii?"

"It's getting cool these days, so I thought I'd try to manifest some warmth, at least in spirit."

"…Want me to hang up?"

"Ahhh! No, don't! Stay on the phone with me! But… Hey."

"What?" *Don't suddenly change your tone of voice, Maaya. You totally startled me.*

"Saki. Isn't there something you want to talk to me about?"

"…Huh? Not particularly."

"Really? You don't usually go along with other people's whims. You almost never talk to me when I message you at night."

"Ugh."

"I figured you agreed to talk because there was something that you *wanted to discuss with me."*

I gave up and sighed. "Why are you so needlessly sharp?"

I was hoping to introduce the subject naturally, but my best friend was too wise to be fooled.

"I thought so."

"Let's say, uh, hypothetically, that you wanted to go out somewhere with a boy…"

“Go where?”

“Um. Well, it doesn’t matter. You just want to go somewhere with him.”

“Okay.”

“How would you invite him without making it sound awkward?”

“Are you going somewhere with Asamura?”

What?!

“I—I never said it was Asamura.”

“Saki. You wouldn’t worry about stuff like that with anyone else. You’d be as cool as a cucumber, methodically doing whatever you needed to do like the calmest sniper in the world.”

“…I guess now I know how you see me.”

“If it were anyone else, you’d just ask them. You wouldn’t worry about how to do it.”

That’s not true…

“Shinjou seems to have bombed, so it has to be Asamura.”

“Maaya, listen to me. Even if it *is* Asamura, it’s not for the reason you’re thinking.”

“Hmm.”

Her “hmm” conveyed perfectly that she didn’t believe me one bit, and I unconsciously tightened my grip on my phone.

Maaya was clearly suspicious, but she decided to move on with the conversation anyway. *“Your excuse is key. You need to make it sound natural when you ask him out, or he might suspect you have an ulterior motive.”*

“I don’t have an ulterior motive.”

“Hmm.”

“Like I said—”

“All the more reason to make it sound natural. You don’t want him to say no, do you?”

“Well, no.”

I’d never considered…that he might turn me down. But Maaya was right. Why hadn’t I thought of that? Asamura might not want to go out with me. He hadn’t mentioned it once since the festival. What would I do, then?

“For example… Hey, are you listening?”

“Oh yeah. Of course.”

“Maaya Narasaka, the girl you’re currently talking to, will be celebrating her birthday the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah? Happy birthday.”

“You’re too early! And so little feeling!”

“Should I say it again on the day of?”

“It doesn’t matter. Anyway, you should use the excuse that you’re buying a present for my birthday to go shopping with him.”

“Are you planning a birthday party?”

“No. Or I wasn’t before. But I’ll throw myself a birthday party so that you can use me as your excuse.”

“Isn’t that going a little overboard?”

“No, it isn’t. You and Asamura will be my only guests.”

Could you really call that a party? Wouldn’t it be the same as just going over to Maaya’s place for a visit?

“It’s fine. That way you won’t have to be nervous. Plus, it’s a great excuse for you to ask him out!”

It did make sense. Maaya had come over several times, so it wouldn’t be too big a deal for Asamura to visit her place for a birthday party.

“Are you sure it’s okay?”

“What do you mean?”

Unlike me, Maaya was really popular. If she announced that she was having a birthday party, it wouldn’t be just her classmates wanting to attend—it would be students from every class in every grade. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’d told me she held a party every year.

When I told her so, she said she couldn’t fit everyone in her apartment, and since she didn’t want to leave anyone out, she figured it was better not to have a party in the first place. She wasn’t just a popular girl with a lot of friends—she was considerate to a fault. How perfect could one girl be?

“But since I’m rooting for you and Asamura, I don’t mind having one this year if it’ll help you guys move forward.”

“I told you, it isn’t like that.”

“Okay, then. I’ll send a message to Asamura after this and ask him to join us. Oh, and I’m not going to tell him that you two are my only guests. It’ll be a surprise.”

I glanced at my clock and saw that it was already two AM. The blanket wasn’t covering my shoulders, and they were starting to get cold.

“Oh no, it’s getting late… What if we sleep in and don’t make it to school on time?”

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

“Shouldn’t you be getting more than that?”

“Are you worried about me? I sleep six hours total, so I’m fine.”

I wondered when she got the other three hours.

“I might be in trouble, though… I want to get up before Asamura does and prepare for the day.”

“Maybe you should stop trying to be perfect around him all the time. He might think it’s cute if you let him see you a little out of sorts now and then.”

“No way…” Back at the school cultural festival, I’d begun to realize I was bad at acting cute in front of others. “Well, I guess I see your point…”

“Ah! Now we’re getting somewhere, Sakippi!”

Who the heck is Sakippi?

“I *did* hear that boys like girls who surprise them.”

“Yes, indeed. I wonder who told you that, hmm? Oh, right. Tell you what. Why don’t you go home first before my party and get changed.”

“Why bother when it’ll only be the three of us?”

“The element of surprise, Saki! That way you can get a second date out of it!”

I can’t go on a date to her birthday party…

“…I’m…going to bed.”

“Okay. Good night.”

I said good night and ended the call.

Maaya was always teasing me. *Geez…*

A little out of sorts, huh? Maybe a bit of that was necessary for a guy to find a girl cute… *No, no. You’d better think this through, Saki Ayase. You can’t intentionally make yourself vulnerable for a reason like that. No way.*

I pulled the covers over my head and shut my eyes tight.

No way in hell.

The next morning, I not only slept in, but I also ran into Asamura on my way to the bathroom. He saw me straight out of bed.

I was mortified. When I got to the mirror, I could see I had bed head. There was no way I could do something like this again *on purpose*.

Asamura was the one to bring up Maaya’s birthday party. He asked me what I wanted to do about it. All the words that had

been whirling around in my head vanished, and my mind went blank. I was so nervous that I thought he might hear my heart pounding.

I feigned calm and said, “Well, it *is* her birthday. I thought I’d go celebrate it with her. What about you, Asamura?”

I was hoping we could casually move on to the topic of buying her a birthday gift, and again, Asamura beat me to it. *Is this for real? Can he read my mind?*

Asamura told me he’d never given a gift to a girl.

Oh, I see. He hasn’t. Why was I feeling a little relieved? I’d never given anyone a present, either, unless you counted Mom.

I gathered my courage. *Come on—say it.*

“Do you want to go buy something together?”

My voice might have been trembling.

Asamura started to speak, then said, “But wait,” and it felt like he’d crushed my heart in his fist.

But I’d been wrong. As it turned out, he was just worried that people from school might see us if we went shopping together nearby. I didn’t want that, either. Then he suggested we go a little farther to buy Maaya’s present, and I nodded.

“Do you remember what we talked about at the cultural festival?” I asked carefully. Asamura was a kind person, so maybe he was only thinking about buying a gift for my friend.

But his answer was—

“Of course.”

Good.

I was glad I could *confirm and be sure*.

I was still working part-time at the bookstore, and I’d started taking the same shifts as Asamura again.

There were three of us working today. Yomiuri and I were behind the cash registers while Asamura was out on the sales floor, opening up space for new books.

When we ran out of customers, I found myself staring at Asamura as he worked. Yomiuri pointed this out and laughed, saying she knew I was interested in him.

“I just happened to be looking in his direction,” I said.

“Hmm.”

She didn’t buy it at all.

Yomiuri kept talking to me, perhaps because there were no customers and she had nothing better to do.

“Halloween is coming up,” she said.

“It’s on the thirty-first, right?”

“Yep. The last day of October. Halloween is on the eve of All Saints’ Day.”

“All Saints’ Day?”

“That’s on November first, and it commemorates all the Christian saints. The day for all fools is on the first of April.”

“Oh, April Fools’ Day.”

“Yep. But for some reason, November first isn’t called November Saints’ Day. Or is it? Do you know?”

“No, I don’t.”

“And when it comes to Halloween, Shibuya, where we work, is *the* place to be.”

Whenever I spoke with Yomiuri, the discussion always jumped from one topic to another. Sometimes, I could barely keep up. She was as quick as a whip. She’d probably gotten this way after talking with Associate Professor Kudou for so long.

I recalled the time I went to the open campus at Yomiuri’s college. Just thinking about it exhausted me.

“Shibuya stays up all night on Halloween,” she said.

“Lately, it’s like a costume-wearer’s mecca, huh?”

Every year, crowds of people dressed up as this or that would gather at Shibuya Center Gai. The event had gotten so huge that it was now broadcast live on television news shows. The streets were packed, with everyone shoulder to shoulder.

“It’s so irritating to have so many people crowding up the place,” I said. “I avoid Center Gai like the plague at this time of year.”

“But, Saki, no matter how irritating it may be, we still have to go.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Because we work here.”

Oh…

Come to think of it, both Asamura and I had work on the thirty-first. Apparently, Yomiuri did, too.

“Maybe we should come in costume,” Yomiuri suggested.

I shook my head. There was no way I was going to dress up for Halloween.

“But you’d look cute wearing cat ears or a witch’s hat.”

“Cute…”

“Oh, so you *are* interested.”

“Not really,” I said, fully aware it didn’t sound very convincing.

“I just know you’re thinking of Asamura.”

I blushed just as Asamura returned from the sales floor.

“I guess it’s time to switch places. I’ll start on maintenance,” I said and quickly stepped out from behind the counter. *I hope I didn’t sound weird.*

On the way home from work that day, I was rubbing my numb hands together as I walked through the frigid, wintry air.

Asamura was walking next to me, pushing his bicycle.

It was at times like this that I realized how shallow I was. I couldn’t figure out what to say. I had no idea what topics Asamura might enjoy or what would make me sound cool or interesting.

All I could do was blow on my hands to warm them, buying time.

He said I looked good in my winter clothes. I wondered if he was going out of his way to start an exchange.

I made a fist with the hand I had pushed into my pocket. The words I finally managed were, “I can’t wait for school to end tomorrow.”

How pathetic.

But Asamura said, “Yeah.”

I’d been worried that I was the only one looking forward to our outing. That would have been so embarrassing. But he’d responded right away.

I sneaked a peek at his face. He looked happy.

I opened and closed my fist inside my pocket. It was so hard to think of a good topic.

The two of us walked up the street in silence. But…maybe this was good enough for now.

I was a little sad that we’d have to split up once we got home.

● OCTOBER 20 (TUESDAY)—YUUTA ASAMURA

I started getting anxious on Tuesday around noon.

My first afternoon class was Modern Japanese, and my classmates' voices as they read from the textbook slipped in one ear and out the other, as if they were speaking in a foreign language.

The reason nothing would stick in my brain was because it was already full. For a while now, there had been only one thing on my mind—my shopping date with Ayase.

I kept thinking and thinking about how to make it a success. I wasn't confident enough to say I hoped she would enjoy our time together, but I didn't want to bore her, at least.

"What are you moaning about, Asamura?"

I looked up and saw that Maru, who sat in the seat ahead of mine, had turned around and was staring at me.

"Come on, Maru. We're in the middle of class."

He gaped at me, astounded. "What are you talking about? Class ended ages ago."

"Huh?"

Looking around in a panic, I saw that my classmates were getting up and moving around. Just then, I remembered that we were conducting an experiment during sixth-period Chemistry and needed to head to one of the special classrooms.

"You seem distracted," said Maru. "If something's bothering you, you can always talk to me. Though I don't know if I'll be able to help."

"Not very confident, huh? But that honesty is very you."

"I don't make empty promises."

That was why I could always trust Maru. And yet…

"Is this still about the thing from last time?" he asked.

"Not exactly, but…"

As I looked at my best friend's face, I suddenly remembered the advice he'd given me before.

"Hey, Maru? You said it was important to let the person you care about see that you're making an effort for them, right?"

"Yeah, I did… And yeah, it's the process that matters. You can't trust the finished product alone."

He looked at me as if to say, "So it *was* the thing from last time." I supposed he was right… But no, this was different. Or, well, not really, I guess.

But wait a minute. "What do you mean by 'you can't trust the finished product alone'?"

"Think about a guy with no interest in women's makeup," he began. "Do you honestly think he could look at a girl and tell if she'd worked hard to make herself beautiful for him?"

"Ummm."

"Personally, I think it'd take a guy who was into makeup himself to accurately judge something like that."

"Oh, that makes sense."

I thought back to Ayase the previous day. Because I'd seen the way she looked straight out of bed, I was able to appreciate how much effort she put into her armor.

"Results are just results. It's a lot like baseball."

"I don't think your coach would like to hear that."

"I'm just saying you shouldn't get too caught up in whether you win or lose each game. I'm way too much of an amateur to get complacent because of a few wins, and if I can't see how hard my opponents have been training, I'll stop improving myself. That's why I can't afford to let my guard down."

Huh… He sure is self-disciplined.

"So you're saying you pay attention to your opponents' process and that it's the same when you're dating a girl?"

"Exactly. That said, while I don't like to show off the work I've put into playing baseball, it's a different story with a girl I like. Doesn't a home-cooked meal from your girlfriend make you happy, even if it's not as good as something you could get at a restaurant?"

Ayase's home-cooked meals were actually better than restaurant food, but that aside…

"There are some situations where the whole point is showing someone you put in effort," he explained. "I'm not telling you to do that, of course."

"…Aren't you contradicting yourself?"

"What I'm saying, Asamura, is that you're an exception."

I tilted my head to the side. *What does he mean, I'm an exception?*

"Oh? You mean you're really not aware of it?"

"What?"

"You're incredibly easy to read. You'll be fine."

For a moment, I was taken aback. *I'm easy to understand…?* What was he saying?

"Just be your usual self," he said, "and she'll get the message."

"Um…?"

"Don't worry, Yuuta Asamura. You aren't as subtle as you think. You aren't skilled enough to hide your efforts, so don't try. Just give it everything you've got."

His words weren't reassuring in the slightest.

What did he mean, "be my usual self"? What was I usually like?

"Now I *really* don't know what I should do," I said.

Maru burst out laughing and wouldn't stop, and we were almost late to Chemistry.

After school, I went home to get changed.

I decided that I would stand out if I went in my uniform, and even I knew a school uniform wasn't appropriate attire for a date with a girl I was close to.

So then…what *should* I wear?

I had no good ideas, and I soon became aware of a certain downside to living in the same home as your date. Specifically, how difficult it was to check my appearance.

If I was constantly fumbling back and forth between my room and the bathroom to look in the mirror, she'd hear it all.

Maru had said to let her see that I was making an effort, but this was too much. That said, I doubted many high school–aged boys had large mirrors in their bedrooms, and I was no different.

After much deliberation, I resorted to using my phone's selfie camera. Smartphones really were the multi-tool of the modern man. By setting the phone at eye level and stepping back far enough to see my whole body, I could turn the phone into a simple mirror.

“This will have to do.”

I picked out an outfit I felt comfortable in, only to realize it wasn’t much different from what I usually wore. It was normal: a black jacket, a light gray knit sweater, and black denim pants.

It wasn’t bad, but I wasn’t confident in my own judgment.

“…Lots of other boys ask for help, too, right?”

I hesitated, then saved a photo and sent it to Shinjou, asking for his sister’s opinion.

I knew I was acting out of character. But if the alternative was Ayase thinking my outfit was lame, it would be a hundred times better to have a junior high school girl I didn’t know think I was a pain in the neck.

…But then something occurred to me.

Shinjou was probably in the middle of club activities right now, and his sister likely had her own things to do. It might be difficult to get a response before it was time for me to leave.

I was so desperate that I hadn’t even considered that.

But the message was immediately marked as read. Shinjou just happened to be taking a break from his club activities, and his response came almost immediately.

My sister got back right away.

I started sweating. My body was heating up as the embarrassment set in. I’d just shared a photo of myself with a junior high school girl I’d never even met.

With trembling fingers, I typed, What did she say?

She said it looks “normal.”

Huh?

It looks “normal.” That’s all she said.

Shinjou’s message included a screenshot of his exchange with his sister.

Had my outfit bored her so much she couldn’t think of anything else to say? Did she mean it was bland?

Sorry. Break’s over.

That was the end of my exchange with Shinjou. I sent him a picture to express my appreciation and sighed. I’d really messed

up.

The ambiguous comment had only made me more anxious, and now there was no one I could ask. It had been a big mistake to try to rely on someone else when I didn't have time to wait for their advice.

"So that was Shinjou's sister, huh? Aren't they…awfully close?" I mumbled to myself as I glanced at the screenshot of their texts.

If they could get ahold of each other and have a casual exchange so quickly, they must have been on really good terms. Though I didn't know what most brothers and sisters were like and couldn't say if that was typical or not.

At that point, something occurred to me.

What if some guy sent me a photo of himself, asking for advice on his outfit? Would I forward it to Ayase?

Somehow, I didn't think I would. I'd come up with an excuse and turn him down. I didn't feel like hearing Ayase talk about some other guy.

Shinjou probably didn't coerce his sister into doing things willy-nilly, either. They must get along well and have a deep bond of trust. I figured he sent her those pictures because he already knew it wouldn't bother her.

Maybe a relationship where you could do things like that without either side minding was what close siblings were supposed to be like.

Were my feelings weird for a brother?

"Ready to go?" I heard someone calling me from out in the living room.

Apparently, Ayase was ready to leave.

"Yeah…I think so."

I still wasn't sure if my outfit was okay, but I couldn't stay in my room wondering forever. It was time to stop questioning myself.

I opened the door, and Ayase got up from the sofa.

I looked at her and gasped. I should have known she'd look great.

She was wearing a burgundy knit top under a moss-green jacket. The colors complemented each other but weren't flashy or overwhelming. She had a great sense for such things. A triangular pendant lay over the sweater, against the swell of her chest.

She was also wearing a skirt. The hem fell about fifteen centimeters below her knees, giving her a subdued impression. I usually saw her in pants when she wasn't in our school's uniform, so this was something different.

As you might expect for someone who called her clothes "armor," Ayase usually came off as somewhat unapproachable for the average high school boy. Today, however, she looked noticeably friendlier.

She wasn't just pretty, she looked cute, too. Or at least, that was how I saw her.

"Okay, let's go," she said.

"Yeah… Oh, wait a minute."

"What is it?" Ayase was about to slip her feet into her boots, when she stopped and turned around. "Did you forget something?"

"No. I was just wondering if it was really okay for us to walk together from here to Shibuya Station."

"You mean out of uniform and in our regular clothes, right? I don't think we need to worry. Other siblings probably do stuff like that all the time."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Sorry, that was silly of me."

"No worries. It's an important thing to consider. Thanks for being cautious. Let's be sure to talk through any difficult decisions or judgment calls."

I breathed a sigh of relief at her words. *I really love that about her.*

After that, we left the apartment together.

We were waiting for our train at Shibuya Station when I suddenly started feeling uncomfortable.

At first, I wasn't sure what was bothering me, but…when we casually met each other's gaze, I realized it was Ayase's face. Or rather, it was the expression she was making. She looked like she was a moment away from bursting into laughter. I thought I could see her glancing at me, and the corners of her mouth were twitching. Was she laughing at my outfit? *No, she isn't like that.*

Maybe she'd found something strange with my clothes. It was bothering her, but she thought she might hurt me if she mentioned it, and so she couldn't say anything.

Was that it? The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed.

I shook my head, trying to clear it. I wasn't going to ask her about it. Whether I was right or wrong, it would only make things awkward.

But I couldn't shake the feeling she was acting strange.

Oh, forget it. I can't let it bother me. And either way, it was rude to keep staring at her like this.

I forced my thoughts away from Ayase and was careful not to look at her too much after we got on the train.

We arrived at Ikebukuro Station in just under twenty minutes. We exited the platform and headed down the stairs into the basement level, then left through the north ticket gate.

After passing by the stone statue that served as a popular meeting spot by the east exit, we took another flight of stairs up to ground level and exited onto a spacious road.

We proceeded along Sunshine 60 Street, where I spotted a variety of shops: ice cream parlors, crepe shops, coffeehouses, shoe stores, used clothing stores, boutiques, arcades, and movie theaters. It was a bustling downtown area—the perfect place to spend time with a friend or a date, and there were lots of other people doing just that.

To one side of the road, I saw a couple making out and was a little taken aback.

"Whoa…"

Ayase jabbed me lightly in the rib with her elbow. "It's rude to stare."

"Sorry. I didn't have time to stop myself. It was thoughtless of me."

"I understand how you feel. It's…surprising to suddenly come across something like that."

We shared our feelings, then exchanged a wry smile.

Human emotions were a mystery to me. I thought it was up to each person to decide what to do where, and that it wasn't for anyone else to judge. Yet here I was, shocked by the sight of two people kissing.

If I were asked in a questionnaire what I thought of couples kissing in public, I would definitely answer, "Nothing in particular." But for some reason, my brain instantly decided that I'd seen something weird.

Perhaps my answer to the questionnaire reflects my rational beliefs, while my candid reaction is a product of some instinct etched into my mind. A person's values are based on reason, hardened by experience and knowledge. But maybe when you're confronted with something shocking enough to cause a glitch in the system, all that falls away and you catch a glimpse of what lies beneath.

"Do you think you'd wanna do something like that, Ayase?" I asked.

"Not me. If someone suggested it, I might run."

"I agree. We probably didn't even need to compare notes on that one…"

"Sure we did. It's important."

Kissing in public wasn't something I wanted to do, and it was clearly off the table for us anyway. There was no way siblings were supposed to do something like that. It wasn't even worth considering, but it was important to verbalize, even if it was about something trivial.

Still overwhelmed, I followed Ayase up the road and on to a side street, where we found a building with a big blue sign. There were lots of people going in and out of the entrance; it seemed just as busy as the main area of Sunshine 60 Street.

"Oh? This is…," I began.

"It's a specialty anime store. I hear it's pretty famous, so it should have a good selection."

I knew all this. There was another one in Shibuya, and Maru had once taken me there.

I'd been following Ayase up until now, and only at this point did I finally remember why we'd come all this way.

"Um, Ayase?"

She turned to me with a look that said, "Hmm?"

"We came to buy Narasaka a present, right?"

"Yep."

"Are we getting it here?" I asked. This felt like the last place you'd go to buy a present for a high school girl.

"She likes this stuff," Ayase said, pointing to an anime character on a poster in the window.

I was stunned.

As an avid light novel reader, I wasn't particularly biased against otaku. I probably looked like any other nerd when I was

buying books—I simply wasn't the type to buy a lot of merchandise. Of course, we weren't talking about me right now.

I was just surprised that a popular extrovert like Narasaka was into anime. We'd talked a few times now, and she'd never hinted that she was interested in such things.

"I told you she has younger brothers, right?" said Ayase.

"Yeah, now that you mention it."

"She said they watch anime together on streaming services and that she knows all about them. And she likes to put them on when she's doing household chores."

"Oh, so it was her brothers' influence."

"That's how it started anyway. Now she seems pretty hooked."

That explained why Ayase thought her friend might like anime goods for her birthday.

We pushed through the crowd and entered the store.

"This place is pretty big," she said. "Where should we start?"

"Why don't we just go around and see what we can find?" I suggested. "I have no idea what they have or where it's displayed, and I don't know what Narasaka likes, either."

"No problem. You can leave that to me."

We waded through the packed store as we searched, and along the way, I learned a lot about the kinds of merchandise on offer these days. It was the sort of thing I hadn't been able to notice just following Maru around.

In what appeared to be the women's section, not only did they have the typical items I associated with anime merch, but they also sold key rings and notebooks featuring the insignias of various characters' dorms. The designs were tastefully added into the items' detailing, and at a glance, they just looked like nice accessories you might buy at a regular boutique.

"I wouldn't even know some of these were anime merch...," I muttered.

"Yeah. They're pretty cool."

"You think so, too, Ayase?"

"Although these over here...," she said, pointing to the next shelf over, "...might be a little harder to use on a daily basis."

That section was filled with stuffed toys and key rings in the likenesses of popular characters—the typical sort of merchandise I'd been seeing since I was a kid.

"Very true."

It seemed the manufacturers had increased their offerings. I recalled Maru saying something about how the ever-expanding otaku market had made nerdy hobbies commonplace, which had then resulted in greater product diversification.

Even so, I was a little surprised. I'd always thought being fashionable and having nerdy interests were mutually exclusive.

At that point I glanced around and gasped. The other customers were all dressed nicely, at least as far as I could tell. What's more, the male-female ratio was fifty-fifty—or no, there seemed to be more women than men.

I recalled Ayase once saying she envied the shape of my eyebrows, even though I didn't trim them or anything. And now that I looked around, most of the other customers—male and female—had nicely shaped eyebrows. Unless there had been some kind of evolution in human DNA, they must all have been trimming them.

So that was why Ayase had assumed I did the same. Maru had once told me that more otaku were particular about their appearance these days, but I was surprised that it was this widespread.

"Maaya's so extroverted and self-confident, she could probably pull off either kind of item," said Ayase.

"That's true…"

Narasaka was something else. I got the feeling that she could go around with whatever she wanted hanging off her bag, and people would just say, "That's Narasaka for you."

But back to the subject at hand—I was here to choose a gift. And if I was going to give her something, I wanted it to make her smile.

With Ayase's help, I ended up picking a mug with an illustration from an anime she was into lately (it was a show for kids, and I'd never heard the title before). The little emblem on the item's tag was the only thing that gave away its association with the anime.

I figured she could use another mug since she had a large family, and if her brothers also watched, then they could use it if she didn't want to.

"Phew. Thanks, Ayase. You've been a big help."

"Yeah? Good."

I took the paper bag containing the gift-wrapped mug, and we left the store.

It was already past five PM. The sun had set, and the sky had gotten dark.

"Ayase, it just occurred to me that you didn't buy anything. Is that okay?"

"I changed my mind. I'll go out to the Shibuya Station area tomorrow and get her something then."

She didn't tell me what she planned to buy.

We took the train home, letting it gently sway us as it traveled down the tracks.

When I thought back to our shopping trip, I realized it hadn't felt much like a date.

It was fun browsing around the store and chatting with Ayase, but we hadn't held hands or anything. Rather than a date spot, it was more the type of place I'd go with Maru. There had been plenty of arcades and boutiques around, but we hadn't gone into any because Ayase didn't seem interested.

But weren't those the kind of places you went on a date?

And we'd headed home right after buying Narasaka's present, too. This was supposed to be "an outing for just the two of us," and I felt somehow unfulfilled. In hindsight, maybe we should have gone to a fast-food place for a break before we left. Then again, it wasn't a good time to eat, since we were going to have dinner as soon as we got home.

Ayase kept smiling the whole time, but she seemed somehow awkward, and I had no idea why. It was just a vague feeling of discomfort I had that I couldn't put into words. We could try to work things out if I could identify the source, but I was at a loss. *What could it be? It's driving me crazy…*

The train kept rocking back and forth, just like my feelings. I stood, counting the lights to the side of the tracks until I could no longer hold it in. Finally, I decided to be brave and just ask her.

I started with some casual conversation, then dove right in.

"Do I look funny today?" I asked.

"Huh? Not at all. Why?"

I was relieved to see her look surprised. *I guess that wasn't it.* But then I started to second-guess myself.

“Well, compared to you, I don’t give a lot of thought to stuff like fashion and hair.”

And now I’d admitted that I didn’t have much confidence.

“I think you look fine,” she said. “The style is very you.”

I’d figured she would say that.

“Thanks. But…the way you’re dressed, it looks like you’re making an effort to be stylish.”

“Well…”

“And after a lot of thought, you pick the best outfit you can come up with. Or that’s how it seems to me.”

“Well…”

“And I think it looks great on you, too.”

Ayase’s expression faltered. She seemed startled.

“…Thanks.”

I wasn’t expecting her to thank me, and her awkward smile was getting stiffer by the second. But at the moment, my mind was already racing, and I didn’t have the capacity to follow her expression very closely.

“But you know,” I continued, “I’m not sure what suits me to begin with. I’m totally clueless about fashion, and I have no confidence at all. So I’m not sure what you mean when you say it’s fine or it’s ‘very me.’”

“Um… So are you saying you want to try wearing clothes other people would find stylish? I didn’t think you were interested in stuff like that.”

“It’s probably a good skill to have, whether it specifically interests me or not. Like for formal occasions and so on.”

“Oh… I see. Okay, that sounds more like you.”

I’m pretty sure I just sound like I lack confidence.

“So are you saying you want to know how to dress up for a date, but you’re not sure about your own judgment?”

As expected, Ayase understood immediately.

“Yeah.”

“Hmm.” She looked down and began mulling this over.

Our train had passed another station by the time she raised her head again.

“Let’s make one more stop before we go home,” she said.

“What? Now?”

“If you don’t mind relying on my sense of style, I’ll choose something for you.”

I hadn’t considered this option.

I figured I could trust Ayase to make a good choice, and this way, maybe I could casually find out some of her preferences. This sounded even better than I could have hoped for.

I thanked her.

“Don’t expect much,” she said. “I’ll just be choosing something I like.”

Even better.

“So where to?” I asked.

“Daikanyama is good, and it’s close to home.”

“All right… Sorry I didn’t say something earlier. There were a bunch of stores in Ikebukuro we could’ve gone to,” I said apologetically.

Ayase giggled and smiled. “It’s okay; don’t worry about it. It’s just like us to have our timing a little off.”

“Ha-ha-ha. That makes me feel better.”

We changed trains at Shibuya Station and headed out to Daikanyama. I let Ayase lead the way.

All the stores were still lit up, and the light leaking out the large shopwindows reflected off the asphalt road. We walked into a men’s clothing store near the train station.

From the moment I stepped inside, I could tell that it was different from a supermarket or a convenience store. There were no shopping baskets or carts in sight. I was looking around, lost, when a female clerk silently approached me.

“Can I help you?”

“Uh, no.”

Ayase casually appeared from behind me and said, “We’re going to look around for a bit first.”

The clerk smiled, then looked at each of us and bowed. “All right. Don’t hesitate to call out to me when you’ve found something.” Then she left us again, moving just as quietly.

“I panicked…,” I said.

“She probably thought you were alone.” Ayase sounded a little angry for some reason.

Did she mean that the clerk saw how we were dressed and assumed we weren’t together?

I started to sweat. I felt like I was on another planet. Despite knowing it was all in my head, I couldn’t help it.

Ayase, on the other hand, was supercool. She took the lead, walking through the store like she owned the place.

“Do you come here often?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh no.”

“No…?”

“They only sell men’s stuff here.”

Oh. Right.

“Of course, some women like to wear men’s clothes. Do you think that kind of stuff would suit me, Asamura?”

I thought about it.

I’d spent some time reading the fashion magazine I bought before bed the previous night. It didn’t prove to be as good a reference as I’d hoped, so I’d used the internet to search for the words *men’s* and *style*, and pictures of female models had come up. Curious, I looked at one of the sites, and it explained that the model was wearing a genre of women’s fashion that mimicked traditionally masculine styles.

This wasn’t women dressing up as men, but fashion for women using men’s clothing. A lot of the outfits were casual, but some models were posing in suits and jackets.

I figured that was what Ayase would look like if she wore those kinds of clothes.

I pictured her, with her medium-length, bleached hair, in a jacket emphasizing her shoulders. *Yeah, like that one over there*, I thought, staring at a mannequin wearing a black jacket and a wide men’s belt. I tried to complete the image in my mind.

It was kind of like dressing up an avatar in a game. I was no fashion expert, but with the clothes expertly prearranged on the mannequin—I assumed by one of the salespeople—and Ayase standing right there in front of me, it was easy to imagine.

I finished dressing up Ayase in my mind. She put on the black jacket, straightened up, and struck a pose like a model.

“I think you’d look cool,” I said.

Ayase made a sound like a cat being stepped on. I glanced up, but she immediately turned away.

“I-I’m not trying it on.”

“Huh? Oh, right, I guess not. It doesn’t seem like your kind of style. But I do think it would suit you. Like that jacket,” I said, pointing to the mannequin from before. “I think you’d look good in that. Oh? What’s the matter?”

She stuck out both hands and waved them back and forth. *No, huh?*

“Forget about that,” she said. “We’re here to choose an outfit for you, not me!”

“Oh, right. Well, what do you recommend?”

“I swear… Okay, let me see.”

She reached for an item on the rack and held it in front of her, looking back and forth between me and the shirt. Then she told me to turn around and held it against me, presumably checking the shoulder width and length.

“Hmm. Come over here, Asamura.”

“Mm, okay… Are we done with these already?”

“I’ve already looked them over.”

“O-okay.”

Hey, that was just one shirt.

Ayase walked me around the store, stopping several times to examine one or two items and check them against my body.

She’d have me hold a jacket in front of my chest, then bring over a shirt to see how they looked together, only to switch it out a moment later. She was busily putting together an outfit.

Her fist touched my chest as she moved, and it tickled.

“Hey, hold still,” she said.

“Oh, sorry.”

“Hmm. Nope, not this one either. Stay put.”

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

I became a mannequin at Ayase’s command. She was so focused she didn’t seem to notice, but I thought I saw the other customers smiling as they passed us by.

This feels more like a date.

From the overall mood to the destination, our shopping trip to Ikebukuro hadn’t been much like what I’d envisioned. But right now, as Ayase picked out clothes, standing close enough that I could touch her—*this* definitely felt like a date.

…Wait, was I sure about that?

I thought of Shinjou and his sister. Shinjou had said his family went shopping together and that his younger sister checked the clothes he picked out and helped him decide what to buy.

That was precisely what Ayase and I were doing.

This was something real siblings did, too; we were just taking it a little further. There was nothing wrong with that—it was exactly what we’d agreed to do. And yet I felt a gnawing sense of discomfort, like a tiny bone stuck in my throat.

Was this enough? Was an especially close sibling relationship all I wanted? Or was I looking for something more?

What did I want to do with Ayase and to what extent?

I'm really fixated on her, aren't I?

I was working my way into an endless mental maze, when I realized all my body heat was gathering in my face. It was almost winter, and yet I was burning up. Were they blasting the heater in this shop?

"Okay. I've made up my mind," Ayase said as she took two items from a rack. "This is what I'd choose if I were you."

"Uh… What is it?"

"The jacket you're wearing is nice, but I think this tailored one would suit you, too."

"T-tailored…? What's that?"

"You don't know? It's a type of jacket."

"Ah. Tailor, as in the person who makes it."

"So you know the word."

"I saw it in a book."

I knew the word *tailor* from a novel I'd read about a girl working for one in Victorian England.

The tailored jacket Ayase was holding was light gray and had a rather narrow lapel. Compared to a typical suit jacket, the shoulders seemed less pronounced, and the bright color made it feel light and fresh.

"I picked something in a solid color so you won't have as hard a time matching it with other pieces."

"Does that make it easier?"

"If you have something with a pattern, you have to worry about how it goes with everything else, right? …Well, I guess that's a bit complicated for now."

"Sorry."

"This is what you'd wear under it. It'll be cold in the middle of winter, but I think you could probably make it work through November."

In her other hand, she held a white T-shirt. It was also plain, with no patterns or graphics. The breast pocket was subtle and inconspicuous, and the shoulders were sloped, probably to go with the jacket.

It was simple, but I could see on the tag that it was twice as expensive as the shirts I normally wore. I assumed it came down to the quality of the materials or the design.

That said, I couldn't really tell the difference…

"I think the pants you're wearing will go fine with this. If we bought anything else, it would get pretty expensive."

"Thanks."

"Mm. Try it on. And if you like it…"

"Okay."

I took the jacket from Ayase and asked her to watch our stuff. Then I went into the fitting room, tried it on, and took a good look in the mirror.

I didn't have the vocabulary to describe what I was seeing, but I thought it suited me. It was a casual, stylish jacket for autumn. The shoulders weren't too sharp, creating a gentle, easygoing impression. It was decently warm, maybe because of the quality of the fabric. It would probably be okay for this time of year.

But in my opinion, it didn't seem much different from what I was currently wearing.

Was this okay? I couldn't say for sure.

People are generally hard-pressed to notice small differences in areas where they lack expertise. It's like the resolution on the picture drops for them.

Young adults might use their smartphones for all sorts of things—playing games, listening to music, texting, studying. But their parents can't tell the difference, so they scold them about playing with their phone too much no matter what it is they're actually doing.

Maybe I do look better in this jacket, but I just can't tell the difference.

"Well? What do you think?" I asked, stepping out of the fitting room and showing Ayase the outfit.

"Mm. Nice."

"Um… Is this enough? Do you think I should dye my hair or something?" I asked, feeling insecure.

I felt like just switching out my shirt and jacket wouldn't be enough to change Shinjou's sister's assessment of me. Perhaps I needed something a little more drastic?

Ayase sighed like a nursery school teacher chiding a young child—kind, with just a hint of exasperation.

"Asamura. Whose approval do you need to satisfy you, exactly?"

"Huh?"

“If you want total strangers to think you’re stylish, then I can understand if you’re unsure about relying on my judgment alone. But is that really what you’re after?”

“No, that’s not—”

“I didn’t think so,” she said before I could finish. Then she smiled. “So why don’t you just trust me? I picked out that jacket, and I’m saying it suits you.”

“Oh yeah… You’re absolutely right. Sorry, I don’t know what came over me.”

“No problem. I know you’re worried about how other people see you. I can understand that.”

I was relieved to see the gentle look on her face. It was clear she meant what she was saying.

I suddenly realized how self-centered I was being. I wanted to look good enough to stand next to Ayase, who put in so much work. But I wasn’t doing it out of concern for her.

Instead, I was just trying to protect myself from feeling inferior. I kept judging myself based on what other people thought. I’d been clinging to Shinjou’s sister’s opinion—a girl I’d never met and whose personality I didn’t know a thing about. That was just proof that deep down, the ones I wanted to impress were people I barely knew.

Remember what Yomiuri said, I told myself.

Even if a guy wasn’t that stylish, she would be happy if he dressed up for their date, because it would mean he cared about looking good for her.

The person whose opinion mattered was the one you were dating, not some stranger.

Maru and Shinjou had said the same thing. It wasn’t important if you were actually stylish. What was important was that you were trying.

I wanted to hit myself over the head. Those around me had already given me the answer, and yet I’d gone astray.

Who cares what someone else thinks? If Ayase likes the way I dress, then that’s the style for me.

I purchased the clothes and left the store.

As we were walking toward the train station, Ayase stopped me. “Asamura. Can we drop by a convenience store?”

“Sure.”

“Things are cheaper at a supermarket, and I have a lot of things I want to buy, but we’d have to take an awfully long detour, so I’ll go another time. Still, we’re out of mustard, so I have to get that, at least.”

“Mustard?” I asked.

“I was thinking of making *oden* today.”

“Ah… Piping hot *oden*, huh? It *has* been cold these last few days.”

“I’ve been thinking about hot pot since yesterday. It’ll be mostly vegetables, but we have the ingredients at home.”

“It’s probably healthier that way. But let me know if you need anything else, and I’ll go and pick it up.”

“Thanks. Hey… Did I say something funny?”

I’d chuckled as I looked at her. She must have been confused.

“No, no. Sorry,” I said quickly. “For me, fashion and styling feel like something out of another dimension. I felt like I was on another planet back at that store.”

“You must be exaggerating.”

“I mean it. So when you suddenly started talking about dinner, I felt like I’d finally landed back on Earth.”

“So you were still floating in space?”

“I guess so. But I think I’ve had enough space travel for today. I can’t wait to go home and eat hot *oden*. I’m pretty tired, to tell you the truth.”

“You did well today. I hope you get a lot of opportunities to wear that jacket.”

“Yeah. You went to all the trouble of choosing it, after all. I’d like to wear it as much as I can.”

When I said that, I realized something. Wasn’t that the same as saying I’d like to go on a bunch of dates with her?

I panicked, but Ayase just said, “Yeah,” that awkward smile still on her face. *I guess I was overthinking it.*

And that’s how my first date with Ayase came to an end.

It was 7:03 PM when we finished at the convenience store and headed back home.

We walked through the brightly lit apartment entrance and were about to board the elevator when Ayase turned to me.

“By the way, how did I do?” she mumbled.

At first, I didn’t even realize she was asking me a question.

“What are you talking about?”

“Was I easier to talk to? Was I nicer? Did you notice anything different about me?”

I stopped and turned to face the girl standing beside me. The pale LED light shone down from the hall ceiling, illuminating her entire body.

I looked over her from head to toe.

She was still wearing the same clothes I’d seen her in when we left—a knit top and a moss-green jacket. The front was buttoned all the way up, probably because it had gotten chillier while we were out. That must have meant her necklace was irrelevant.

Her hair was the same as usual—the part hadn’t changed, it wasn’t done up, and she wasn’t wearing any extensions. So it had nothing to do with that, either.

What was different about her today? Which part of her had changed?

Her nails? Her perfume? I thought I’d been paying attention to both. Her pale pink nail polish looked great, but it probably didn’t have much to do with being easier to talk to.

As for her perfume… *Wait a minute, Asamura. You can’t just go up to her and take a whiff. You don’t want to turn into one of* those *people.* Anyway, while it was possible she might’ve chosen a calming fragrance, it didn’t seem like something Ayase would do. In fact, she wasn’t the type to expect me to figure that stuff out on my own, either. *But then what could it be?*

Something different.

…Oh.

I realized there was something that had been bothering me the whole time we were out.

“Your facial expressions?”

“Yeah.”

“You were trying not to laugh.”

“I was trying to be sociable.”

We’d spoken at the same time. I turned and looked at her, and she did the same.

What?

“I was wondering if my outfit looked weird,” I said honestly. “I thought you might be trying not to laugh.”

In a situation like this, bluffing would only make things worse. Alarm bells were going off in my mind, warning me that this was not good. If we didn’t talk this through, it could lead to

a huge misunderstanding. I hadn't known Ayase long, but that was how I felt based on the time we'd spent together.

"Why would you think something like that?" she asked. "I told you. You look good."

"I'm sorry. I just didn't have the confidence to believe you."

"Is that really what I looked like to you?" Ayase's shoulders slumped, and I felt genuinely sorry. "I was trying to be easier to talk to, more pleasant than I usually am."

"Oh. Sorry."

"It's so hard to act friendly… I guess we were both acting out of character," she said, her usual expression returning.

At that point, the dark elevator arrived. The light popped on, and the door opened.

I let Ayase get on first, then followed, carrying my shopping bag. I pressed the button for our floor and mumbled as the door closed, "But I don't think you need to change. This is more like you."

"Huh?"

Her expressions and demeanor were things she'd honed over the course of her life—the spoils of her victories. There was no need to change them.

With a faint tremor, the elevator began its ascent.

That night, I was reviewing some math problems before bed when I received a text message from Shinjou. It was a follow-up to the message he'd sent me earlier that day.

I talked to my sister at dinner, and she gave you a pretty high rating. She said a lot of my friends try too hard to look cool and end up bombing and that it was good you weren't like that.

Apparently, most of her single-word feedback consisted of things like "drab" or "pitiful," and "normal" was quite favorable.

If only he'd told me that earlier. I smiled wryly as I thanked him, then returned to my schoolwork.

Some lessons are only learned by messing up and taking the long way around.

That's what I think anyway.

● OCTOBER 20 (TUESDAY)—SAKI AYASE

I was going out with Asamura after school.

The thought alone made me so anxious I wasn't sure what to do. I couldn't pay attention to my schoolwork at all.

It was always hard to focus after lunch, but today, I didn't even bother writing down what was on the board. I just sat in a daze, my thoughts spinning.

I'd never dreamed a day would come when I'd have to worry about how to act around boys or what was appropriate to do with someone who was more than my brother but not quite my boyfriend.

Wait, that's not exactly it, either.

I wasn't interested in how to act around boys in general. I didn't care what other boys thought. I just didn't want one boy in particular to dislike me. These thoughts whirled around in my head, distracting me from my studies.

When fifth period was over and we had a little break, Maaya walked over from her seat in the corner of the classroom.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Huh...? Oh, nothing."

"Yeah, sure. You were tuned out all through class."

"Shouldn't you be focusing on the lesson and not on me?"

How did she know I was distracted? She wasn't supposed to be looking at me. But then I remembered that she'd gotten higher marks on our last test than I had.

...Guess I'll change the subject.

"Maaya, you're popular. People like you. Not just girls but boys, too. Is there a trick to that?"

"Oh? Hmmm. I don't know, but people always tell me that I'm friendly and approachable."

"Friendly and approachable," I repeated.

That sounded kind of hard. What did “friendly and approachable” mean, exactly? As I racked my brain for an answer, Maaya leaned in and whispered, “Just keep smiling, and you’ll win Asamura’s heart for sure!”

“Like I keep telling you, not everything is about Asamura.”

“Are you sure? You specifically said ‘boys, too,’ so I figured you wanted a certain boy to like you.”

“Please stop making weird assumptions.”

“Hmmm.”

She obviously didn’t believe me. *Fine, I guess.* At that point, the warning bell rang, and I shooed her away from my desk.

Friendly and approachable… Did I just need to smile?

I wasn’t very good at smiling, but if it would make Asamura happy, then maybe I could give it a try.

But in the end, it proved a lot more difficult than I’d anticipated.

After school, I headed home and got changed. Then I sat down, looked into the round mirror on my desk, and tried out various facial expressions.

I pushed and pulled the skin around my mouth. After a while, my cheeks got tired. The muscles in my face were probably all out of shape. *A smile, huh? What does a smile even look like?*

I usually tried to maintain a poker face so people couldn’t read my emotions. Looking at my face in the mirror now made me very uncomfortable. Why was I doing this? *No, wait, Saki. If you go back to your usual self, you’ll lose. But lose at what, exactly?*

After a particularly lengthy staring contest with the mirror, I was able to produce some semblance of a smile. *That will have to do.*

I psyched myself up and stepped out into the hallway, then knocked on Asamura’s door.

After asking if he was ready, I sat down on the sofa and waited. Then the door opened.

The moment I stood up and our gazes almost met, I looked away. My heart was pounding. I realized that I hadn’t paid much attention to my clothes and started hoping I looked all right.

“Okay, let’s go,” I said, heading for the front door without waiting for his reply.

I had already decided on our destination: Ikebukuro.

Despite what you might think, Maaya loved anime and manga, and she'd told me a lot about them. She even told me whenever new merch she liked became available. Was she expecting me to buy it, too?

Asamura and I went to Shibuya Station to catch a train on the Yamanote Line.

While waiting on the platform, I stole a glance at him.

He was wearing a black button-up jacket over a gray sweater. It was a very Asamura look, and I liked it—clean but not too flashy. It occurred to me that clothes worked better when they matched a person's personality. It was important to wear something that suited you.

Wait a minute. Could it be that I just think anything looks good on Asamura? Well, I guess it doesn't matter.

I could tell I looked flashy next to Asamura's casual stylishness. I wasn't exposing much skin, but I was wearing green and red—Christmas colors. Colors like that were difficult—if you used the wrong hues, you were sure to be laughed at, but I also knew that the right combinations would look great.

I thought I'd looked good in the mirror, but I wondered what Asamura would think.

I'd picked something more subdued than usual, going for cute rather than pretty. But this was as much as I could do, considering I didn't own a lot of cutesy clothes. Sober styles and colors don't really suit someone like me, who wants to have their say but isn't a particularly good negotiator.

On the train, I made an effort to be friendly and approachable while talking to Asamura. The whole time, I kept wondering how I was doing.

Once we arrived in Ikebukuro, I used my phone's map to take us to a certain store I'd checked out in advance. I hadn't spent a lot of time in this area, but the map saved me from getting lost. I silently thanked modern technology.

The crowds here were about the same as in Shibuya. If I had to pick out a difference, I'd say there were more people around our age here, such as other high school and college students. A lot of the stores along Sunshine 60 Street catered to young

people; there were probably more adults around the west exit area, where the bars and pubs were located.

Was it my imagination, or was I seeing a lot more boys and girls together? Couples, in other words. Or maybe I was just noticing them because I was paying more attention to stuff like that now.

"Whoa…"

Asamura was walking next to me when he suddenly spoke up. I followed his gaze and almost reacted the same way.

There was a couple on one side of the road, making out. They were all over each other.

I somehow managed to keep my voice down.

I wasn't doing any kissing, of course, but my body began to grow hot. My mind produced an image, unbidden, of me and Asamura doing the same thing. *What am I thinking?* cried the rational part of my brain, appalled.

As Asamura gazed intently at the couple, I started worrying that he could somehow read my thoughts, and I jabbed him lightly in the ribs.

"It's rude to stare."

"Sorry. I didn't have time to stop myself. It was thoughtless of me."

I'd made him apologize. I'd only been trying to cover up my own embarrassment, so I felt bad.

"I understand how you feel," I said quickly. "It's…surprising to suddenly come across something like that."

I meant it, and I was relieved when Asamura smiled wryly and agreed. I was glad I hadn't made him mad.

After that, we visited an anime shop.

I'd been thinking of getting Maaya something related to an anime she'd told me about before—something with a casual design that she could use every day. As I searched, Asamura and I began to move around the store.

We picked up item after item and asked each other whether it would make a good present. *Do you think it's too childish? It might suit her, though.* Our back-and-forth gave me an idea of how he saw her, and whenever our opinions aligned, I felt oddly pleased.

Thinking back, this was the first time Asamura and I had taken the train and gone out shopping, just the two of us. When we went to the pool during summer break, it had been in a big

group. I never imagined I would be so nervous and excited to be alone with him.

After Asamura finished his shopping, we decided to go home.

I was thinking of buying Maaya a present, too, but that would give away the fact that Asamura and I had gone out together. Then again, she knew we were siblings, so maybe I didn't need to worry about it.

Either way, I could go to the Shibuya Station area before school the following day and pick up something for her then.

We were on the train home, and I was feeling relieved everything had gone well, when Asamura said something unexpected.

He asked me if his outfit looked weird.

I hadn't anticipated a question like that and was very surprised. To begin with, I didn't see anything wrong with what he was wearing. I thought he was fine just the way he was.

After mulling it over, I came up with an idea. I offered to pick something out for him as long as he didn't mind that it would be based on my personal sense of style. That meant we'd stop at one more place before heading home—a men's clothing store.

This was what I was thinking: First, I'd pick out a stylish outfit I thought fit Asamura's personality. Then I'd have him compare it with what he was wearing now and come up with a new outfit himself. In other words, we'd "talk it out," as usual.

I didn't know if the end product would be good clothes for a date, but I didn't really care about that kind of thing, so I figured it was fine. What I *didn't* want was for Asamura to start dressing like someone else.

…Was I being selfish?

We went to a men's clothing store near Daikanyama Station. I boldly led the way, giving Asamura the mistaken impression that I often went there.

Of course, I didn't. It just looked like I knew my way around because all these brand shops were similar. Maybe I would have frequented the place if I liked more masculine fashion, but I didn't.

When I told Asamura that, he pointed to a mannequin and said he thought the clothes on it would suit me. I was starting to worry about how I looked in his mind.

A black leather jacket and a wide belt, huh? I don't like being underestimated, but I'm not trying to intimidate people.

He told me he thought I'd look cool in it. What a thing to say. We're choosing *his* clothes right now, not mine. *Really… What's with him?*

My face felt hot. How high was the heat in this place?

I browsed the various items, occasionally holding them up to Asamura. It was fun, like playing dress-up. I wondered if this was what it would be like to go shopping together as a married couple.

…Wait. I should have said "siblings" there. A married couple is way too far of a leap.

I enjoyed spending time with Asamura, but I was starting to get carried away, and I didn't like that. I needed to focus.

We made a circle around the store, and I picked out a jacket and a shirt for him. They were both items that caught my eye right away, and they'd both proven to be keepers.

After one more stop, we headed home.

As we walked through the dark, I was relieved to see the light of our apartment's entrance shining toward us. This surprised me—at some point, this apartment had begun to feel like home. Once we stepped through the door, our date would be over, and I would be just his stepsister again.

It was then that I wondered, *What about me?*

I hadn't noticed that Asamura was worried about fashion, but had he noticed that I was acting friendly and approachable?

I asked him, "By the way, how did I do?"

It took several seconds for him to respond, and it felt a lot longer than normal. But when he mumbled, "Your facial expressions?" I felt really happy. *All right!*

Then he said, "You were trying not to laugh."

Huh?

"I thought you might be trying not to laugh."

I almost crumpled to my knees. What on Earth was he talking about?

"Is that really what I looked like to you?"

I'd tried so hard to smile, hoping it would make him happy, and yet none of it had gotten across to him.

I was so embarrassed.

The more I thought about it, the hotter my face felt. I wanted to dig a hole and bury myself in the ground. Or maybe I could just lie down, and someone would cover me up. Scratch that, I

wanted to self-destruct and disappear from the world without a trace. Where was the self-destruct button? I put on my usual stern face again so he wouldn't see me blushing. *It's nothing. Nothing at all. I am not upset. Not affected in any way.*

I guess I really don't understand myself. I'd been trying to force my face into an expression I just wasn't capable of. I'm not the sort of person who can smile and be friendly to others.

I erased all emotion from my face. I'd been trying to act like someone else.

Forget it. Saki Ayase will just be a boring, unapproachable girl for the rest of her life. It's hopeless.

But then, just as the elevator door closed, Asamura said he didn't think I needed to change—that this was more like me.

I pretended like I hadn't heard.

I wasn't sure why, but I felt something warm spread through my chest at his comment.

That was why Asamura was such a problem for me. He had me swaying one way and then the other, to the point where I lost sight of where these feelings were headed.

Did I want us to be extra-close siblings, or did I want him to be my boyfriend?

Which relationship was I hoping for?

Which relationship was *he* hoping for?

I thought we'd already decided what our relationship should be like, and yet the devil on my shoulder was whispering in my ear, asking me, "Is this really all you desire?"

When Asamura said those nice things to me, I'd been struck by a sudden desire. I wanted to touch his cheek and take those kind lips to task—not with words but with my own lips.

Just like that time when I'd held him close behind a closed door where no one could see us.

If I did something like that out of the blue, though, I'd shock him. But when would be a good time? I wasn't sure, and so I was stuck, unable to act.

I decided to use my favorite bath salts that night.

I was hoping that surrounding myself with a nice smell would help calm my mind, if only a little.

● OCTOBER 21 (WEDNESDAY)—YUUTA ASAMURA

The chilly morning air crept under my blanket, and I rubbed the soles of my feet together as I woke up. As winter approached and it got colder, it would only get more difficult to drag myself out of bed.

I wanted to stay under my blanket where it was still warm, but I kicked it off and forced myself to get up.

Just as I did, my alarm went off. I slammed my hand down on it, and the ringing stopped.

"I won."

There was no point in competing with my alarm clock, but little victories like this one could make or break a person's day… Okay, maybe that was an exaggeration.

Today was Narasaka's birthday party.

I began to feel the pressure as I got ready for school. I was anxious about whether I would get along with the other attendees.

Once I was done, I headed into the dining room.

Ayase had already finished breakfast and was about to leave. She'd washed her dishes and put them on the drying rack.

"Hey. You're up early today," I said.

"I'm stopping by the train station," Ayase replied as she grabbed her bag.

Oh, right. She's buying a birthday gift for Narasaka.

"I'm off, Dad. Bye."

"Bye, Saki. Have a good day."

"Bye, Big Brother."

"See you, Ayase." I nodded.

"Mm." She returned the gesture, then headed out the door.

"Dad," I said, turning to him. "Are you still okay timewise?"

"Yeah, I can take it slow today."

I wondered if things were winding down at his workplace.

I opened the rice cooker and found it filled with steaming white rice dotted with tiny yellow bits. A faintly sweet aroma wafted up to my nose.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Rice with chestnuts. It’s cooked to perfection. Saki’s great with rice.”

If Ayase were here, I had a feeling she’d humbly insist that all she did was mix the ingredients and turn on the cooker, but…

“It looks great.”

I filled my bowl and took it to the table. We also had pickled radish, pickled turnip, and salted plums. And of course, the ever-present miso soup. Today, it contained big pieces of green onion.

Across from me, Dad’s bowls were already empty.

“Do you want seconds?” I asked.

“Oh, no thanks—I’m fine. I’d better be on my way now.”

“Okay.”

The chestnuts in the rice were cut into small pieces about as big as the tip of my thumb. I picked one up with my chopsticks and tossed it into my mouth.

“Hot!”

As I crushed it with my teeth, it crumbled and released a burst of sweet flavor. It tasted like autumn.

“You’re right,” I said. “It’s delicious.”

“Isn’t it?”

“I better be careful not to eat too much.”

Oh, so that’s why we have fewer side dishes today.

Dad left for work, and I finished my breakfast and washed the dishes, then put them on the drying rack. I ended up devouring two extra bowls of chestnut rice. I’d taken a little more time eating than I’d anticipated.

I left home considerably later than Ayase, but I figured I’d still be on time since I was riding my bike. The handlebars were cold when I grabbed them, and I reflexively yanked my hands back.

It wasn’t yet cold enough for my breath to turn white, but the wind chilled my cheeks as I pedaled.

Soon winter would arrive in earnest, and it would get much colder.

I dashed into my classroom three minutes before the warning bell.

The last bell rang, and we were dismissed for the day.

Maru got up and headed off to baseball practice. “See you later, Asamura.”

It was finally time for me to go to Narasaka’s birthday party.

Around noon, Ayase sent me a text message saying, Don’t wait up. I’ll go separately.

So…Ayase is going home to change.

The old me would have been nervous and tense, but I was a new man. There was no need to be self-conscious. I had confidence now.

As I was changing my shoes at the school entrance, I saw a boy in a tracksuit run out of the building. He didn’t have his schoolbag with him, so I doubted he was going home. He must be doing laps for his club.

The student looked familiar as he ran by—was that Shinjou?

Wasn’t he going to Narasaka’s birthday party? I had assumed he’d be there. Maybe he’d head out after practice. I didn’t know he was that serious about tennis.

I took my bike home. Ayase wasn’t there when I arrived. Had she already changed and left, or did I beat her home? I supposed it didn’t matter since we were supposed to meet at Narasaka’s apartment.

I no longer had to worry about what to wear; I would simply trust Ayase’s judgment.

I put on the jacket I’d bought the day before, then opened the chat app on my phone. I asked Narasaka for her address, and she sent me a message with a map.

“Over there, huh?”

I had seen Ayase near my prep school while she was getting snacks and drinks for a study session at Narasaka’s place, so I had a good idea of where it was. There was bicycle parking in the area, so I could head straight there on my bike.

When I arrived in Narasaka’s neighborhood, I opened up the map and zoomed in. Looking left and right, I spotted a large green sign with the name of a company I’d seen on the map. Now I knew I was in the right place.

From there, I walked while pushing my bicycle along beside me. The sidewalks were narrow, and my bicycle bobbed and

bounced.

A few minutes later, I safely arrived at my destination. I left my bike in the parking area Narasaka had indicated and went to the first-floor entrance.

Before hitting the call button on the intercom, I sent her a text. It'd be fine as long as she was in, but I wasn't sure what to do if another member of her family answered.

Luckily, that didn't happen. Before I heard back, I saw Ayase and Narasaka crossing the street.

The automatic door at the entrance opened, and the two girls walked toward me.

Ayase was wearing a denim skirt and a soft mustard-colored cardigan. The one-shoulder knit sweater was signature Ayase, but looking at it, I wondered if she was cold.

When Ayase saw me, she nodded, while Narasaka waved and ran over to me. As usual, her gestures reminded me of a small animal.

"Did you have to wait long?" she asked.

"Oh no. I just got here," I said, shaking my head and glancing around. Strangely, there was no one else from school in sight.

"Okay, let's party!" Narasaka exclaimed. "The elevator's right this way!"

Huh? What's going on here?

"What about the others?" I asked.

"What?" she said, tilting her head as if to say, "I have no idea what you're talking about." *That doesn't help. I'm the one who's confused.*

"Did you invite anyone else?" I asked.

"Nope. You two are the only ones I reached out to."

"Us two… You mean Ayase and me? Why?"

"Hmm, because I felt like it?"

That's not much of an answer. So this was just a whim?

"Come on—let's go. We'll be in the way if we talk here, and it's cold."

"Uh, okay."

I looked at Ayase for answers, and she quickly looked away.

Hmm? Was it possible…that she knew?

Narasaka mumbled something, but I was too distracted by the look on Ayase's face to hear it.

We got off the elevator and walked to Narasaka's door, where a wooden WELCOME sign was hanging. She pulled a key out of her bag and let us in.

"Welcome. Go on! Make yourself at home."

"Can I wear these slippers, Maaya?" Ayase asked.

"Of course. Asamura, you can use these."

I put on the pair she'd offered. They were decorated with a bear pattern.

A narrow hallway led to the living room, dining room, and kitchen. I could tell right away that it was a large apartment. The layout was pretty typical and much like my own. I figured it was also a three bedroom.

"Over here! This is where we're having our party!" Narasaka said as she opened one of the doors on the left.

"Not in the living room?" Ayase asked.

"Well, it's only the three of us."

Wait, does that mean we'll be in her room?

I wasn't sure what to do. The few memories I had of a girl's room flashed through my mind, and I broke into a cold sweat.

Ever since a particular incident right after Ayase and I became siblings, I'd been making an effort not to think about her room and to look away if I saw the door open. Best not to tempt fate.

But Narasaka led us straight toward her room without a care in the world.

As she was about to step inside, Ayase tugged on her shirt, stopped her, and slammed the door shut.

"Maaya. Are you sure this is okay?"

"Huh? Is *what* okay?"

"Like…I'd understand if it was just me, but Asamura's here. Are you sure it's okay to let him into your room?"

"Well…" Narasaka looked up and put a finger to her chin, thinking. "I've hidden all the dirty books and made sure to toss all my clean underwear and my school uniform in the closet. I took all the proper precautions."

I let my mind go blank as she spoke. Nothing. I heard absolutely nothing.

…Are those precautions really "proper"? I wondered idly.

"C-come on!" Ayase exclaimed. "Don't say those things out loud!"

“Don’t worry about it. I wouldn’t say any of that in front of my kid brothers.”

“Of course you wouldn’t!”

“So what’s the problem?”

“…Is that really your only concern?”

“You’re such a worrywart. Come on—it’s fine. Don’t be scared!”

“That response is what scares me the most.”

Sighing, Ayase took her hand off the door, and Narasaka opened it again and went inside.

“Sorry for intruding,” Ayase said as we both followed.

The room was about ten square meters. There was a bed by the window on the far wall and a desk to the left. That much I could see, even without really looking.

To be on the safe side, I made a conscious effort not to stare too much. *Kuwabara, kuwabara*, I thought, invoking the old chant to ward off lightning strikes. The source of the lightning in this case was Ayase, though I wasn’t sure if the chant would work on a woman’s wrath.

“Wow,” said Ayase, impressed. “You keep your room nice and tidy.”

“I have to set an example for my brothers. If I don’t keep things clean, then they’ll slack off even more.”

How admirable. She’s really thinking like a big sister.

“Here, sit down.” She gestured to three cushions encircling a low, round table.

She offered the two seats farthest from the door, then plopped down on the remaining cushion. Once we were seated, I realized something: Narasaka had taken the position closest to the door.

Immediately, she said, “I’ll get us something to drink,” and stood up, confirming my suspicions. She was acting as host and had taken the most convenient seat to take care of us—her guests. If this kept up, we’d wind up being served by the birthday girl.

“This is supposed to be Maaya’s birthday party, right?” said Ayase, once we were alone.

“I know, but we can’t exactly go poking around her house…”

“No, I guess not…”

As we wondered what to do, Narasaka returned with a jumbo-sized plastic bottle of tea and several cups. “Okay, let’s

begin!”

“Maaya, stop taking care of us and sit down,” Ayase said, grabbing her friend by the shoulders and forcing her to sit.

“But a hostess must see to her guests.”

“It’s your day today. This is your birthday party!”

Narasaka puffed out her cheeks unhappily, but Ayase was right. It was our responsibility to entertain *her* today. That said, I didn’t think it was my place to insist. It was best to leave this to Ayase.

“I guess that’s true,” said Narasaka, “but then again…”

“It’s true! Anyway, here!” Ayase handed her a paper bag.

“Hmm? What’s this…? It’s not my present?”

“We haven’t had dinner yet, so it’s small.”

Inside the bag was a white box containing three small cakes. Ayase said she’d bought them at a pastry shop by the train station. She hadn’t planned to buy a cake, but at the last minute, she’d decided it would be sad not to have any and changed her mind. *So that’s why she wanted to go separately.* I decided to pay for my share later.

There was a shortcake, a Mont Blanc, and a cheesecake—a set of classic crowd-pleasers.

“Ooh! These look yummy!” said Narasaka.

“Yep. No candles, though,” Ayase replied.

“I’ll get plates and forks.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s fine.”

“Grr.” Narasaka sat back down, and the birthday party began.

I still can’t believe it’s just the three of us…

Before we started eating the cakes, Ayase and I handed Narasaka her birthday gifts.

I gave her a mug for an anime she liked. It didn’t have any big pictures of the characters on it, so I figured it wouldn’t be too embarrassing.

Narasaka held it up and grinned. Then she turned to me and politely gave her thanks. I was glad she liked it.

Ayase had chosen a set of teaspoons and cake forks.

They were fancy, with an elegant vine pattern carved into the handles and a crown shape at the end.

“Wow!” cried Narasaka. “These are so cute!”

“They’re not made of silver or anything, obviously,” Ayase replied.

“They’re great! Thanks, Saki. Oh, we can use these to eat our cake!”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that. I only bought two sets.”

“I don’t need one. I’ll use the fork that came with the cakes,” I said, indicating the plastic tableware included in the box.

“I think I’d like to use my gift,” Narasaka said.

“Shouldn’t you wash them first?” asked Ayase.

“Yeah. I’ll go do that now. You’ll let me do that much, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back!”

Narasaka went to wash the spoons and forks, then returned along with an extra set—a spoon and fork she’d gotten for me from her kitchen. It seemed she couldn’t help taking care of others. Maybe looking after her brothers for so many years had made her that way.

We poured tea into the cups and clinked them together in a toast.

While we were eating the cake, Narasaka’s mom came to greet us with sweets. She looked kind and bore a strong resemblance to her daughter. We ate the sweets, too, and I began to worry that I wouldn’t have room for dinner.

Come to think of it, Dad had told me he would be eating with his colleagues tonight. Akiko wouldn’t be home from work until late, either, so we didn’t need to worry about preparing dinner. I hoped that meant Dad’s work was slowing down.

Ayase and Narasaka finished eating and began talking about our trip to the pool during summer break. Feeling a bit less nervous now, I stretched my arms behind my back and relaxed.

But as I did so, my back smacked against something, and I quickly pulled away.

The room was only ten square meters, and Narasaka had a bed, desk, table, and two display cases pushed up against the wall. Of course, there wasn’t enough space to stretch your arms and legs.

I cautiously glanced at the case my back had hit and saw that it was for displaying collectibles. Luckily, it didn’t look like I’d broken anything.

When we were out gift shopping, Ayase had told me that Narasaka was an anime fan. And sure enough, I saw a figure of

a familiar-looking character. The character wasn't human, however—it was a robot.

I immediately realized where I'd seen it before. It was the same limited-edition item that Maru had bought over summer break as a gift for an online friend.

Huh. I guess this thing was pretty popular.

"Hey, Saki, your birthday's coming up soon. It's in December, right?" Narasaka's voice brought me back to the present. I hadn't realized the topic of discussion had shifted to Ayase's birthday.

"What about you, Asamura?" Narasaka asked, turning to me. "When's your birthday? It must be soon since you're the older brother."

"It's in December."

"Oh? The same month as Saki's?"

"It's a week before mine," said Ayase.

"Ah. So you're only the big brother by a week."

Now that she mentioned it, I realized she was right. We'd be the same age again after only a week. Not that it mattered—we weren't little kids, and I didn't want her treating me special just because I was a year older.

"We're basically the same age," I said. "It's not that big a deal."

"It must be nice to have a cute girl like Saki call you 'Big Bro.'"

"Maaya, stop it," Ayase said, looking serious.

"There's no need to be shy."

"I mean it. It feels weird to hear you say that. I don't like it."

"What about just 'bro'?"

"That's basically the same thing."

"In that case, I'll go easy on you. How about just 'Big Brother.'"

That didn't seem all that different to me, but I wasn't in the state of mind to make a witty comeback. My heart was racing.

The casual way Narasaka said, "Big Brother," as if she were Ayase made me imagine Ayase had said it herself.

So far, Ayase only used those words around Dad and Akiko. Narasaka couldn't possibly have heard her say it.

"S-stop it…"

"Aw, come on. You're his sister for real now. Or do you already call him your brother and stuff?"

“Asamura is Asamura.”

“That’s no fun.”

“Fun has nothing to do with it. Okay, we’re done talking about this!” Ayase declared, clapping her hands.

Narasaka looked unhappy, but a moment later, she smiled as if she’d completely forgotten. “Since you’re celebrating my birthday, I’ll have to throw a huge party for you guys in December!”

A huge party? What will that entail?

Narasaka seemed really into holding events, and I began to worry about what she might be imagining. I’d never really cared much about my birthday, after all…

“People born in December usually have their birthdays combined with Christmas,” I said.

I talked about my experiences celebrating with family, and Ayase said the same thing happened with her. It seemed it was a pretty typical phenomenon.

Thinking back, I was always grateful for my birthday, because it was the only time when my parents didn’t fight. I wasn’t about to complain, even if it meant one celebration for two events.

That said…I did feel a little like I’d been missing out.

I explained this, and Ayase nodded emphatically. Things must have been similar in her family.

It was then that I heard a small creak and turned my attention to the door. A little boy about kindergarten age was peeking through the crack.

Narasaka turned around when I did. “Hey! I told you I was busy with my friends. Go find Mom!”

The boy ignored this and continued to stare at us. To be more exact, he was staring at the table. I followed his gaze to the sweets.

Narasaka noticed this, too, and quietly shook her head. “No. It’s almost dinnertime.”

“No fair…”

“Oh, geez!” Narasaka stood up and headed toward the door. “Don’t worry; there’s enough for you all. But you have to eat dinner first.”

“Whaaaat?”

Narasaka wasn’t shouting; her voice was calm. The boy puffed out his cheeks unhappily but obediently turned around

when Narasaka patted him on the back.

“Okay, go on now.”

“I want my snack!”

“Dinner first!”

“Big Sis Maaya is so mean to me!”

“Come on now. Do you give me *your* snacks?”

“Urffgh!”

She tussled playfully with the boy as she dragged him away from her room. More noise followed, and then things seemed to settle down. I wondered how many brothers she had.

“Sorry for the interruption,” Narasaka said upon returning.

“No problem,” replied Ayase.

I nodded in agreement. “Your little brother’s sure energetic.”

“Yeah, those little ones are something else. He’s the youngest.” The way she spoke implied she was considerably older than her siblings. “It’s a tough life, having to look after so many little brothers!”

She claimed it was challenging, but she seemed to be enjoying herself.

I could tell that she loved her brothers. I was glad that both she and the boys she was looking after seemed to be having a good time. I’d heard that siblings close in age tended to compete for their parents’ affection, but older siblings saw themselves as guardians toward younger brothers and sisters.

Maybe she feels more like they’re her children than her siblings.

“I bet you’d make a great mom, Narasaka,” I said.

I got the impression she wouldn’t be the type to leave her family and abandon her children.

The comment just spilled out of me, and Narasaka looked appalled. “Asamura. Those are words you should only say to Saki.”

“Maaya. What are you talking about?” Saki shot back.

Huh? Only to Ayase…?

I realized then that Narasaka took the words *a great mom* to mean a “good candidate for marriage” (for me). In that case, she was right. It *was* inappropriate to say that to her— *Wait a second—that’s not the issue here…*

“Oh? Don’t you want him to think you’d make a great mom, Saki?”

You’re missing the point.

“That isn’t what he meant. Right, Asamura?” Ayase seemed to understand what I was trying to say.

“Don’t you want to be a mom someday? Or a dad even?” asked Narasaka, looking at Ayase.

“I respect my mom, but that’s different. I haven’t even thought about that stuff. And I can’t very well be a dad, can I?”

I supposed that depended on if you were thinking of “mom” and “dad” as biological roles or as social ones.

“Oh, okay,” said Narasaka, seeming to come to a conclusion.

“…What’s okay, exactly?”

“You want to be a bridegroom!”

“How did you get *there*?” asked Ayase, her voice as cold as ice.

Narasaka was still smiling, unfazed. I wondered how much she knew about Ayase and me and to what extent she was just trying to tease us.

Ayase sighed. “Why am I lashing out at Maaya so much on her birthday?”

Isn’t it because Narasaka keeps acting silly?

The birthday girl noticed my gaze and pouted. “It hurts me when you look at me so scornfully, Brother Asamura. See? I won’t hurt you.” She held out a tiny finger toward my face.

I stared at it. What was I supposed to do?

“It’s okay. Go ahead and bite me. I can take it.”

“I’m not going to bite you.”

“Because Saki’s watching, right?”

“I won’t bite you, even if she isn’t watching.”

“Maaya. What the heck are you saying?” asked Ayase.

I was glad she didn’t understand the exchange.

Narasaka continued to act silly, but she never managed to defeat Ayase’s chilly poker face.

It was almost time for Narasaka’s dad to come home, so Ayase and I decided to head out. Apparently, Narasaka was supposed to have a birthday dinner with her family after we left.

I imagined her dad would buy a large cake with candles, and her mom, who we’d seen earlier, would cook up a delicious meal. Narasaka would smile and laugh, surrounded by her younger brothers.

At the door, Ayase suddenly said, “Your family is so nice, Maaya. Everyone gets along so well.”

Narasaka cocked her head to the side. “What are you talking about?”

“Huh?”

“Saki, that’s my line.” She shaped her right hand into a pistol and pointed it at Ayase, then quickly moved it toward me. She lifted her finger silently, as if she’d just shot me. “You guys get along great.”

“What are you saying, Maaya?”

“What’s this now? Don’t want me thinking you get along with your brother?”

“No, that’s not…”

“Oh, I get it. What you really wanted me to say was ‘Oh, what a lovely married couple!’”

“Wh-who are you calling a married couple…?!”

“Your mom and Asamura’s dad.”

“Ngh.”

This might have been the first time I saw Ayase at a loss for words.

“They get along great, right? Didn’t you tell me that?”

“W-well, yeah.”

We’d stepped out into the cold air, but I didn’t think that was the reason Ayase’s cheeks were so red.

Narasaka grinned. “Hmm? I wonder which husband and wife you thought I was talking about?”

“I’m going home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yep. See you! You too, Asamura!”

Narasaka kept her teasing at a certain level. I figured this was the key to maintaining her friendship with Ayase. She was like the wise court jester who knows how to make fun of the king just enough to get laughs without ever putting his life on the line.

“Well then, have a nice birthday dinner,” I said with a quick bow.

After that, I started home with Ayase.

“Geez. She’s always teasing me… But you know what?” Ayase looked at me. “If she thinks we get along great as siblings, then we must be doing things right.”

“Well… I guess so.”

As we walked home, Ayase would recall various exchanges she’d had with her friend and sulk, blush, or act outraged, repeating the words “I swear, that Maaya…”

They must be really close, I thought. Then I recalled a quote from a famous Japanese novelist named Saneatsu Mushanokoji: “How beautiful it is to have good friends.” I hadn’t read much of his work, but I knew the quote.

That aside, it was always comforting to see people get along well, whether they were parents and children, friends, or husband and wife.

I conjured up images of Dad and Akiko in my mind’s eye, then glanced at Ayase’s profile as she walked beside me.

A couple who doesn’t fight in front of their children, huh?

I suddenly saw a picture of the distant future. Of course, as a high school student, I couldn’t begin to imagine what my life would actually be like.

I shivered as a cold wind blew down on me from above.



● OCTOBER 21 (WEDNESDAY)—SAKI AYASE

Later, after returning from Maaya's birthday party, I was up preparing for the next day's classes. Gentle music mixed with ambient noise drifted out from my headphones.

My eyes darted back and forth over my textbook, but I wasn't focusing, and information was slipping out of my mind as soon as it entered. I was getting nowhere. That said, there weren't any problems to solve in advance in my Japanese History textbook. *You're just making excuses, Saki.*

I finally lost all will to concentrate and looked up. The clock's display had just changed to 23:33, or 11:33 PM. *That's three 3s in a row*, I thought idly. Even that was distracting. I was truly in no mood to study…

I decided to take a bath. Giving up on studying for the night, I headed for the bathroom.

First, I drank a glass of water to hydrate myself, then got into the tub for a soak. I stretched my arms and legs and felt the tension in my body slowly dissolve into the hot water.

I sighed deeply.

"I swear, that Maaya…"

I recalled what Maaya had said when Asamura met us at the front of her apartment. *"I can give you two young people time alone if you want."*

I puffed out my cheeks in indignation. I hoped Asamura hadn't heard her.

What were we supposed to celebrate without the birthday girl? *For goodness' sake.*

I wondered just how suspicious she was of us—of Asamura and me. To be fair, we *were* siblings. It was natural for someone to comment that we were close, and teasing us about it wasn't a problem. Maaya was close with her brothers, too.

Our relationship was the same. You could touch your sibling without it being weird. If Asamura were a kindergartner, I could tussle with him just like Maaya did with her brother, right?

What was Asamura like when he was in kindergarten? Probably cute, like Maaya's brother. I'd tug and poke his soft cheeks… Wait, Asamura's cheeks? No, I could never do that.

I shook my head and chased the fantasy away. What was I thinking?

I decided to try focusing on something else. Asamura's birthday was coming up the month after next. So was mine, but *his* birthday would come first. I'd have to think of a birthday present for him.

As I mulled this over, the timer I'd set earlier went off.

Twenty minutes was perfect for a good soak. I needed to get out of the tub before I started to sweat. Any longer and my skin would start drying out.

Once I dried off, I put on moisturizer. Without it, my skin, warmed from my bath, would start losing all its moisture.

I got into my pajamas and took the clothes I'd worn that day to my room (I couldn't just leave them in the basket in the changing area). Once there, I put on a bed jacket and headed into the kitchen, where I poured myself a single cup of cold barley tea.

Just then, I heard the front door open. My mom had just gotten home.

"Oh? You're home early tonight," I said.

Mom worked as a bartender, so she usually came home late at night or early the next morning. I hadn't expected to see her back so soon.

"Yeah…"

"Aren't you feeling well?"

"Oh, I'm fine," she said as she sat on the sofa. "I'm not sick, and I don't have a cold. It's *the usual*. It's a little heavy this time."

"Oh." I nodded, understanding. "It must have been cold outside. Want some hot tea?"

"Sure. Thanks."

I turned on the electric kettle and then sat down across from Mom. "I'm glad you're actually resting."

Before, Mom used to continue working nonstop even if she felt bad, so this was a change for her. And that change had come when she remarried.

“I have Taichi now, so I can afford to take some time off,” she said, glancing toward her bedroom.

“Because you have Dad?”

“Yes. And, Saki, you’re becoming more dependable, too,” she said with a gentle smile.

Her praise embarrassed me and, at the same time, made me ashamed that I’d been a burden in the past.

But now things had changed, and she felt she could take a day off. If a member of our family fell ill, someone else would help them. Knowing she had a family to count on had made her stronger.

The kettle went off, and I made a cup of decaffeinated tea, then placed it in front of Mom.

“You don’t have to just rely on Dad. I’ll help you out however I can.”

“Thanks, Saki.”

I shook my head. *Not at all.*

She’d been through so much, and there was almost nothing I could do for her. Not like Dad, the man she could place her whole trust in…

“Have you eaten?” I asked.

“A little. I’m fine.” Smiling, Mom picked up the remote and turned on the TV.

The lively sounds of a news variety show spilled out; the screen showed celebrities happily browsing stores with dazzling orange-colored decorations and lights. It appeared to be a program related to Halloween.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “Halloween is coming up.”

“I guess so,” I said absently.

The show must have reminded her.

“At first, Taichi and I were talking about going out to dinner somewhere, since it’s a holiday.”

It’s not really a Japanese holiday, though.

But, as she went on to explain, she would likely be out all night since bars in Shibuya would be extremely busy.

“Is Halloween that big a deal?” I asked.

I’d thought it was just for people who liked to dress up in costumes.

“Taichi wants us to celebrate as a family, but I told him we should just wait until Christmas, since it’s almost December. I’m planning to take off Christmas Day, so let’s celebrate both of your birthdays with a bang.”



“Okay, sure.”

“What are you smiling about?”

“Nothing.”

So we’ll be lumping both our birthdays into Christmas after all. I couldn’t help smiling—but that wasn’t the only reason. Starting this year, we’d be celebrating together as a family.

● OCTOBER 29 (THURSDAY)—YUUTA ASAMURA

It was Thursday morning, about a week after Narasaka's birthday party.

I woke up, got changed, and headed straight to the bathroom to wash up.

These days, the soles of my feet felt cold against the floor if I was only wearing socks. I stepped in place as I washed my face, shaved, and slapped on some lotion. I also used some wax to casually style my hair—just enough to smooth down my bed head.

This had become my morning routine ever since the cultural festival. I was following Ayase's lead, but once I started, I realized I was the only member of our family who hadn't been taking care of his skin.

"To think that this bottle of Dad's was actually skin lotion," I mumbled to myself, looking at the translucent, blue-tinted bottle.

Now that I thought of it, I realized it had been there by the sink since before he met Akiko.

I recalled Dad saying he had previously been a salesman. I had to hand it to him. And at the same time, I couldn't believe how oblivious I was to things that didn't interest me.

I was beginning to realize that I didn't spend enough time thinking about others. Or to be more precise, I didn't have the drive to convey my goodwill to other people.

Ayase said I didn't need to change, but I didn't want to compromise when it came to how I felt about her. I wanted to make as much effort as I could, while still going at my own pace.

Not all the items lined up by the bathroom mirror belonged to Dad. Lotions and creams belonging to Akiko and Ayase had joined them, reminding me that our family had grown.

It made sense that doubling the number of people would double the number of items in the bathroom. Still, it was refreshing, if a little odd, to see the kind of things you'd never find in a male household. (I was shocked when Ayase told me she kept most of her makeup in her room. How many more products could she be using?)

After finishing breakfast, Ayase left first, as usual, and I headed out a little later.

As I rode my bike through the streets of Shibuya, a chill wind hit my body. What had been refreshing earlier in the year was now bracing. In a month, it would be legitimately cold.

I parked my bike in the usual spot at school and reached my classroom five minutes before the bell, as always. Soon, Maru came thumping in from morning practice and plopped down in front of me.

"Good morning, Maru. Tired from practice?" I asked.

"Hey there. And not at all."

"Good for you."

"It just takes getting used to. Practice becomes tough when you consider it a special workout. Make it routine, and it won't bother you."

His words sounded wise, but I didn't think just anyone could make that kind of exertion into a routine.

Shortly after, our teacher walked in and began homeroom. It was then that something out of the ordinary occurred.

The teacher started handing out printouts with CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS written at the top. They appeared to be looking for anyone interested in picking up garbage the day after Halloween.

"Shibuya's Halloween celebrations are famous," said Maru, "but the garbage left behind the next morning is terrible."

I nodded. We heard about it every year. It was great that the local community was thriving, but it was sad to hear about the mess.

And the garbage was only the beginning. Masses of crows would show up, and plump rats, their bellies full, would wander across the streets. The smell was awful.

"They say Shibuya's an exemplary city, but the morning after an event like that, it's a real garbage heap," he said. "It's appalling."

"Have you seen it yourself?"

“I have morning practice.”

The sight must have left a pretty bad impression on him. Maru furrowed his brows and said he’d indeed been through Shibuya the morning after Halloween.

The teacher told us to volunteer if we were interested, then stepped out of the classroom.

“The time on this is pretty early. What do you want to do?” I asked.

“Why do we have to clean up strangers’ garbage?”

“Yeah, you’ve got a point.”

This little oddity reminded me both that Halloween was approaching and that it wasn’t all about fun and parties.

I had prep school after classes that day.

I’d been going regularly ever since summer break, and my grades had improved significantly since the spring. As it turned out, slow and steady was the way to go, and I felt increasingly motivated to study.

Until a little while ago, I’d been doing my schoolwork with no particular goal in mind. My only thought about college was that I should probably try to get into a good school. But now my aims were clearer.

I wasn’t just trying to get into a good school—I wanted to get a well-paying job at a good company. To do that, I needed to get the grades to enter a top-class university, either public or private.

No one had told me to do this, and I hadn’t shared my goal with anyone yet. It was personal and something I’d decided on my own.

I hadn’t even told Ayase. I *couldn’t*.

To tell the truth, this was my way of balancing out our uneven relationship. She was making my meals every day, and I hadn’t found her a high-paying part-time job to help her become independent.

Since I couldn’t do that, I’d started thinking of a way I could provide for the Asamura family so that she would be free to live however she wanted.

I hadn’t told her about it because she hadn’t asked me to do any of this, and citing her as my reason would probably make it sound like I expected her to be grateful.

Just as I arrived at prep school, I received a text message from Ayase.

Do you want to go to the supermarket with me after you're done? I want to pick up more ingredients for tomorrow's breakfast.

I had no objections, so I told her when my class was over, and we arranged to meet in front of the prep school. I was already looking forward to it.

As I opened the door to my classroom, a familiar, tall girl caught my eye. It was Fujinami. The desk next to hers was the only one available, so I gave her a casual bow and sat down.

Classes at the prep school were about three hours long and ran from 6:30 to 9:20. But on this particular day, I'd only selected two sections, so I'd be done in only two hours.

Sometime later, I looked at the clock and saw it was 8:20. I was meeting Ayase in ten minutes.

I hadn't talked to Fujinami during class, but she approached me after the bell rang.

"You've changed a bit, haven't you?" she said.

I put my pens, pencils, and study materials back into my bag and turned to face her. "I have?"

"Uh-huh. Have you found yourself a girlfriend or something?"

"Yes and no. I'm not sure how to explain it."

"I see. Congratulations."

"You're awfully accepting, considering how vague my answer was."

"You must have a reason for being vague." Fujinami took off her glasses and used a microfiber cloth to wipe the lenses. The classroom was heated, and they'd started to fog up. "If your relationship with the person you love has changed for the better, then that's great—whether you've started a relationship or you're just friends with benefits."

"I really appreciate your encouragement, Fujinami. It's thanks to you that I was able to move forward."

"I'm glad to hear it. But is it okay for you to be having a friendly exchange with another girl?" she asked teasingly, a smile on her face.

"Uh… Yeah, because I consider you a friend."

“I see. So you and I are friends. There shouldn’t be a problem, then.”

I was glad she seemed happy with that. But just then, something crossed my mind.

“Fujinami, you’re really familiar with Shibuya, right?” I was too, since I lived nearby. I could draw a map of bookstores near the station, but I wasn’t as knowledgeable about the nightlife. “You probably know a lot about Halloween, too.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Are you going to join in the festivities?”

“Yes. I quite like the energy.”

What a surprise. She didn’t strike me as the type to enjoy that kind of partying.

“I guess I didn’t expect that.”

“Oh yeah? I find the way everyone starts acting incredibly stupid reassuring. It’s nice to be reminded that humans are fundamentally silly creatures.” She flashed me an archaic smile. Her opinion of people’s idiotic behavior was the exact opposite of Maru’s, but I got the sense they were somehow similar.

“‘Fundamentally silly,’ huh?”

“Yes. When you get right down to it, we’re all animals, only a little different from apes.”

“So I guess that means you normally have high expectations of other people.”

Fujinami blinked once as if I had surprised her. “You think so?”

“Because you expect a lot out of people, they disappoint you. So now and then, you remind yourself of how people really are as a warning not to expect too much. That’s how you keep a sort of balance.”

“Oh… I never thought of that.”

The phone in my bag began to vibrate. I’d set it to silent and tucked it away. Now I quickly pulled it out. I had a text from Ayase.

I’m standing in front of your prep school now.

I put my phone in my pocket and slung my bag over my shoulder.

I was only tagging along while she went shopping—it wasn’t really a date—but my heart fluttered to think that I’d be doing

something with Ayase, spending our time together.

"Is it your girl?" Fujinami asked.

"Yep. We're supposed to meet outside, and she texted me… Oops. It wasn't polite to check my phone while we were talking. Sorry."

"Oh, don't worry about stuff like that." It was just like Fujinami to say that. Much like Ayase, she didn't like to constrain other people's actions. "Okay, then—I'm off."

"Right. See you."

"Bye." Fujinami promptly left the classroom.

A bell sounded over the loudspeaker, announcing the start of the third class, and I headed out, too.

Outside the building, I saw that the sky was already dark. Ayase was leaning against a streetlight. I immediately spotted her bright hair and her face under the light.

Our eyes met, and she smiled. We'd only been away from each other for half a day, but it somehow seemed longer, and I felt a thrill at being reunited.

"Did you wait long?" I asked, walking toward her.

She shook her head and said, "I just got here." She was out of uniform, wearing a cardigan.

It was to be expected at this hour. She must have gone home and gotten changed. We were only going shopping, but she was dressed as stylishly as ever.

On the other hand, I'd gone straight to prep school after class and was still in my school uniform. Maybe it was self-conscious of me, but I felt a little embarrassed walking next to her.

As planned, before heading home, we made our way to the supermarket.

I hadn't really noticed before, but it seemed the whole world was gearing up for Halloween. The display shelves inside the supermarket were stacked with seasonal snacks.

"Halloween's sure tough on the eyes," I said.

Ayase thought for a moment. "Because there's so much orange?"

"Yeah."

Many items were wrapped in bright orange packages.

Orange was the color of pumpkins in the West. I'd heard that they originally used turnips, meaning jack-o'-lanterns were once white. But when the tradition migrated to America, they

began using the orange pumpkin, which was more common there. From America, Halloween had found its way to Japan, and now the orange-colored pumpkin was its standard symbol.

We saw pumpkin-shaped plastic containers filled with sweets. Their orange color was so bright it stung my eyes, and seeing giant piles of them everywhere was hard on me.

“The event hall at the department store I went to was also like this,” said Ayase.

“Oh, when you went to buy Narasaka’s present.”

“There are also a bunch of decorations up in the city.”

Now that she mentioned it, I recalled Halloween decorations hanging from the trees by the road downtown. It almost looked like *Tanabata*.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said.

“But once it’s over, these types of seasonal decorations disappear before you know it.”

I nodded. Some stores stopped selling seasonal items the very next day. Once Halloween was over, I bet these shelves would be full of Christmas items. That was always the sign the year was almost over.

“Well, at least Christmas items have some green,” I said, “so they’re a little easier on the eyes.”

“You sure have an interesting way of thinking about holidays, Asamura.”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t often hear people judging them based on store display colors.”

It must have been pretty obvious how little I cared about the events themselves.

Ayase and I walked past the seasonal items near the entrance and began shopping.

The arrangement of merchandise in supermarkets is much the same everywhere, but everyone has their own unique way of traversing them. It’s the same with bookstores. Even if a store creates a standard route for customers, there will always be people who go their own way.

“Are we running short on anything?” Ayase asked as I pushed a shopping cart along the aisle.

After accompanying her a few times, I’d noticed that Ayase liked to decide how to go around a store in advance. She must have wanted to use her time efficiently. Her personality was

such that once she'd decided on her goal, she wanted to achieve it as quickly as possible.

It was the same when we went shopping for clothes. She had a predetermined route around the store and went from one area to the next without ever getting lost.

"Let's see…" I racked my brain, trying to think of anything we needed.

I started with daily use items. We still had plenty of toilet paper and tissue boxes, as well as garbage bags, soap, detergents, and fabric softeners.

"I guess there's nothing to stock up on," Ayase concluded.

"I don't think there is."

I couldn't remember being short on anything over the last few days. *I guess I should start making notes when I notice something running low, just in case we wind up at the supermarket.* It would be annoying to have to carry around a notepad, but in this day and age, all I had to do was talk into my smartphone.

"We should have enough seasonings," she said, then, "Oh, I think we're running low on mirin. We have pepper, but it might be smart to pick up some whole black pepper, too."

"Then let's get those while we're here."

"Okay."

Ayase started walking briskly ahead, and I pushed our cart and followed her.

As we passed the vegetable section, Ayase checked the prices, mumbling things like, "Oh, that's cheap" and "That's a bit pricey" as she looked over the radishes, cabbages, and so on.

"Overall, I'd say the greens are a little expensive," she said.

"Really?"

She was talking about items with green leaves, like spinach and green onions. I knew that much, but I couldn't tell if they were expensive. You'd probably have to be checking the prices on a regular basis to notice.

"These are about twenty yen more expensive than they were yesterday," she said.

"You have a good memory."

"You think? I'm pretty sure this is normal."

I was genuinely impressed. I certainly didn't remember prices from the day before. Then again, I didn't have a habit of looking at them, either.

After that, we left the vegetable section. Up ahead was the meat—first chicken, then pork, then beef. Beyond that was the fish. Ayase looked at the prices but didn't pick up any of the items.

"Aren't you going to buy anything?" I asked.

"I haven't decided on the menu yet. If I were alone, I'd just buy the ingredients for tomorrow, but there are two of us, so I'd like to shop ahead since we can carry more."

So an extra body means more choices, huh?

"Sorry," she said. "I might make you do some heavy lifting."

"No problem. It's the least I can do since you're always handling the cooking."

Ayase mumbled a small "thank you," sounding a little embarrassed. As I watched her, I thought, *I really would help you anytime*. It was nice to shop with her, discussing things as we went.

"Okay, I've decided. I want to pick up some chicken and vegetables. But before that, we need to get those spices."

"Got it."

Mirin and black pepper, right? But where's the mirin?

Ayase pointed. "It should be over there. See those signs listing a bunch of sauces?"

We headed in that direction.

Ayase picked up a bottle of mirin, then had second thoughts and returned it to the shelf. As I wondered what she was thinking, she took a bigger bottle from the shelf beneath it and put it in our shopping cart.

"You want that one?" I asked.

"Yeah. I've been thinking lately that we're running out pretty quickly. Then I realized that with more people in our family, we're using double the amount we were before. That's why I wanted the bigger one."

"Oh, I see… You and Akiko were only using half as much a few months ago."

"It's about time I got used to shopping for four."

"Okay, now for the black pepper."

Salt, sugar, and pepper were on the other side of the aisle. I found the black pepper I was looking for on the top shelf, checked with Ayase, and then put the package in our shopping cart.

We went around the meat and vegetable sections again, and Ayase grabbed chicken breast and various vegetables and tossed them in the cart. After that, she began moving toward the register, then pulled up short.

“That’s a pretty good discount,” she said, looking at a display.

“Hmm? What discount…? Oh, those pumpkins?”

“Yeah. They’re cheap, so I was thinking of buying one.”

A mountain of pumpkins was set in a display near the cash register, with a sign advertising a special rate. Maybe it was an attempt to sell pumpkins for Halloween. But as you might expect, they were Japanese pumpkins with green skin, completely unlike the ones everyone associated with the holiday.

“A whole pumpkin would be too much,” said Ayase, “but we could probably eat one of these halves… Can you carry it?”

I picked up half a pumpkin from the shelf. It wasn’t all that heavy, but it wasn’t light, either.

“It’s fine. I can put it in my bike’s basket,” I said.

We got in line at the register, made sure to get points in the supermarket’s app, then paid for our items.

By the time we left, it was quite late. As we passed through Shibuya’s Center Gai on our way home, we saw a group of people in costume.

It was still two days before Halloween, so they were a little early. I didn’t mind that per se, but they were taking up the whole street, and I almost ran into them. *What a nuisance.*

I had heavy groceries in my bike’s basket; I didn’t need any extra hassle.

It was past nine when we got home.

“I’ve already prepared dinner, so I just need to heat it up,” said Ayase.

“Thanks, but you should let me do that. You haven’t had much time to study.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m using the little breaks between kitchen tasks to study,” she said, pulling a small English vocabulary notepad out of her pocket with a little grin.

The expression was almost too subtle to call a smile, but it was unusually childlike. It was so different from her normal mannerisms I nearly laughed.

I didn’t want to insult her, so I hid behind the refrigerator door as I put away our purchases.

As Ayase heated our food in the microwave, the aroma tickled my nose.

“That smells good,” I said. “What is it?”

“Chicken teriyaki. It’ll only take a few more moments.”

Ayase wouldn’t let me help with the vegetables or with reheating the miso soup, so I decided to wash the dishes in the sink.

Dad and Ayase must have had dinner earlier when they were at home together. I put some detergent on their dishes and began wiping.

Suddenly, Ayase said, “Oh!”

“Hmm? What’s the matter?”

She was staring at my hands, which were covered with suds.

“I would have done that. You should have left it.”

“I can’t let you do everything. I don’t have a lot of ways to repay you, so let me handle this.”

“Not a lot of ways to repay me…? You’ve got that all wrong.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You do. Did you think I hadn’t noticed? You’re working so hard so you can help support the family, aren’t you?”

“Huh?” My poker face was abysmal. I’d make a terrible gambler.

“You couldn’t find me a high-paying part-time job, so you’re taking more classes at your prep school, investing in yourself so you can support me and the family. You intend to make back the school fees and then some, right?”

“Wow… You can see right through me, can’t you?”

“Well, when I considered the timing, it made sense. And besides…” She ladled a bit of miso soup into a bowl, tasted it, then nodded to herself. “…I think about you, so I notice these things.”

“…!”

I suddenly began to sweat. Were the stove and microwave producing that much heat?

I was washing the dishes in cold water, but my hands weren’t cold at all. I tried to focus as I rinsed away the suds.

I stole a glance at Ayase and saw that she, too, had looked away. I couldn’t begin to guess what she was thinking.

The next moment, I heard our parents' bedroom door open, and I straightened up.

Dad walked in, yawning. After a quick look around the kitchen, he snatched a piece of the reheated chicken and disappeared into the bathroom.

The smell from the kitchen must have been so tempting that he had to have some even if it meant he needed to re-brush his teeth. He grinned and said it was delicious.

I tensed, wondering if he'd notice the strange mood in the room, and missed the chance to tease him.

I was the only one eating since I'd gotten home late. The menu was chicken teriyaki with miso soup and rice. Large lettuce leaves were set on a plate separate from the salad bowl, which I assumed were for wrapping up the pieces of chicken.

After eating, it was time to relax. I drank tea to settle my stomach and talked to Ayase, who sat across from me.

We chatted about the group in costume we'd run across on our way home. If people were getting into the Halloween mood this early, I wondered how things would be on the thirty-first. Ayase and I both regretted agreeing to work that day.

"I wasn't worried about it since I'd never been in town for Halloween before," said Ayase.

I nodded. "It'll be really crowded. It was already pretty bad today."

"Maybe some people will walk into the store in their costumes."

"Either way, our work will be the same. Though if someone comes in made up like a zombie, it might startle me… How about you, Ayase. Are you okay with scares?"

"…Not really," she said, then added, "But I think I'll be all right if you're with me."

In that case, I was glad we were on the same shift.

● OCTOBER 29 (THURSDAY)—SAKI AYASE

With two more days until Halloween, our teacher gave us all printouts titled CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS.

They were requesting students to pick up trash on the morning after Halloween. It was bad enough that crowds filled the streets every year. Now they wanted us to pick up after them?

Come to think of it, I'd talked to Yomiuri about Halloween around a week ago. She'd suggested I come to work in costume and said I might look cute in cat ears. For just a minute, I'd thought about it.

I'd never tried to make my armor "cute." Being "cute" and being "stylish" were similar, but they weren't the same. I'd never wanted anyone in particular to think I was cute before, so I'd never really thought about it.

Well… I was happy when Mom said I was cute, but only when I was in elementary school. Children that age don't really understand what "cute" means. I would've been just as happy to be called "cool" or "pretty." Children are more concerned about having their parent's approval than the meaning of the words they say.

My father was a different matter. He always got upset when I wore dresses my mom picked out and people called me cute.

The more people praised me for my appearance or my grades, the less approving he was.

"You're going to hurt me like she does."

How could I possibly like being called cute after he'd cursed me with words like that?

Even so, I spent time dressing myself and learning how to use makeup. I didn't want to be vulnerable when I was aiming to live on my own. I didn't do it to attract attention. And yet…

"Saki!"

I looked up at the sound of Maaya's voice.

I saw our teacher leave the classroom; I'd been lost in thought for all of homeroom. As the teacher left, Maaya came up to my seat.

"Maaya. Class is going to start at any minute," I said.

"Hee-hee! Trick or treat! Candy, please!"

"Okay, okay. You can play a trick on me, but I'm not giving you candy."

Maaya fluttered her eyelashes and then flashed me a wry smile. "Then I'll have you put on a maid outfit with cat ears and make you sing a teen idol number at karaoke."

"I'm not doing any of that, either."

It sounds less like she's playing a trick on me and more like she wants to use me to play tricks on someone else.

"Jokes aside, Halloween is on a Saturday this year, right?" said Maaya.

"Yes, it is."

"Well, I'm thinking of having a karaoke party with everyone in class."

"Oh, sorry, I have work."

"Which is more important to you, friendship or work?"

"Work."

You couldn't compare things like that. Besides, I couldn't skip out on my job.

"I should have assumed," she said.

"Yeah."

"Okay, then. Have fun at work, and I'll tell everyone you can't make it this time."

"Who is *everyone*?"

"The whole class. Saki, you put in a lot of effort during the cultural festival."

"Oh…right." It was better than playing waitress on the day of.

"You did all the work behind the scenes without a single complaint. Everyone's grateful."

"There's no need. I just did what I could."

I had no idea until she mentioned it.

Did that mean everyone *wanted* to play waitress? Were they really that excited to put on those silly outfits and say, "Welcome home, *meow*ster"?

…You have got to be kidding.

Oh yeah, that friend of Asamura's… Maru, was it? He said something about visiting all the themed cafés at the festival. I wonder if he managed to do it. Do boys really think maid outfits are cute? Would Asamura have said I looked cute if I'd put one on?

"You're thinking about Asamura again, aren't you?" said Maaya, interrupting my thoughts.

"Huh?! What are you talking about?"

She grinned and returned to her desk.

That girl scares me lately. It's as if she can read my mind.

I didn't have work, so I headed straight home after school. I was studying when I remembered that Asamura was at prep school that day.

I knew he'd made a female friend there, and I wondered if she sat next to him in class.

For some reason, I suddenly wanted to see him. After all, that girl got to see him the whole time they were in class…

Ugh, I'm such a disgrace.

It was rude of me to think such things, even though I had a pretty good idea of why he was studying so hard at his prep school.

We'd made a deal that I would cook in exchange for him finding me a high-paying part-time job. I didn't intend to keep holding him to that promise, but considering Asamura's personality, I doubted he felt the same way.

Knowing him, he was almost certainly trying to offer me something to match the daily meals I was cooking. I knew right away when he increased the number of courses he was taking at prep school after summer break—that it must be part of his future plan to pay me back in good faith.

As a matter of fact, his grades were clearly improving. He might have made a female friend in class, but his results proved he wasn't just playing around.

I understood that, but my heart was still troubled.

I opened the messaging app on my phone and sent him a text asking if he wanted to go to the supermarket with me after class to pick up a few things for the next day.

I worried that he would think it was weird for me to suddenly suggest something like that. I normally managed to whip up a meal with whatever we had at home, so it might

seem strange for me to suggest going shopping so late in the evening.

But he soon replied, letting me know what time his classes ended and saying he'd meet me at his prep school.

I breathed a sigh of relief and put my headphones back on. A gentle sound mixed with ambient noise immediately flowed into my eardrums. I surrendered my mind to the lofi hip-hop and slowly regained my focus.

I psyched myself up and set the timer on my phone for twenty-five minutes.

Slowly, I began to focus on the notebook in front of me, ejecting the clutter from my mind and letting it float up and away as though I were sinking to the bottom of the sea. Even the music in my ears gradually faded into the distance…

My alarm went off just as I was solving problem number seven, and the loud noise broke my concentration. Okay, it was time for a break. I reset the timer for five minutes and stretched.

I'd been trying a new way to improve my concentration called the Pomodoro technique. It called for twenty-five-minute bursts of concentration interrupted by five-minute breaks.

At first, I was worried that twenty-five minutes would be too short a time to focus properly and that I wouldn't get anything done. But once I tried it, I realized it was plenty of time to get absorbed in a task.

They say humans can only give their all once they set a deadline. Repeatedly setting short timers was supposed to allow a person to operate as if they were continuously approaching a deadline.

Of course, the amount of time someone can focus varies from person to person, but for now, this was working for me, and I was thinking of sharing the method with Asamura. Then again, he might say I was increasing the amount he owed me.

After one more cycle of focus and break, it was time to prepare dinner.

I stopped working and went to the kitchen, carrying only my English vocabulary notepad.

The only person besides me who would be home at dinnertime today was my stepfather. Asamura would be out late at prep school, and Mom wasn't eating at home this evening.

Tonight's menu was rice, miso soup, and teriyaki chicken. It was quick and easy, and I finished preparing it in no time at all. As soon as it was done, I heard the front door open. My stepfather was home.

"I'm back," he said. "Mm, something smells good."

"It's teriyaki chicken. Would you like some fresh off the stove?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Okay."

I set the table while my stepfather went to his room to change. Then it was time for dinner for two—just me and Dad.

There had been several occasions like this since my mother remarried—times when neither she nor Asamura were home, and it was just the two of us. I'd been terribly nervous at first, after all the things that happened with my biological father. My edginess must have been obvious.

After suddenly becoming the father of an adolescent girl, it must have been tough for him to gauge the proper distance between us. I could sense that from his clumsy attempts to communicate. It was a different kind of awkwardness from Asamura. I wondered if Mom had told him about how things were for me in the past. In the beginning, he'd been very careful not to hurt or scare me.

These days, there were no problems. I was grateful to him, just as I was to Asamura. That said, a part of me still wasn't able to completely relax and put my full trust in an adult man. There was nothing wrong with my stepfather, it was just a reaction caused by my childhood memories.

Perhaps Halloween approaching had brought all that closer to the surface, as well. Without realizing it, I broached a topic that I wouldn't usually bring up.

"Say, Dad, what do you dislike about my mom?"

"Huh?!" He coughed.

He probably hadn't expected a question like that. He choked, and a piece of teriyaki chicken fell from his mouth. Luckily, it landed back on his plate.

"That came out of the blue," he said. "Wouldn't you normally ask me what I *like* about her?"

"Well, from watching the two of you, it's obvious there's a lot of things you like about each other," I explained with a smile before continuing. "But I don't think marriages last when

people only look at the positives. After being together for a while, you'll start to notice things you don't like… We've all been sharing this apartment for a few months now, and I wondered if anything had come up."

"Hmm. I see." Dad wiped his mouth with a tissue and thought this over.

I felt a little nervous. Maybe I'd overstepped.

But I wanted my parents to have a happy life together, different from before. I didn't want Dad to make the same mistake as my biological father, who ultimately grew frustrated with my mother. Maybe I could stop a tragedy from happening if I knew a bit more about him beforehand.

"Let's see… I wouldn't go so far as to say it's something I dislike about her, but I guess you could say she seems dependable, but she's a bit careless in her everyday life."

"You have a point there."

"And whenever I get a little strict with Yuuta, she secretly admonishes me afterward."

"Oh."

I hadn't expected that. I'd never imagined our parents talking about Yuuta's discipline. They probably talked about mine, too.

"Other than that, I suppose her complaints about work can get pretty long."

"What?! Mom complains about work?"

"It only happens occasionally. But once she gets started, she goes on for quite a while."

"I didn't know…"

I'd been living with Mom all this time, and yet she'd never complained like that in front of me. Why hadn't she shown me that side of her?

"Well, she works at an expensive bar. Her complaints about customers can get pretty nasty, and she probably didn't want you to hear them. Apparently, before we got married, she used to share them with her colleagues."

Oh, so that's why she sometimes came home pretty late.

One of the reasons for my biological father's lack of trust in my mom was due to her coming home at all hours. He'd suspected she was cheating on him. But maybe if he'd been more receptive to her mental exhaustion, she wouldn't have had to complain to her coworkers and could have come home

on time. I wasn't sure which problem had come first, though, and there was no way to find out now.

"Um… If you don't like listening to her complaints, I'll listen instead!" I said, leaning forward despite myself.

Dad's complaints might be small now, but if there was a chance they'd lead to another disaster, I needed to step in right away.

My stepfather stared at me blankly for a moment, then smiled gently. "Ha-ha-ha—it's okay, Saki. Don't worry."

"But…"

"Listen. Akiko may have her faults, but they're nothing compared to mine."

"What?"

"I'm way more careless than she is, and I butt in when she scolds you, too. And I complain about stuff all the time. How can I blame my wife for her faults if they're all mutual?" As Dad spoke, his eyes were gentle like Asamura's, and I could tell he was speaking from the heart. "Besides, I think Akiko and I are together now because we've both been through a lot."

"…Okay, yeah."

"I think that's what marriage is all about—being able to accept the good with the bad."

"Accepting the bad…"

It was an eye-opening thought. Maybe I really could relax and trust this man with my mother. And not only her, but…

"Let me ask you something," I said. "Imagine if Yuuta or I became a terrible delinquent. Would you still accept us as family?"

"Of course." His answer was immediate. "…But hey, what's this about? Have you started thinking people like that are cool?"

"Oh no, not at all! It was just an example."

"As long as you don't break the law… No, that's not true. Even if you did break the law, you'd have to be punished, of course, but I wouldn't disown you or Yuuta. Ever."

"You wouldn't?"

I think I'm in love with Asamura. And not as a sister but romantically.

I wasn't brave enough to say those words, but I had the feeling that even if I did, my stepfather would cheerfully accept them.

I recalled the day I'd embraced Asamura in my room and the time I'd imagined the two of us kissing like the couple we'd seen in Ikebukuro—not in public, of course, but maybe when we were alone. The devil was whispering in my ear, saying it might be all right to do the kind of things with him that other couples took for granted. Was it okay to give in?

…What was I thinking? My brain was jumping way too far ahead. I needed to sort out my thoughts.

Both my stepfather and I stopped talking, and our time together ended quietly. The next thing I knew, it was almost time to meet Asamura.

"I'm going out to do some shopping," I said.

"At this hour? It's late."

"It's okay. I'm meeting up with Big Brother."

"Still, I feel a little uneasy letting a girl go out alone at this hour…"

"I'll bypass the downtown area and avoid any dangerous streets. I'll be fine. I often went shopping by myself when I was living alone with Mom, looking for last-minute discounts."

"Well, if you say so."

He didn't sound convinced, but I managed to get his permission.

Sorry, Dad. I just really want to see him.

Talking with my stepfather had made me even more anxious to see Asamura, and I left home at eight sharp.

I checked the clock when I reached Asamura's school and sent him a text, timing it to arrive just as his class ended.



I'm standing in front of your prep school now.

Then I leaned against a lamppost and used my phone to get on the internet. I looked over some study materials online, glancing up at the entrance every now and then.

I happened to be looking at the door when a very tall girl came out. She caught my attention right away. She had a fantastic figure with a high waistline; she looked like a model. I couldn't help giving her a once-over.

She was wearing a knit sweater that hid the contours of her body, with skinny jeans instead of a skirt. I wondered if she was dressed plainly on purpose. Her top was meant to be mixed and matched, and the hoodie she wore over it was in a very trendy color.

I was sure the boys in town would be glued to her if she were wearing a style that showed off her bare legs.

"Wait, Saki. It's rude to look at a girl like that," I said to myself.

I exhaled and was about to return my attention to my phone, when I noticed a familiar silhouette at the door, backlit by the lights from the building.

I'd been right—it was Asamura. I felt an odd sense of relief seeing his face under the light.

From there, we headed to a supermarket on the way home.

While shopping, I noticed how neutral Asamura was—a kindness directed toward everyone he encountered. He didn't seem aware of it, but he would reach for the pepper high up on a shelf without being told and ask me if it was what I was looking for. He spoke to the women giving out food samples kindly and without a hint of arrogance.

We shouldn't act differently with people based on preconceived notions. I tried to live by that rule, too, but I wasn't as good as Asamura was at being friendly with others and creating an air of intimacy with them. Was it because I'd grown up with my biological father's gruff attitude? I got the feeling that while I was better than him, that was as far as I'd gotten.

After we finished shopping and were walking through Shibuya's Center Gai, we saw a bunch of people already in

costume, even though Halloween was still a couple of days away.



The road was so crowded, everyone's shoulders were nearly touching. I began to feel ill, which only drove home how bad I was at being close to others.

Many of the pedestrians were red-faced from drinking and staggered across the street. I could smell alcohol. A man lost his balance and almost bumped into me, but Asamura stepped in to shield me. After that, he gently changed direction and took us down a less crowded path.

I stole a glance at him as he pushed his bicycle, its basket full of groceries, and wondered something to myself: At a time like this, was it okay to be honest and admit it if you wanted to hold hands?

Both of his hands were occupied, gripping the handlebars of his bicycle, and I couldn't work up the nerve to say anything. Whether that was lucky or unlucky, I couldn't say.

It was after nine when we got home.

I reheated the meal I'd made for Asamura. He was probably tired from attending prep school, so he really didn't have to help me. But he started washing Dad's and my dishes anyway.

"I would have done that. You should have left it," I said.

"I can't let you do everything. I don't have a lot of ways to repay you, so let me handle this."

"Not a lot of ways to repay me...? You've got that all wrong."

Normally, I wouldn't have said anything. The fact Asamura hadn't mentioned what he was doing must have meant he didn't want me to feel like I owed him—at least not yet. He probably wouldn't say anything until he felt he was truly able to help me out.

In that case, it was better for me to keep quiet, too.

I was worried the wrong words might hurt his pride. But to be honest, I wanted to go further and tell him how I really felt, even if he resented me for it.

"Did you think I hadn't noticed? You're working so hard so you can help support the family, aren't you?"

"Huh?"

"You couldn't find me a high-paying part-time job, so you're taking more classes at your prep school, investing in yourself so you can support me and the family. You intend to make back the school fees and then some, right?"

"Wow... You can see right through me, can't you?"

“Well, when I considered the timing, it made sense. And besides…”

I was getting tense, and that made me thirsty. I took a sip of the miso soup I was reheating, pretending to taste it. It was still lukewarm.

Okay, say it. I’ll try to be just a little more open about my feelings.

“…I think about you, so I notice these things.”

Was it the heat from the microwave and the stove making me sweat? I hadn’t felt this way since I embraced him in my room.

Ever since, I hadn’t explicitly mentioned my feelings or asked to touch him again.

I didn’t want to impose my wishes on him, so I’d decided not to say anything unless I could tell he was genuinely asking for it.

There were too few examples of what an ambiguous relationship between a brother and a sister should be like, and I had no idea when, where, or how far I could go.

I stole a glance at Asamura’s face. He was single-mindedly washing the dishes. Could it be that he hadn’t heard me?

If that was the case, I’d embarrassed myself for nothing.

Suddenly self-conscious, I looked away. The white walls that filled my vision were strangely soothing.

I was debating whether I should try again—whether I should turn around and take his hand and tell him I wanted to touch him. That was when I heard our parents’ bedroom door open.

At the sound of my father’s yawn, I straightened up.

I can’t. It’s not appropriate to touch Asamura openly at home, no matter how nice a person Dad is. There’s an order to these things.

Dad poked his head into the kitchen and snatched a piece of chicken, then disappeared into the bathroom.

Didn’t he already eat?

But when he grinned and complimented the food, I realized something—he’d been worried about me.

Earlier, he hadn’t wanted me to go out alone late at night. He’d probably been waiting for me and Asamura to get home and was finally relieved enough to sleep.

The price for my selfishness was a piece of chicken—and not even mine but Asamura’s.

Sorry, Asamura. And sorry, Dad.

Still, seeing him worry about me, then let me off with only a gentle warning, deeply relieved me and gave me courage in my relationship with Asamura.

● OCTOBER 30 (FRIDAY)—YUUTA ASAMURA

It was Friday, the day before Halloween.

At lunch break, the whole class was excited.

Some people say the eve of a festival is even better than the event itself, and there was even an anime about the day before a school cultural festival that lasts forever. Maybe that's why everyone's energy was running so high.

I couldn't blame them. Once a festival arrives, the end is already within sight. That said, I hadn't expected my classmates to be so excited about Halloween. Everyone was talking about what costumes they'd wear and where they were going. The only exception was the area within thirty centimeters of my desk.

"Yuuta. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Shinjou came into our classroom with a serious look on his face. This was unusual for him, and it concerned me.

"Uh… What's up?" I asked. "You look unsettled."

"I want to talk to you in private. Can we go out on the balcony?"

"Who, me?"

"Yeah, you, Yuuta."

"Shinjou, wait a minute. You're not gonna tell me something bad, are you?"

"I'm not. Please. Tomokazu?" he said, turning to Maru.

"Hmph. Well…I don't mind if Asamura doesn't."

"It's okay with me," I replied. "Let's go."

I stood up and began walking toward the balcony. Shinjou followed.

Barely any students were there despite it being lunch break, perhaps because it was getting colder outside. The only ones I could see were playing around far below us, and despite how open it was, it seemed like the perfect place to share a secret.

“So, Yuuta,” Shinjou began. “After our class’s Halloween party, I want to invite Ayase to an after-party, just the two of us.”

“…Oh. Okay.”

I had work that day so I couldn’t attend, but I didn’t want to disclose my part-time job, so I acted clueless.

“There’s just one thing that I want to check with you in advance,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Yuuta. You’re in love with Ayase, aren’t you?”

What?! I was so taken aback that I wasn’t sure if I’d said that out loud or not.

The voices of the students down below seemed to fade into the distance and disappear. I looked at Shinjou’s hands where they gripped the balcony railing. I could tell he was squeezing his fingers, because of the veins standing up on his wrists. He seemed extremely nervous, and I was surprised at how desperate he was.

To me, Keisuke Shinjou seemed like a stylish, popular guy. He always appeared confident around girls, and I hadn’t thought he was the type to get hung up on one person in particular.

I had assumed his rash attempt to befriend me and get close to Ayase was all a kind of game to him and that was why he acted so casually around me.

However, Shinjou was now looking me straight in the eye. I could tell from his gaze that he wasn’t making fun of me or deceiving me.

“You mean as her brother?” I asked.

“You know that isn’t what I’m talking about.”

“What do you plan on doing once you hear my answer?”

“It depends on what it is.”

He didn’t want to back down, and I couldn’t think of a way out of the situation.

I didn’t know how to respond. How could I? Ayase and I were still unsure if our feelings were romantic or familial. How could I explain something I didn’t clearly understand myself? I was beginning to realize how useful it was to have easily understood tags like “boyfriend and girlfriend” or “siblings.”

Could I proudly proclaim here and now, in front of Shinjou, that I was in love with Ayase?

When we embraced in her room that day, we'd defined our relationship as one between exceptionally close siblings. It shouldn't be much different from Shinjou's own relationship with his sister. And in that case, was it okay for me to talk about Ayase like we were in love?

…Was that really all right?

Thoughts were whirling in my brain, when all of a sudden, they came to a halt.

I don't know how Ayase feels, but what about me?

Let's just suppose, hypothetically…

Was I fine with Shinjou staying in love with Ayase? Did I mind that he was trying to ask her out on a date?

Perhaps asking me if I was in love with Ayase was Shinjou's way of being thoughtful.

If the world revolved around Ayase and me alone, we could maintain a vague, unorthodox relationship as long as we liked. But when others became involved, vague definitions weren't enough. We needed a word everyone could understand.

To be frank, I didn't have the evidence to prove whether my feelings for Ayase were those of a brother or those of a boy toward a girl. But if I had to specify, even if that meant lying, there was one answer I could give.

"Shinjou. I don't mind giving you an answer, but I need you to promise me something."

"What?"

"What I'm about to say is strictly how I feel, and it doesn't include how Ayase feels. It doesn't define my relationship with her, either, so I don't want you jumping to any conclusions."

"Uh, yeah… I'm not sure I follow, but okay."

Even if romantic feelings existed between Ayase and me right now, we didn't intend to make that public. We were siblings, not boyfriend and girlfriend. I had no choice but to keep saying that. Besides, Ayase hadn't officially accepted me as her boyfriend—at least not yet. Still, there was something I could say based on my own judgment.

"Suffice it to say…" If Shinjou needed some firm statement to give up on Ayase, I had no qualms explaining to him how I felt. "…Yes, I love Ayase. I hope that answer satisfies you."

After putting my feelings into words, I began to feel more confident.

I wanted him to give up on her. Those were my true feelings. And if that was how I really felt, then it was clear that deep down, I wanted to go further with Ayase.

I wondered what kind of expression Shinjou was making and glanced up at him. I'd never had to confront a rival for someone's affection before in my life, and I had no idea how one might behave in this situation. Would he be angry? Sad? Would he pout? My mind ran through various possibilities, but in the end, none of them were correct.

"I see," he said. His face was neutral, his voice plain and unaffected. It was as though he'd just been provided the model answer to a problem—something he'd expected right from the start. "Thanks for telling me, Yuuta."

"Sure."

"I'll see you around, then."

"Yeah. See you."

Shinjou did a big stretch, turned his back to me, and walked away. After watching him head back to his own classroom, I looked over the balcony's ledge again. I wasn't Shinjou, so I didn't know what he was thinking now or if he would start acting differently.

But his words of gratitude had felt genuine. Like they came from his core.

I felt hopeful that things wouldn't turn out badly. Was I just getting carried away? Having expressed my feelings for Ayase, I felt stronger and more sure of myself.

When I got back to my classroom, Maru looked up from his book with concern and asked, "So what did you guys talk about?"

"He just wanted my opinion on something. I can't go into detail, but it seems like the issue's been resolved."

"Hmm… Well, I guess it's okay, then," Maru said, looking at me suspiciously but ultimately dropping the subject.

Several groups of kids were talking about meeting up in Shibuya the following day and having a party.

Hoping to distract Maru, I asked, "Do you have any plans?"

"You mean, like, for Halloween?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not going to any parties," he said. But when I asked him if that meant he was free, he said he'd been invited to karaoke.

“Are you coming, Asamura?”

“Unfortunately, I have work that day.”

Maru nodded and didn’t try to pressure me.

I’d never had many friends, but I had a feeling the reason I’d gotten along with Maru so well for so long was because he never overstepped. Shinjou had jumped right in, of course, and that had worked out fine. I wondered if that was a sign I’d matured.

That aside, seeing my classmates so excited made me realize many of them would be gathering in Shibuya on Halloween, right when Ayase and I would be working at a bookstore near the station.

I’d just revealed my feelings for Ayase to Shinjou, but I didn’t think he was likely to blab. That said, it would be a pain to have different rumors floating around about us. I really hoped no one would see us at work on Halloween.

Considering the crowds from years past, I doubted anyone would be in a position to see other people’s faces clearly. But since we’d be finishing up late, I would probably want to walk Ayase home, and that meant we’d be traveling side by side through the streets of Shibuya.

How would that look to others? It was probably wise to be careful.

Once school was out, I went home and then walked from there to work. I figured there’d be a lot of traffic around the station and didn’t feel like riding my bike. As I approached Shibuya Station, I noticed more and more people walking down the street dressed in strange outfits.

There was a witch with a broomstick in a black lacy dress and a zombie with an ax stuck in his head. I saw two girls who appeared normal at first, but on closer inspection, I noticed they had scar stickers on their cheeks and blood dripping from the corners of their mouths.

…Wasn’t Halloween still a day away?

The holiday was supposed to be the eve before All Saints’ Day. Did it really make sense to celebrate the eve of an eve?

When customs spread beyond their place of origin, they often get distorted somewhat. Though it’s quite common, it’s always surprising to see it firsthand. Right now, it was as if all of Shibuya had become one giant haunted house.

A parade of demons passed through as the waning moon began to rise.

As soon as I arrived at work, I braced myself for the shift ahead.

I could see customers wandering around in strange outfits like those I'd seen on the street.

You're kidding me. Halloween isn't until tomorrow.

And that wasn't all. Once I'd changed into my uniform, the store manager handed me a funny-shaped hat.

"Here, Asamura. This is for you."

"What…is it?"

"It's a hat."

It had colorful bunches curving down in all directions like the peel of a banana. In other words, a jester's hat.

"You want me to wear this…?" I asked.

"Yeah. It's Halloween. Wear it for today and tomorrow. We have to appeal to customers."

Appealing to customers? Was that what this was?

I looked around and saw that the manager and all the regular employees—including part-timers—were wearing the same hat. It felt surreal. I wondered if I'd made a mistake agreeing to work these two days. In the end, I resigned myself to my fate, put on my hat, and headed for the office in the back.

New books don't arrive on Saturday and Sunday, but that meant a large number came in on Friday. No matter how much space we had on the shelves, it was impossible to fit them all. Big, thick magazines were especially troublesome since we couldn't stack them very high. The only thing to do was bring them out a little at a time. Once a few issues sold, we would keep filling the space with more.

I called out a greeting as I walked into the stockroom.

"You're late, kiddo," said Yomiuri.

"Hi, Asamura," greeted Ayase.

"Oh, hi. You both beat me here."

The two girls were stuffing magazines into cardboard boxes set up on a cart.

When I looked at Ayase's face, my heart skipped a beat. My cheeks felt hot as I recalled my conversation with Shinjou during lunch break. In my mind, I'd clearly defined my feelings for her as romantic. Belatedly, I began to feel remorse for doing something so drastic.

“You’re late, kiddo. Late!”

“Huh?!”

How could I be late?

“It’s okay, Asamura,” said Ayase. “You still have five minutes before our shift begins.”

“Oh, okay. Yomiuri, you scared me there.”

I checked the clock on the stockroom wall, just in case. Ayase was right. Yomiuri was up to her usual tricks again.

The girl in question, who had been bending over to stuff more magazines in the boxes, thrust her hands upward with a grunt and straightened up, stretching at the waist.

She made it look like she’d been doing some real heavy lifting, but judging by the time, she’d probably just begun.

“Already tired?” I asked.

“Ugh. Saki, your brother is treating me like an old woman.”

“But you said earlier that you *were* tired,” Ayase countered.

“I can’t believe you betrayed me! …Oh, how cruel, Saki. Whose side are you on?!”

“Pretending to cry like that isn’t very convincing when you’re wearing a funny hat.”

Ayase was right. The sight of Yomiuri pretending to sob, fingers under her eyes, looked like a jester’s routine when combined with the silly hat, jiggling back and forth.

“I’m glad to see you’re getting used to the place, Saki! Okay, guess I’ll have to come up with another method of attack.”

“Couldn’t you just stop attacking?”

“No. That would be boooring!” she exclaimed, putting a strange emphasis on the *o*.

She swung around so her back was to Ayase, then strode over to me. She had her arms out like a zombie and was wiggling her fingers.

“Hee-hee! Trick or treat, kiddo! Give me candy, or I’ll play a trick on you!”

“Halloween isn’t till tomorrow.”

“So what?! Holidays like to creep up on you before you realize it. Now give me candy.”

“Now you’re just making demands. And I don’t need holidays that creep up on me like a zombie.”

“Baaah, you dare defy me?!” Yomiuri changed direction again. This time, she circled around Ayase and hugged her from

behind. “There! I have a hostage now! Give me candy, or I’ll play a trick on your sister.”

“Huh?!” exclaimed Ayase. “Hey. Uh, that t-tickles…”

“Hee-hee-hee. Now where’s the bad boy who won’t give me any candy?”

Her act felt more like some demon from rural folklore that went around scaring kids than it did a Halloween monster.

“Stop it, Yomiuri,” I said. “You’re our senior, so this could be construed as harassment. And I’ll give you candy, so stop, okay?”

She let up immediately. *How calculating.*

“Okay, kiddo. And remember, as a big brother, you should always have a candy or two in your pocket for when you see your darling little sister. Got it?”



That didn't sound very realistic.

Yomiuri knew that Ayase and I were now stepsiblings, and she never missed an opportunity to tease us.

That was all well and good, but where was I going to get candy…?

"All right," I said. "I'll bring something tomorrow."

"Yes! That's a promise! And should you break it…" Yomiuri let Ayase go, then wiggled her fingers at me again and said, "This was nothing. Just wait until you see me tomorrow!"

"Okay, okay."

Just then, the clock displayed the time for our shift.

"Oh, break's over! Saki, kiddo! Let's get to work!"

"I'm pretty sure you were the one furthest from working…"

But Yomiuri had the most experience out of any of us, and once she got down to business, she was very efficient. She seemed to have checked the displays on the sales floor in advance and started stacking more magazines in the boxes, saying, "We've sold a couple of these, so let's get out two more."

After a while of going back and forth between the sales floor and the stockroom with replenishments, the three of us took a short break.

As we chatted over the free tea in the back office, the subject shifted to how we'd spend Halloween.

Since it was a Saturday, the parties would be going all day. The three of us had to work around our shifts, of course.

Yomiuri said she was going to parade around Shibuya in costume with her college friends and then pull an all-nighter singing karaoke. She wasn't shy about telling us her party plans, much bolder than anything a high schooler might get up to. She said that even her associate professor would be there. Apparently, she wanted to see the youth go wild on Halloween for herself.

"She said it was an academic study, though I have a feeling she just wants to have some fun."

"Do you mean the professor you were with the other day?" Ayase asked, appearing to have put two and two together.

"Precisely. Professor Kudou."

"Oh yes… I remember her."

Ayase paled at the name, and Yomiuri chuckled.

"I guess you've had enough of her, huh?"

"Are all university instructors like that?"

“Hmm? I think Professor Kudou is an exception. She’s famous for her odd behavior, well beyond the realm of the average human’s understanding. She’s the most brilliant woman in the department and as quick-witted as the devil.”

“Well, I understand why you wouldn’t call her as ‘wise as an angel.’”

She sounded like one hell of a teacher.

But…wait.

“Is that the person you and your friends were having coffee with?” I asked. “You know, at that pancake place?”

“Oh, that’s right. You were eavesdropping.”

I wished she wouldn’t make it sound like I was doing something wrong. I just happened to be passing by and overheard them.

“Well, I suppose she ought to tone it down a little, or we’ll lose applicants to the college.” Yomiuri sighed.

Strangely, however, Ayase mumbled back, “Not necessarily.” Her voice was so low, I wasn’t sure if Yomiuri heard her.

“Professor Kudou really is a handful.” Despite her words, Yomiuri was smiling.

● OCTOBER 30 (FRIDAY)—SAKI AYASE

My classmates had been restless since morning.

I could hear them discussing their plans for Halloween. Everyone was talking about their costumes and where they'd meet up in Shibuya before heading to various parties.

Maaya and a group of her friends were gathered next to me. They, too, were getting together for a costume party.

"Saki, are you sure you can't come?" Maaya asked.

"I've got plans."

I had no choice—I'd already agreed to work. That said, I didn't mention what I was doing. A lot of kids were meeting up in Shibuya, and if they kept asking me questions, they might find out where I worked.

Besides, I didn't really like the party atmosphere. And yet… these days I'd begun to think that maybe it *would* be fun to spend a holiday like this with people I was close to… It could be nice to walk around town in costume if Asamura were with me. Even if I wasn't good with parties, I wanted to spend more time with Asamura and make memories together to cherish.

Once school was over, I headed to the area around Shibuya Station for work.

The sun was finally slipping toward the western horizon; it was past dusk, and the sky was turning blue. The Shibuya 109 building cast a long, wide shadow that fell across the street at my feet.

The eastern sky, visible through the gaps between buildings, was almost the color of night, and the wind caressing my cheeks was laced with the smell of dead leaves. Winter was on its way, and my breath would soon turn white.

As I entered the bookstore, I noticed Shiori Yomiuri already wandering around the forest of bookshelves. Our eyes met, and

I bowed before heading toward the women's dressing room.

Yomiuri followed me in and said, "Good morning, Saki!"

"Good afternoon…"

For some reason, Yomiuri always greeted me as if it were morning. The sun was about to set. She didn't seem to care how I responded, so maybe it was just a habit.

"Saki, our first order of business today is replenishing the bookshelves."

"Okay."

Together with Yomiuri and Asamura, who arrived five minutes before our shift, I worked hard filling up the shelves.

After a while, it was time for a break, and the three of us headed into the back office.

Yomiuri was as fond of Asamura as ever, and she'd been teasing him and joking around since we started. It seemed he now owed her candy and would have to bring some in the following day.

Maybe I ought to try that, too—saying "trick or treat" to Asamura. *No, what am I thinking? That isn't like me.*

The subject of our friendly chat shifted to Halloween. Yomiuri said she'd be dressing up and going out on the town with her college friends after work the following day.

Asamura seemed impressed by her bold plans.

Apparently, her ethics instructor would be joining her for the festivities—Associate Professor Kudou.

The mention of her name brought back memories of the open campus at Yomiuri's college, and the fatigue I felt back then showed clearly on my face. Yomiuri said she was the most brilliant person in the department and as quick-witted as the devil. *As quick-witted as the devil*—that was certainly an apt description.

To me, she seemed like a nuisance. She was an upsetting person who tired me out more quickly than anyone else. I wasn't much good at talking to strangers to begin with—there were few people I could relax and chat with like I could with Asamura.

"Well, I suppose she ought to tone it down a little, or we'll lose applicants to the college."

That was how Yomiuri described the associate professor's teasing behavior, and she was absolutely right. If you started engaging in a merciless war of words with everyone you met, it

only made sense that people would start avoiding you. And the way she argued was so arbitrary and self-serving, it felt like she was only saying things to observe how people reacted. It was like she was putting live humans through some kind of destructive testing.

I, too, wished she would learn a little discretion and common sense.

But then, without realizing it, I mumbled, “Not necessarily.”

Talking to her was the first time I’d ever felt like I was activating every part of my brain’s circuitry, pushing it almost to burnout. It had exhausted me, sure, but that didn’t mean…

She’d said she was a researcher and that all she did was *live*. Since she doubled down and insisted on that, those around her had no choice but to accept or reject her. Maybe she was just clumsy, and that was the only way she knew how to do things.

I didn’t hate people like that. After all, I was the same.

Asamura finished up his break first and left the office. After watching him go, Yomiuri turned to me. “By the way, have you resolved yourself to come to work in costume tomorrow?”

“That again?”

The last time our shifts overlapped, Yomiuri asked me to come to work in a costume on Halloween day.

“I want to see you wearing cat ears. It would be so cute. Such good eye candy.”

“Why do I have to provide eye candy for you?”

“I’ll teach you how to dress up. You can even go out with us after work if you like.”

Had she forgotten that I was still in high school?

“Don’t worry; they have nonalcoholic beer where we’re going since some college students are underage. Professor Kudou will be with us, so rest assured we’ll be obeying the letter of the law.”

“I think Professor Kudou is the one I trust the least.”

Yomiuri flashed me a wry smile. “She really went overboard playing with you, didn’t she? But I want to play with you, too. Tell you what. I’ll teach you how to apply makeup and what brands of cosmetics are good. You’re interested in things like that, aren’t you?”

To tell the truth, I found that idea quite persuasive. I was using the time when I wasn’t studying to practice makeup and fashion, but a high school student like me lacked hands-on

experience. If adult women were expected to wear makeup when out in society, then high school students, who are training to join them, should have more opportunities to study it. Actually, scratch that. I didn't need to make things so complicated.

In the end, I was interested. That was the important part.

"Hey! Are you biting yet?" she asked.

"Nope."

"Hmm. I'm sure we could find some other useful opportunities to trade ideas. Saki, have you ever been to a nail salon? I bet you've never gone to a spa by yourself."

"I don't have that kind of money."

"But it can't hurt to learn about what's out there or about what kind of meals a licensed nutritionist puts together, for example. It gets hard to lose weight as you get older, you know. Are you sure you aren't putting on some pounds, Saki?"

"…Do you usually talk to your friends about stuff like that?"

"My mind overheats from reading academic papers all the time, so sure, I talk about girl stuff to relax. I'm serious."

"I've never done it, so I wouldn't know."

"Then let's give it a try. It can't hurt to learn how to draw the eye with fashion or psychologically accurate methods for dressing to attract the opposite sex. Learn how to look cool *and* cute, you know?"

"Like, 'Know your enemy, know yourself'?"

"That's it."

"I'm interested, but I'm afraid I can't go. My parents would worry."

"So you say, but I bet you're actually going on a date with Asamura."

"I—I am not!"

Yomiuri grinned.

That night, I finished my homework and took a bath, then got into bed.

I pulled back my blanket and slipped inside. My body shivered at the coldness of the sheets, and I quickly pulled the covers up to my neck.

Maybe it was about time I switched to winter bedding. After checking the time on my alarm, I turned off the light and closed my eyes. Just before falling asleep, I suddenly remembered a

certain Halloween from my childhood. I must have been in third or fourth grade.

Mom had promised me we'd have a Halloween party, but she couldn't take time off work, and it didn't happen. My father also went out and didn't come back all night.

I was at home by myself. Feeling lonely, I sat in the dark and lit the candle Mom had bought for our Halloween party.

We were poor at the time, and our home was small. Our dining room was only seven and a half square meters, with a low table set in the middle. I'd placed the pumpkin-shaped candleholder with its orange candle in the center of the table. I was only a grade-schooler, and after lighting the flame with a match, I sat and stared at it in a daze.

I thought of the story of the little match girl I'd recently read and started fantasizing. I saw a mother sitting at the table with a kind-looking father (I gave him the face of an actor from a TV drama I was watching at the time). On the table was a big cake topped with lots of cream.

Because I was just a child, I think my Halloween fantasy had a lot of Christmas mixed in. I remember a big reindeer talking to me. In the fantasy, I was very chatty and went on and on about all the good things that had happened at school as my imaginary parents listened and smiled.

I spent the night daydreaming about this scenario I knew was impossible, and then I fell asleep.

I awoke to my mom shaking me. It was already morning, and she scolded me for falling asleep before blowing out the candle. Then she apologized for leaving me home alone and hugged me.

As I lay in bed now, I imagined how tough Mom must have had it back then.

The inside of the blanket warmed up, and I was slowly pulled into the vortex of sleep.

I could still remember the pale light of that Halloween candle. It had been a symbol of my loneliness.

I thought about the pumpkin-shaped candlestand and wondered if they still sold anything like it as my consciousness faded to black.

● OCTOBER 31 (SATURDAY)—YUUTA ASAMURA

It was the last day of October. I had the day off, so I slept in and then spent my time relaxing.

Then, when four o'clock rolled around, I headed out to work.

I figured it would be even more crowded today, so I left my bike at home again. Since I'd be walking, I had to leave home a little early, and Ayase and I headed to work separately, as usual.

As I approached Shibuya Station, it became more and more obvious what day it was. Tomorrow was All Saints' Day, and today was its eve—Halloween.

A large crowd of people dressed as monsters were walking the streets of Shibuya. There were all kinds: zombies, vampires, mummies, werewolves… There were anime characters mixed in with the standard monsters, too. Shibuya had become a masquerade even larger in scale than the one the day before.

"I feel dizzy…," I mumbled as I did my best to avoid the crowds.

The street was so packed everyone was bumping shoulders. I sighed. Work was bound to be busy today.

Casting a sidelong glance at another group in costume, I made my way into the bookstore.

Once inside, I could see that there was chaos here as well. The number of customers coming and going was at least 30 percent greater than usual, and many of them were in fancy dress.

I went into the back office, said hello, and was about to head to the changing room when the manager stopped me.

"Oh, Asamura. You're working the cash register today," he said and handed me the same jester hat I'd worn the day before. He reminded me that we would be selling special Halloween items that day and warned me not to forget about them.

After changing into my work uniform, I went to the sales area and found party items I hadn't seen yesterday piled up on a special shelf next to the register. It was the kind of stuff you'd find at a discount store—little costume accessories; candles in various shapes; and, for whatever reason, penlights. They must have brought this stuff in and decorated after closing the night before.

These were special items only on offer today. The era when bookstores could stay afloat just selling books was behind us. The manager had probably decided we should sell whatever we could while the crowds were here.

It was just another thing to remember at the register for me, though.

Jester hat on, I headed behind the counter. It was going to be a busy day with this crowd.

Anything that could go wrong would probably go wrong today. At times like this, Murphy's Law was always in full force.

Because we were so busy, there was no time to chat with my coworkers. Shibuya was always crowded, but we had almost double the usual customers today. The fact that Halloween had fallen on a weekend was probably to blame. Even people who didn't usually come out had probably shown up this year.

It was great that business was booming, but I had never been so busy behind the register. By the time my shift was over, I was dog-tired. My legs ached from standing nonstop, and I was sure my muscles would be sore the next day.

For the first time, I found myself envying Maru and his regular workout regimen. Of course, I had no way of knowing how much muscle pain you'd have to endure to achieve a body that didn't feel it anymore. In the end, life is never easy.

To make matters worse, tragedy struck just as I was nearing the end of my shift from hell. I heard that someone had thrown up near the store's entrance.

It was probably an annoying passerby who was already plastered. However, if we left it, it would inevitably reduce foot traffic. Someone had to deal with it, and since the manager was busy giving out orders, I was the obvious candidate.

With a bucket full of water and a mop, I trudged to the front of the store. The scene of the crime was right outside the automatic doors. The culprit was no longer in sight. All that

remained was a pool of ugly vomit. It was a complete and utter pain in the neck.

I had to stand in the chilly autumn night air as I emotionlessly wiped away the vomit with my mop. All the while, costumed partyers continued to pass me by.

I've always hated noisy events like this, and I wasn't the least bit envious of the revelers. But when couples passed by, I couldn't help stealing a glance at them.

Even now, I could see a college-aged couple gazing into each other's eyes at point-blank range in front of a movie poster. They kept kissing, oblivious to the many passersby staring at them. I'd seen something similar in Ikebukuro and began to wonder if couples just couldn't stop themselves from kissing in public.

"Hmm?"

Suddenly, I noticed something off about the scene. I could see someone crouching down in front of the couple, staring at them as they kissed.

At first, the figure reminded me of the devil, disguised as a woman.

She wore a hairband with demonic black horns and a thin tail with an arrow-shaped tip, while her black gothic dress, with its puffy skirt and wide sleeves, made her look like a witch. Her costume must have been a cross between the two. At any other time of year, she would have looked incredibly suspicious.

But as if by some Halloween magic, no one seemed to notice her, and I appeared to be the only one paying attention to the conspicuous figure. Even the people she was staring at were too absorbed in kissing to pay her any mind.

Suddenly, the devil spoke to the couple. "Hmm. Can I have a word with you two?"

The man and woman seemed to notice her for the first time and turned to face her.

Good. I was worried I was the only one who could see her.

The man looked at her warily and took a step toward her as if to protect his girlfriend.

Without so much as blinking, the devil said, "The two of you are publicly preparing for sexual intercourse, yes? Do you always engage in this kind of foreplay in public?"

"What…?" The man looked stunned.

I could understand. What on earth was this devil saying?

“Oh, it’s just a simple question. I’m wondering to what extent the Halloween atmosphere prompts young people to ignore social ethics or if it simply makes it easier for young people with a lack of social ethics to get together. I’m just curious.”

“H-huh? What are you trying to say?”

“Come on—let’s go!” The girl pulled the guy by the arm and tried to flee.

“Hey, wait a minute!” cried the devil. “Was it not your intention to excite yourselves by showing off in public? And in that case, shouldn’t you welcome my attention?”

“We’re leaving! Don’t come near us!”

“Can you just answer one question for me? Is it only today that you’re flirting in public, or do you often act like that? That’s all I need. You can yell the answer as you leave.”

“We weren’t flirting!”

The woman glared at the devil and stomped away toward Center Gai, pulling her boyfriend by the hand.

“Thank you for providing me with a valuable sample. I promise I’ll put it to good use in my future studies,” the devil said as she waved to the couple. “Now to look for my next target for observation… Hmm?”

“Oh.” My eyes met the devil’s as she turned around.

A single glimpse of her sooty, jewellike eyes brought back a powerful memory. The pale skin, the unkempt hair, the sloping shoulders, and the nasty way she talked to that couple. I’d met someone just like this before.



It was the woman who had debated with Yomiuri at that café. I recalled Yomiuri calling her Professor Kudou.

Come to think of it, Yomiuri had said she was going out with people from her college after work. Maybe her professor had shown up a little early.

“You there. Have we met before?” she asked.

“Oh, um, no. Sorry for staring.”

“No problem. I won’t blame you. Every learning experience begins by staring, after all.”

“S-sure…”

“You saw that couple’s courting behavior, didn’t you? What did you think?”

She was asking what I thought. The question was unexpected, but I came up with an answer right away.

“I thought it was embarrassing.”

“Ah.”

“Or that’s how I felt instinctually.”

“I see. So you imagined yourself doing the same thing and being stared at by strangers.”

“I—I mean, I didn’t…”

“Sure, you did. A suspicious-looking person like me asked, and you provided an answer right away. That means you already had an opinion and that it’s your honest impression. You might have found them annoying or unimportant, but you said they were *embarrassing*. That’s called empathic shame. Shame spreads to the observer because they can imagine themselves in the same situation.”

I couldn’t breathe. She had seen right through me.

She had outtalked Yomiuri. There was no chance that I could debate her.

“When we look at statistics on the percentage of people comfortable kissing in public, the results vary depending on age, gender, and marriage status, but it’s usually around eight percent. But if you ask people if they have actually kissed in public, just under twenty percent reply that they have.”

“Um, and?”

“Despite the fact that most people are uncomfortable kissing in public, a good number of couples have done it. So when and where do such people decide to partake in activities they don’t endorse? Not many studies have investigated this topic, and I’m

currently looking for the conditions under which people's ethics are likely to break down."

"…I see."

What she was saying was interesting. But scary, too.

With her every word and sound, this woman was drawing me in. And before I knew it, I was caught up in her rhythm.

Because she was dressed as a devil, I began to picture her as Mephisto enchanting me.

"You're aware that Halloween in Shibuya is famous for young people going wild every year, right?" she asked.

"Well, yes."

"By 'going wild,' I mean engaging in behavior that deviates from social norms. I hypothesize that it may have a similar effect on relationships between men and women."

"So you're doing fieldwork. You're very passionate about your research, but I suppose I should expect as much from a college professor."

"Oh? You seem to know who I am after all."

Oops. I slipped up.

I knew about her, but only because I'd eavesdropped on a discussion she'd been having with her students, and I didn't want to tell her that.

I was pondering what to do when the devil looked me over from head to toe.

"Oh, you're a clerk at this bookstore. That makes you Yomiuri's colleague."

"Yes, um, I guess you're right."

"Are you Asamura by any chance?"

"What?! You even know my name?"

"Yes, but I didn't know what you looked like until just now."

What a nasty way to answer.

"My name is Eiha Kudou. I'm an associate professor at Tsukinomiya Women's University, where Yomiuri is studying. I've also met your sister."

"She told me a little about that."

Ayase said she'd gone to the college's open campus and got tangled up with a difficult teacher.

After only a few minutes of conversation, I could see what she meant. I could only guess at the emotional strain this woman had put Ayase through.

“It isn’t good for me to interrupt you at work. I think it’s time I left.”

“That’s…surprising.”

“What is?”

“I was sure you’d keep right on talking.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I’m not interested in interrupting other people’s activities or interfering needlessly in matters outside my realm of interest.”

That’s rich after what I just saw. I kept this comment to myself, however.

The frightening thing was that Professor Kudou seemed to be speaking from the heart. She didn’t doubt her own words for a second.

“Well, then,” she said, and turned away.

Relieved, I was about to go back to mopping the floor when she stopped and turned around. “Oh yeah. Since I have this opportunity, I’m going to act like a proper devil and put a curse on you before I go.”

“A curse? That sounds dangerous.”

“Why do kids who don’t normally flirt in public do so today? I believe the key is a temporary drop in their intelligence quotient.”

“You’re saying…that the Halloween atmosphere has turned them all into idiots?”

“Yes. And the dumber we become, the more we succumb to our primal needs…to seek sexual contact with our partners.”

“That’s a really blunt way of putting it.”

“It’s the truth. But…it isn’t all bad to be a fool.”

“I can’t imagine anything good about it.”

“It can make you happy, for one.”

“Now you’re turning spiritual on me?” Wasn’t she speaking logically just a moment ago?

“Humans have always existed side by side with spirituality. It’s an integral part of our society,” Kudou said as she pointed to the side.

I glanced in that direction and saw a parade of people in costume filling the Shibuya Scramble Crossing. It reminded me of the night I walked through the city with Fujinami.

Then, too, it had been full of people finding excuses to debase themselves. Back then, they’d been using alcohol. And

today, it was Halloween helping them put aside their higher faculties.

“The two of you are too smart, so let me put a curse on you to make you into fools—Happy Halloween.”

“Fools…? Please stop joking.”

Was she suggesting that Ayase or I would do something so idiotic? *Not a chance.*

Exasperated, I looked back at Professor Kudou, but now that she’d said her piece, the devil had vanished.

“She isn’t *really* the devil, is she…?”

No. Of course not. Ha-ha-ha.

Reflecting on this strange experience, I finished cleaning and returned to the store.

A little later, my shift ended. As I entered the back office from the cash register, I saw the manager handing out big gift-wrapped bags to the clerks who had finished their shifts.

“Here you go, Asamura. Thanks for coming in on such a busy day.”

The bag appeared to contain an assortment of sweets, and I gratefully accepted it.

“Here, Ayase. Thanks for your hard work.”

“Thank you.”

Ayase finished up a little late, and I overheard her exchange with our manager.

Yomiuri was behind her. For once, she was leaving work at the same time as Ayase and me. According to her, she was meeting up with college friends for a costume party after this.

I told her I’d seen someone I thought was her professor when I went outside earlier.

“Are you okay?” she asked, concerned. “She didn’t do anything weird to you, right?!”

When I said I was fine, but that the professor had cast a spell on me, Yomiuri was stunned.

After that, I got changed and reemerged just as Ayase and Yomiuri finished as well. Ayase was back in her regular clothes, but Yomiuri was now wearing a costume. She had on a wide-brimmed witch’s hat and a black dress, and it suited her so well that I almost forgot how she usually looked.

This wasn’t a sexy, fashionable witch showing a lot of skin, either, but the mellow sort you might find deep in the woods. I thought it suited her. When Yomiuri did something, she went all

out. The stone on the brooch at her chest was engraved with a runic symbol, and in place of a broom, she held a small cane-like magic wand, which she'd apparently picked up at an amusement park.

"Hee-hee-hee! What do you think?" Yomiuri made a smug face as she fluttered the hem of her dress.

"Oh, um, yeah. You look really good, like the real deal." I truly meant what I said. I could tell she was ready to have a great time at her event.

"I bet you'd rather see Saki in costume," she said.

I didn't deny it, but I knew Ayase wasn't likely to dress up.

"I'm not dressing up," Ayase said from beside me. Her reply was immediate. *What did I say?*

"It feels good once you get used to it, you know," insisted Yomiuri.

"No thanks."

"Just give it a try. How about something small?" Yomiuri rummaged through a bag. She must have used it to bring her costume to work. "Look! A cat ear hairband!" she said, mimicking a certain robotic blue cat. "Go ahead. Try it on."

"No, thanks."

"Don't be such a square! Come on—I'm sure it'll look cute. And your brother will be over the moon! Right, kiddo?"

"Please don't ask me to agree."

Yomiuri might look different, but she still acted exactly the same—like an old man. If she went too far, it could easily become workplace harassment.

"Um, I'm going home now," said Ayase.

"Huh? You are? …Oh well. There will be many more opportunities to try."

There will?

"No, there won't."

"But you're interested in looking cute, right?"

For a moment, Ayase froze up. Then she said, "Whatever—I'm going home now."

"Okay. Well, then, kiddo—it's late, so make sure she gets back safe."

"Roger."

With a flick of her hand, the forest witch slung a sports bag over her shoulder. It was a surreal image. Maybe she was planning to leave her bag in a coin-operated locker somewhere.

I wondered if she could still manage to find one at this hour. Or maybe she'd already secured a place to leave her personal belongings in advance. Knowing Yomiuri, she'd probably made all the necessary arrangements.

"Okay, then. See you!" she said. But just as she was about to leave the office, I called after her.

"Ah, Yomiuri?"

"Huh? What is it?"

"Here." I held out a small bag in the palm of my hand.

"What's this?"

"Candy. Throat lozenges. You said you were going to karaoke later."

"Oh! I didn't think you'd remember. Good boy!"

"I wouldn't want you playing tricks on me."

"Hee-hee. Thanks." She pressed the bag of candy against her cheek and grinned. "Then I shall cast a spell on the two of you so that you can share in my happiness. Hyah!" She waved her wand. "Happy Halloween! See you!"

"Okay. See you!"

"Have fun."

She turned around with a flutter of her dress and left the office behind.

Ayase waved as we watched her go.

"Okay," I said. "Guess it's time for us to leave, too. Let's head out."

Ayase nodded, and I reached for my bag.

Then I took a step toward her, pulled out another item from my bag, and held it out to her.

"Huh? What is this?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"It's for you." It was a small bag like the one I gave Yomiuri.

"Lozenges for me?"

"No…chocolates."

"But I haven't brought you anything."

"Don't worry about it. It's just a little something. Happy Halloween."

"Thanks. Happy Halloween."

Just before leaving the store, Ayase stopped and told me to wait a minute. Then she turned around and walked back inside.

Had she forgotten something?

I stepped out of the way of the entrance so I wouldn't block customers and found a place where I could keep watch.

Ayase came back out a few minutes later, but she didn't appear to be carrying anything.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said.

"Did you forget something?"

"Something like that," she said vaguely as she came to stand beside me.

"Okay… Let's go, then."

"All right."

Ayase and I were both astounded when we stepped out onto the street. The place was packed with people in costumes. There was no space to walk at all.

I'd known this would happen. That was why I didn't ride my bike to work, and I'd been right. But…

"I didn't think it would be this bad…"

"This turnout is unbelievable."

"I can't imagine anyone seeing us in this crowd."

I'd worried about what to do if we ran into someone from school, but with this many people in costume everywhere, I doubted if anyone would be able to see our faces even if we passed right by them.

It looked like we'd have to weave our way through the crowd of foreigners and college-aged partygoers. I figured it would thin out once we got away from the train station, but right now, it was as congested as Meiji Shrine on New Year's Day when everyone came to worship.

"Ah!"

Ayase let out a small cry and stumbled. Maybe she'd bumped into someone. I quickly reached out and supported her. This wasn't going to work.

"It's not quite as bad where there are cars. Let's go over there."

"O-okay."

We tried to walk where it was less crowded, but it was tough to make our way through the waves of people, and I was afraid we might get separated.

We were heading to the same place, and we weren't children, so we probably wouldn't get lost, but…

"Ayase. Here."

I stretched out my hand, and Ayase grabbed it and squeezed.

I felt the warmth of her palm, and my heart beat faster. Her hand was smaller than mine, and I was afraid I might hurt her

if I squeezed too hard. Still, I didn't want to let go and lose her, so I kept squeezing and pulled her close.

"I can't even see our feet. Watch your step."

"I'm fine."

She moved closer to me so the waves of people wouldn't push her away. It had been a while since we were close enough to feel each other's body heat.

I looked up at Dogenzaka Hill; it was so crowded that there wasn't even room enough for an ant.

Past the hill, I saw a cluster of buildings, their lights twinkling against the black sky. The velvet darkness of the night cast a deep shadow over Shibuya.

Ayase and I continued on our way, weaving in and out of the costumed crowds.

Twilight passed and evening faded into night as the hands of the clock steadily turned. It was now the time for young children to turn in for the night.

Clowns covered in face paint pranced along the road as witches laughed, brooms in their hands, and vampires with fake fangs roamed the streets. They were all waiting at pedestrian crossings, humming popular tunes. A herd of fake monsters. If one or two of them were real, no one would ever notice.

Every time the traffic lights changed from green to red or red to green, the ghouls' movements shifted like a giant, swirling vortex. They were like mindless beasts under someone's spell.

A red balloon slipped from someone's hand and rose into the sky, reflecting the streetlights as the darkness sucked it up and away.

There was honking from somewhere nearby, mixed with the laughter of a man and woman wrapped in bandages. A car rushed down the street, the afterimage of its red LED taillights trailing behind. The song "When the Saints Go Marching In" leaked out from a convenience store every time its door opened, grazing my ears and then fading away.

I felt like I was walking on clouds. Among the otherworldly scenery, the girl holding my hand was incredibly beautiful, and she was my sister. Or my stepsister anyway.

We'd confirmed that we both liked each other, and that seemed like the furthest thing of all from reality.

Was this really happening? The only thing that felt real was her body heat, emanating from our clasped hands.

Did I just see a wolf man laughing under his mask as he passed? Maybe he was one of my classmates, and he'd just seen Ayase and me walking shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand.

I was pretty sure the chances were low, but I knew it was still possible.

As we left the area near the train station and got closer to home, the number of people around us gradually decreased. By the time the lights of our apartment building came into view, there was no one in the street but us.

We finally let go of each other's hands as we passed through a nearby park and crossed a wide street. Both of us sighed in relief.



“You know what?” Ayase said.

“Hmm?”

“If we’d been in costume, maybe we wouldn’t have had to worry about someone seeing us.”

“I guess you’re right.”

Neither of us had been planning to go home holding hands in the first place. But once we started, we couldn’t let go until we’d almost reached home. We both craved each other’s warmth.

Today had been a strange, special day when nearly everyone was in costume. If we could have only gone along and dressed up ourselves, we could have held hands without a care in the world. But to Ayase, I felt sure a costume was different from putting on makeup, and that even if we’d planned to dress up, she would have been too embarrassed to go through with it.

“Someday…,” I began.

I wondered if someday we could walk hand in hand like an ordinary couple without having to think about anything else. But at the same time, I thought of the people who wanted us to stay brother and sister.

“Yeah?” she asked.

“No… It’s nothing.”

Our shadows stretched behind us, still overlapping and holding hands. They seemed to say, “I want to stay out here and play together forever.”

The lights were on in every apartment unit above, and each one of them was home to a family—including some who had only just started their lives together.

We continued to walk home in silence. I couldn’t bring myself to offer her my hand again after that.

We opened our door and turned on the lights.

“We’re home!” we cried out in unison, but there was no reply.

Oh?

I knew Akiko was at work, but Dad should have been home.

Ayase, who had gone into the living room a step ahead of me, croaked, “Huh?”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Look at this,” she said, fluttering a sticky note in her hand.

It was in Dad's handwriting, and it read, **I'm going to see Akiko.**

I quickly pulled out my phone and checked it. Dad had texted me. He said that since it was Saturday and he had the following day off, he'd decided to have dinner at Akiko's bar.

He must have realized I hadn't seen his text and decided to leave a message for us.

"It looks like Dad's planning to come home with Akiko," I said.

"Yeah, it looks that way." Ayase had a text from Akiko, as well. We hadn't checked our phones, so neither of us had any idea.

If they returned after Akiko was done with work, it would be pretty late at night. We'd hurried home, figuring Dad would be hungry. *Too bad.* It would likely be several hours before either of them returned.

"Well, Dad's been busy lately, so he deserves some time with Akiko…"

They were still newlyweds in their first year together. With their differing work schedules, he must have missed spending time alone with her. These days, I could completely understand how he felt. But that meant…

"So it's just the two of us until they get home?" asked Ayase.

"I guess so."

"Okay. Then what should we have for dinner? I was planning to do a hot pot again since I thought Mom and Dad would be eating at home, but…maybe something simpler would be better if it's just us. Do you have any requests?"

I thought about it. It's always tough to respond when you suddenly get asked what you'd like for dinner. That said, I knew I couldn't just say "anything" in this situation.

"Let's see…"

Hmm. What to have…?

"Sorry. It's hard to come up with an answer out of the blue, huh?" said Ayase as she watched me think.

She clearly was at a loss, too, or she wouldn't have asked. If she had an idea, she could've just said, "I want to eat this, so I'm making it." Simple.

"Hey, you're the one making the food. The least I can do is come up with a suggestion."

That said, I didn't often think about what to cook, so it was extra hard for me.

"Wait a sec," I said. "There's a trick to doing things like this."

"A trick?"

"Well, they say that people have a harder time making choices when they're allowed to choose anything."

This was a technique used by streaming applications. It was considered a bad idea to provide a menu from which someone could select various services. Although it might seem user-friendly, few people open up a service already knowing what they want.

Imagine someone is hungry and knows they want to eat but isn't sure yet what they're craving.

So what should we do in a situation like that?

"First, we force ourselves to make a decision. If we're talking about food, we can first decide what we *don't* want to eat."

"Huh? Why?"

"It's easier that way. At least, that's what I think. That's the trick. Generally speaking, people get bored of eating the same thing over and over. So we can start by thinking of things we've eaten recently."

"We had a Japanese breakfast this morning. And for lunch… we had instant noodles because it was quick and easy."

"So let's cross off those two. In that case, we should tell the other person we don't want to have Japanese food because we had it for breakfast, and let's eliminate Chinese food, too, since we had noodles for lunch."

"I guess that leaves Western-style food."

"It's easier once we've narrowed down our options, right?"

"Yeah, it is."

"Feasibility is also important. Even if we want to make something, it's pointless if we don't have the ingredients. Unless we're ordering out, that is. Again, we can decide in terms of the negative. Do we have any ingredients at home that need to be used as soon as possible?"

"Eggs, I guess."

"Then it's an egg dish, Western-style. Omelet rice, fried, or sunny-side up… Sorry, I can only come up with stuff we eat a lot."

"Oh, hey, then how about French toast?"

“I didn’t think of that. Yeah, I’m starting to get in the mood already.”

Before, I’d only read about French toast in novels, but Ayase had started making it for me every once in a while, and now it was beginning to feel more familiar.

“It’s easy to make, and it’s not too heavy,” she said.

“And it’s kind of like cake, which might be good since it’s a special occasion.”

Once we decided on the main dish, the rest was easy. Since it would be Western-style, we decided on a matching soup instead of miso. Fortunately, we still had some corn soup stock left. We also had plenty of vegetables, so we could make a salad, too.

We divided up the tasks, finished the preparations, and set the food on the table.

We were done in under half an hour and sat facing each other at the dining table, eating our French toast with corn soup and a salad.

“I keep thinking,” I said. “We spend so little time eating compared to how much we put into preparation.”

“Yeah… But isn’t everything like that? Most of the things we use without even thinking about it take time to make, but we enjoy them in an instant.”

Perhaps that was true.

I liked books, and I could read a paperback in an hour or two, but it probably took days for authors to write them, maybe even months. Or maybe not—I wasn’t sure.

Still, I was reminded that we had to be grateful to the people who make things.

“Thank you, Ayase, for always making us delicious meals.” I bowed, and she averted her eyes as usual. Recently, I’d realized she was just being shy.

“I’m just doing what I can,” she said. This was one thing about her that hadn’t changed since we met.

“But I’m really grateful to you.”

“You’ve started cooking now and then, too.”

“It’s going to take a while for me to catch up with you… And yeah, the French toast was delicious.”

“…You’re welcome.”

She turned even farther away, and I asked if she’d like a cup of coffee.

“It’ll make it harder for me to fall asleep…”

She had a point. There was no need to lose sleep when we didn't even have an exam coming up.

"Oh yeah…" I stood up and went to fetch a box from the cupboard. It contained an assortment of decaffeinated coffee that my father had received from a colleague. It was individually wrapped drip coffee that you set in a cup and poured hot water over. "How about this? It's decaffeinated."

Ayase nodded, and I plugged in the electric kettle and got two cups from the cupboard. In the meantime, Ayase started washing the dishes.

The water boiled in a few minutes, and I made coffee for two.

The aroma rose up with the steam, and I was just about to take a sip when Ayase said, "Oh. Wait a minute, Asamura."

"Hmm?"

She stopped me, opened a bag she'd left on one of the empty chairs, and pulled out a package. The gift wrapping looked familiar.

"Huh? Isn't that from our store…?"

"Yep. They were selling it today only."

She unwrapped it and took out a square box. It was just big enough to fit in the palm of her hand. Inside was a small pumpkin-shaped container.

"…Is that a light?" I asked.

"Yeah."

She pulled it out and placed it on the table.

It said LED CANDLELIGHT in large letters on the box.

The orange pumpkin-shaped vessel was a jack-o'-lantern with a hollowed-out interior and a candle-shaped LED light inside. AA batteries were included, and when she put them in and flipped the switch, the light glowed faintly.

"I'm turning off the ceiling light," Ayase said. After that, the only light in the room was the pale LED glow from the pumpkin lantern. It shimmered on the table.

I looked into the pumpkin through the face-shaped gap, and the light inside looked like a real lit candle.

"In the old days, you had to use real fire, but now you can create flickering flames without the danger. Modern times sure are amazing," Ayase said as she sat down on the other side of the table.

It was probably flickering because the LED emitted an irregular pattern of light. As Ayase said, it felt like the real deal.

We sat in the dark room, gazing at each other across the pumpkin lantern's faint glow.

"A long time ago, when I was a little girl...," Ayase began.

"Hmm?"

"...my mom bought me a pumpkin candle that looked a lot like this one. It had the same face, but there was a real candle inside."

"Maybe it's a series from the same manufacturer."

"Maybe it is. I was still in elementary school then, and my mom had work and couldn't come home, just like tonight. I had my own little Halloween party and lit the candle... Mom got mad at me later."

How dangerous, I thought, but maybe Ayase had known that, even back then.

Light was a symbol of human activity. A light in the dark meant someone was there. I always felt relieved when I saw lights spilling out of the windows of our apartment into the night.

"I don't know why," she said, "but I always feel like I've come home when I see the lights on."

"I know what you mean."

"Because of my mom's work, I rarely got to see her at home. I was always lonely as a child when I came back from school. But..." She paused for a moment. "...I'm glad I get to be with you this year."

The lantern's light was faint, and as we sat across the table from each other, only our faces were visible. I stared into her eyes, shining as they reflected the light, and an impulse inside me started to surface.

"Hey," I said.

"Hmm?"

"Um..."

I leaned slightly toward her, and she moved her face closer to mine.

Her eyes shimmered in the erratic light as she stared at me.

I extended my right hand without realizing it and touched her cheek. I ran my fingers through her hair, a few strands of which fell back down onto her face.

"Your hair's grown a bit," I said.

“It’s still a lot shorter than it was before.”

“It looks good on you.”

“…Thanks.”

We were going to be particularly close siblings.

It was only a month ago that we’d decided that. But now I was about to break that vow of my own volition. I asked myself if I was willing to face the consequences.

“The two of you are too smart, so let me put a curse on you to make you into fools.”

I heard the devil whisper in my ear once again.

We weren’t just any boy and girl, and maybe there were lines we shouldn’t cross without the proper resolve.

But when I asked myself if I wanted to spend more happy moments with Ayase, the answer was obvious.

I wanted to touch her, and I wanted her to let me in.

It was shallow and selfish, and I bet the devil would say I was being a fool.

I remembered our small shadows, holding hands under the streetlamp. That was how I felt, too. I wanted to be with her.

Ayase’s eyes bore into mine as I moved closer, then they lost their focus, and she closed them.

I hadn’t realized she had such long eyelashes…

As I thought this, I closed my eyes, too.

Then I felt something soft touch my lips.

Right now, she wasn’t my little sister.

I was kissing Saki Ayase.

We were at home where no one was watching.

Only God could see our sin. But maybe, just maybe, the parade of devils and monsters had blinded him tonight, and he’d missed it.

This would be our secret moment, free from blame.

“It’s the devil’s hour,” said Ayase, breathing out as I pulled away. “I bet the Halloween lights have magic in them.”



● OCTOBER 31 (SATURDAY)—SAKI AYASE

I crawled into bed, pulled the covers over my head, and pressed my hands to my burning cheeks. Then I put a finger to my mouth and traced my lips.

We…*kissed*.

It was mere coincidence that I spotted the candle as I was walking around the sales floor.

The plastic lantern shaped like a pumpkin was on display in the special Halloween section.

It was identical to the candle Mom bought me for Halloween when I was in elementary school. The size, the color of the pumpkin, the look of the face—everything was the same.

However, the one that Mom bought had a candle inside that needed to be lit, while this one was a newfangled LED light.

I debated whether I should buy it, and in the end, I decided to get it just as I was leaving.

Asamura and I headed home after our shift was over. We were stunned when we walked out of the building. The streets were full of people in costume, and we were shoved into those around us. Bumping into someone seemed inevitable.

Sure enough, someone ran into me, and I lost my balance. If Asamura hadn't caught me, I might have fallen.

I squeezed the hand he held out, and from there, we walked home hand in hand. That alone made my heart beat faster.

I was relieved when I saw lights on at our apartment building, but at the same time, I was sad to let go of his hand.

Mom had work that day. Since people were out and about for Halloween, the bar was busy, and I didn't expect her home until the middle of the night.

But since it was Saturday, I thought my stepfather would be home, probably waiting for us to eat. That's why we hurried straight back.

But as we walked through the crowded Shibuya streets holding hands, my stepfather had gone to see Mom at her bar.

Asamura and I were the only ones left at home.

We cooked and ate dinner together. After that, Asamura made us coffee. Then I remembered the lantern I'd bought at the bookstore.

Recalling my childhood, I put the light on the table and turned it on. The dim LED light flickered faintly, and it was almost like a real candle.

As I watched the glow, I realized why I had bought the light.

For a long, long time, the Halloween pumpkin candle had been a symbol of loneliness for me, and I wanted to rewrite that memory.

It was my first Halloween night with my new family. If I lit the lantern and went to sleep, I had a feeling it would soothe the lonely child still inside me.

As we sat facing each other across the pumpkin lantern, Asamura leaned forward a little.

Oh.

I knew then what was going to happen.

His outstretched hand touched my cheek, and the tips of his fingers caressed my hair. My face flushed, and I feared he could feel how fast my heart was beating through his fingertips. His face grew bigger and bigger as we gazed at each other. It was no illusion.

As he moved in closer, I saw my reflection in his eyes.

I looked surprised.

Feelings of anticipation and anxiety alternated inside me like the flickering light of the lantern. But somewhere along the way, I think I'd started to expect this.

I closed my eyes.

The joy of having kissed him, the embarrassment, the anticipation and anxiety of what was to come—I felt like I would explode as all the emotions swirled around in my mind.

I feared that our relationship would change forever. But I let it happen willingly.

Our lips only touched for a brief moment, yet I felt the crying child within me stop. Even my mother's hug the following morning hadn't healed this loneliness.

Halloween lights have magic in them.

But maybe that magic belongs to the devil.

I was the one who'd suggested we keep an appropriate distance as siblings. And now I felt like I'd ruined that.

I knew that if I'd looked away for even a second, Asamura would have stopped. By keeping my gaze steady, I'd given him permission, let him in.

When we reached the point of no return, I closed my eyes and waited.

Then his lips touched mine, just as I'd imagined.

The sense that I was touching him was much more intense than when we were holding hands.

I felt a soft orange glow caress me as I closed my eyes.

The light from Jack's lantern was said to sometimes lead travelers astray and to sometimes guide them. Another story said he was a spirit that wandered the earth, unable to enter heaven or hell.

I hoped that light would guide this girl who fell in love with her stepbrother.

Just then, I remembered the call for volunteers to pick up trash the following morning.

I'd ignored the printout, wondering why I should have to clean up after a bunch of partygoers. But now…

"Maybe I'll get up early and do some volunteer work…"

I didn't know if that was enough to make up for my sins. But for the moment, I wanted to do something that would make me a "good girl."

Maybe I'd ask Asamura to go with me. It had felt wonderful to give in to the devil's temptations, but maybe if we could spend more time together without relying on the devil, we could be a little prouder of our relationship.

As I lay in the warm shell of my blanket, thinking idle thoughts, I drifted off to sleep.

AFTERWORD

Thank you for purchasing *Days with My Stepsister*, Volume 5. I'm Ghost Mikawa, creator of the original YouTube version and author of the novel.

The *Days with My Stepsister* series describes how a boy and a girl around the same age get to know each other in their daily lives and develop a true heart-to-heart connection. Those of you who have read to the end of this volume may think the story has moved too quickly, that our protagonists no longer have anything to do, and that the story will soon end.

Please don't worry. I believe that there is still much left to tell, and I am confident that it will be of value to both readers of the novel and fans of the YouTube version. *Days with My Stepsister* is a story that follows Asamura and Ayase in their lives together. In the same way that we progress through various stages—such as going to school, getting a job, and getting married—I intend to faithfully depict their lives, changing emotions, and interactions. I hope you'll continue to look forward to their story.

And now for the acknowledgments. I want to thank Hiten for the illustrations; the voice actors Yuki Nakashima, Kouhei Amasaki, Ayu Suzuki, Daiki Hamano, and Minori Suzuki; the director of the video version, Yuusuke Ochiai, and the staff who worked on the YouTube version; my editor, O; the manga artist Yumika Kanade; everyone else involved; and all of you readers. Thank you very much for your continued support.



Saki and Yuuta's relationship gradually shifts from that of siblings to something else...

Bewitched by the magic of Halloween, Yuuta and Saki give in to their feelings.



It marks a definite change in their relationship, even if things look the same on the surface. With December comes both of their birthdays and Christmas, and then it's time for New Year's and a trip back home.



They worry about what gifts to give and how to spend their special days as they both try their best to find happiness.







Looking at their parents and relatives, they start to think about where love will lead…
…and are forced to consider marriage, children, and family.





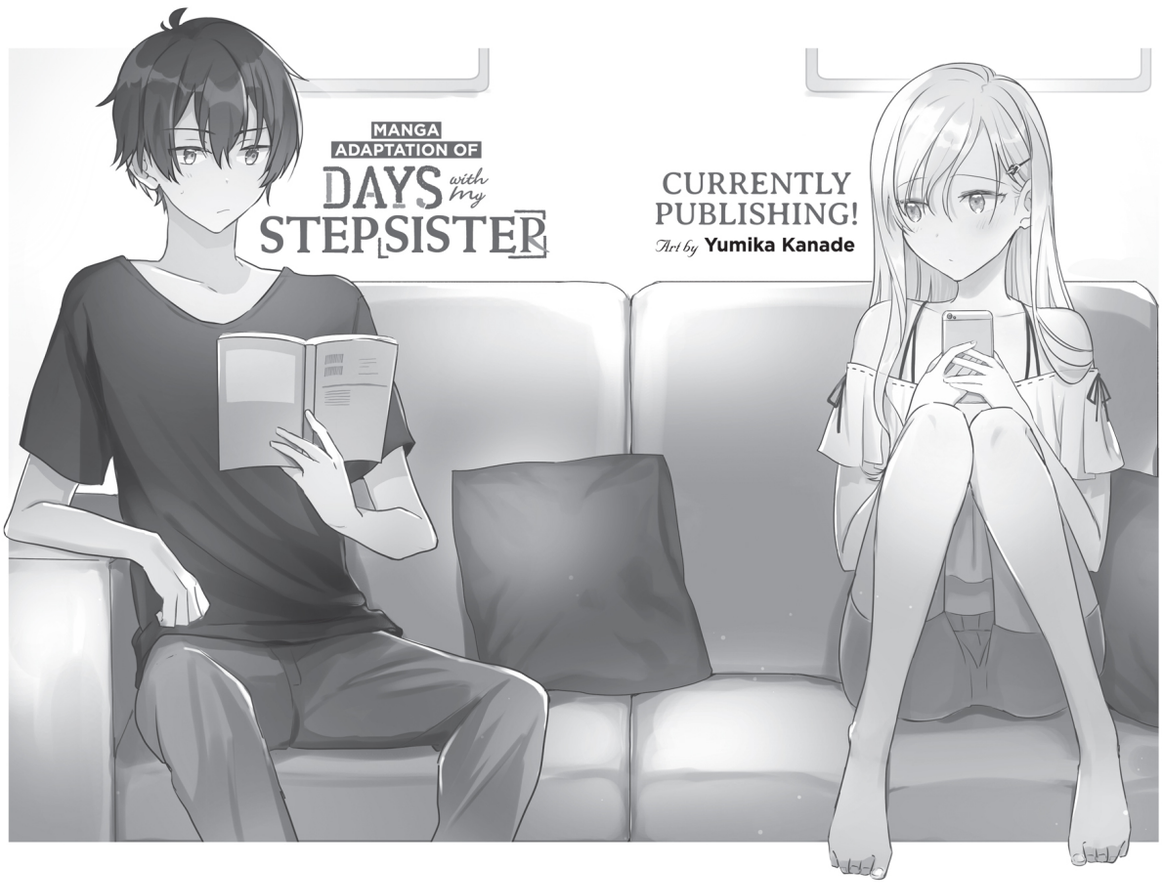


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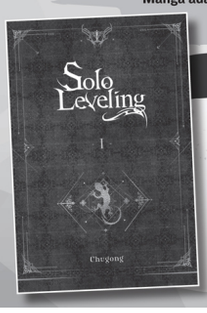
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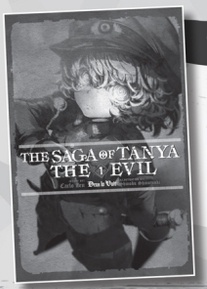
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