



Author  
Kyosuke  
Kamishiro



Illustrator  
TakayaKi



10

# My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex "Within Arm's Reach"





Author  
Kyosuke  
Kamishiro



Illustrator  
TakayaKi

10

# My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

## "Within Arm's Reach"

# Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[How It Begins and How It Will Continue](#)

[Secrets Taste like Honey](#)

[A Normal Girl's Confession](#)

[That Which Is Obtained Is Nothing but a Bright Illusion](#)

[Within Arm's Reach](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus High Resolution Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

# How It Begins and How It Will Continue

## New Daily Life

### Yume Irido

“Be back later!” I said as I put on my shoes.

“Hm?” Mom’s head popped out of the living room, curious. “Are you going somewhere, Yume? It’s New Year’s Day.”

“I’m meeting up with a friend.”

*I have to say, I’ve gotten really good at lying.* I was a straight shooter when I first started living here, but just nine months later, I could lie through my teeth.

“Gotcha. Be safe, okay?”

“Okay,” I replied before nonchalantly leaving the house.

As I stepped outside, the cold wind of January promptly bit into me. I pulled my scarf over my mouth and exited our house’s gate. Then, I waited at the corner, crouching so that I wasn’t visible over the stone wall. After waiting for a bit, I heard footsteps approaching me. As I stood back up, I saw a guy turn the corner and give me a gentle wave.

“Hey.”

“Mm-hmm.”

It was a short greeting, but we had already greeted each other once at home. We were stepsiblings, but we were also a couple. I walked by Mizuto Irido’s side.

“I dunno where people get the energy to go on walks right after the new year starts,” Mizuto said. He looked a little younger than usual with his sour face slightly hidden by his scarf.

“You’re just too much of a homebody,” I retorted.



“No, everybody else is way too active.”

“If everyone was as indolent as you, civilization would collapse.”

“Isn’t that what we have AI and robots for? I’d love for them to hurry up and support civilization so we can be lazy.”

“Where’s your dignity?” I asked, exasperated, as I blew visible air at my cold, red hands.

Mizuto glanced and noticed this. “Why didn’t you wear gloves?”

“Mm...I forgot.”

*That’s a lie. I actually have an ulterior motive.* I put my hands down and began to bump one of them against the hand that he had tucked away in his pocket. I’d learned this trick from Aso-senpai.

We walked a little bit in silence before he took his warm hand out of his pocket and then wrapped it around my cold one.

“Heh heh...” Giggling a little bit was enough of a reaction from me for now.

I moved close enough that our shoulders touched while feeling the warmth from our entwined hands. Like that, the two of us walked to the shrine. This was how the first day of the year began for me.

## **First Shrine Visit of the Year Date**

### **Mizuto Irido**

When Yume suggested that we make our first trip to the shrine for the year, I honestly hesitated. But we’d been led around by the nose by destiny already, so I decided to turn over a new leaf and try taking a look at what the heavens had in store for us by getting up close and personal.

Whether or not this higher power was reliable enough to grant wishes was up for debate, but I could at least request not to be cursed any further than I had been. That was only natural coming from a nonbeliever, right?

The shrine we were heading to wasn’t the famous one that Yume had gone to late last night with Minami-san and her other friends, but an ordinary one in the

neighborhood. There were so many shrines in Kyoto that you'd inevitably run into one if you were doing something as simple as walking your dog. This was the one case in which I found the huge number of shrines convenient.

I'd thought that going in the afternoon would mean fewer people, but I'd been completely off the mark.

"Ugh..." I groaned, disgusted.

"Hey, wipe that expression off your face!"

Saying it was packed would be the understatement of the year. Regardless, Yume dragged me into the crowd.

"Don't worry. It's all about how you frame it," she said. "With this many people around, we won't have to worry about anybody we know recognizing us."

"Since when have you been so optimistic?"

"Since today, I guess?" Yume sheepishly giggled.

*Oh, I see. She's excited. It's not because of the New Year's atmosphere, but because of our new relationship and the new days to come.* Deep down, I probably felt the same. Otherwise, there was no chance I would've come out to the shrine with her.

Back when we were together— Wait, I can't say it like that anymore... Back in middle school, we never went to the shrine together for the first visit of the year. Neither of us liked being in crowds, and there hadn't been many chances for us to see each other during the winter break in the first place, so we'd never asked each other before now. *If I'd gone to the shrine and prayed back then, would we still have broken up?*

*Urgh. Dammit. I can't break this habit of thinking about hypotheticals.* There was no point rehashing things at this point. We weren't exes anymore. We were once again an official couple.

When we finally got to the front of the long, snaking line, we put money into the offering box, bowed twice, clapped twice, and bowed once again. This time I prayed that our relationship would be long and problem-free.



I considered praying for Isana's success as an artist, but from my standpoint, she didn't need any divine intervention. There's a saying about how you're supposed to do your best as a human and leave the rest up to destiny, but if she didn't want to be hated by a higher power, then she needed to go to a shrine of her own volition.

Relationships are all about luck. As a person who'd been strung along this far by the whims of fate, I could say that for certain. There's nothing that relies more on luck than your ties with other people. That's why you probably *have* to rely on a higher power for them. You have to ask for help protecting your partner. I didn't exactly enjoy having to prostrate myself to do so, though.

"Let's go get our fortunes," Yume said after we finished praying.

We then got into the line for the shrine office. Once we reached the front, we drew our fortunes and exchanged them with the priestess (most likely a part-timer) for papers with divine ordinance written on them.

"Priestesses are cute, aren't they?" Yume said.

"Sure."

"Maybe I should work part-time as one next year?"

I inadvertently pictured her in a priestess's red and white outfit, with her long black hair tied behind her head. "Seems kinda forced."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"That a priestess's outfit would look too good on you."

Yume puffed her cheeks. "Why can't you just be straight with your words from the start?"

"Directly praising you for donning the long black hair priestess look felt too simplistic, so it felt unscrupulous to do so."

"You sound like an otaku!"

It felt so matter-of-fact that the priestess look would suit her given her hairstyle and visage. However, the look itself didn't have much of a "wow" factor, so imagining it felt like a waste. *Is this because of all the work I've been doing with Isana? Hmm, but...it's not like I don't want to see her in a priestess's*

*outfit.*

“Well, whatever. Let’s look at our fortunes!” Yume said.

“*You’re* the one who brought up the topic in the first place.”

We each opened our respective fortunes. I got “small fortune,” whereas she got “uncertain fortune.”

“Not bad I guess...” I said.

“Yeah, not bad...” Yume agreed.

While it would’ve been nice for higher powers to read the room and give us more optimistic fortunes, apparently they didn’t want to just tell us what we wanted to hear.

“By the way, did you know that the most important part of these fortunes is written as a tanka at the top?” I asked.

“Huh? Really?”

Most people’s eyes were drawn to the parts of the fortune that talked about romance, business, and academics and thus they didn’t know that there’s a tanka in the corner of the fortunes. I’d read online that there are dozens of patterns, and they’re supposed to be divine messages.

“So...it’s unreliable information, pretty much?” Yume asked.

“One could say that. Honestly, I mostly brought it up because I realized I’d never noticed them before.”

“True...”

Since I’d actually remembered, I decided to give mine a read. On it, the following was written:

“The ice on the pond  
will melt due to the spring breeze  
thereby revealing  
the blooming flowers above  
on the surface of the pond.”



“The ice melted?” Yume asked, peeking at my fortune and smiling triumphantly. “I wonder who that flower’s referring to? Seems like they’re reflected on the surface of the melted pond.”

“Self-absorbed, much?”

Yume giggled cheerfully. *Urgh, I know those are the words from the fortune, but for some reason I feel embarrassed.* “Show me what yours says!” I grabbed her wrist and brought her fortune closer to me. It read:

“A wind has begun  
blowing across the calm sea  
creating large waves  
that leave those on its surface  
a small boat at its mercy.”

“That’s kinda...ominous.”

On a quiet ocean, the waves and wind make noise, which is dangerous for small boats. Or at least that’s what I thought the poem meant. If it was a prediction for this year, then it was very inauspicious. If so, then “uncertain luck” was less lucky than I thought.

Yume looked away from her fortune. “I-It’s just a fortune. Only kids would get shaken up by occult stuff like this.”

“You’re doing a *great* job acting like you’re not shaken up.” I chuckled and lightly tapped Yume on the shoulder. “Don’t worry—I’ll be on your small boat right there with you.”

Yume’s eyes sprung open and she looked at me. “Are you...trying to act cool?”

“Huh?”

“Answer the question. Were you acting cool because we started dating again? Or did you just get caught up in the atmosphere?”

“Ugh... What? Am I not allowed to act cool sometimes?”

Yume began to genuinely laugh. *Let down my guard a bit and this happens*

*immediately! Why did I even try to cheer her up?!* But...these kinds of conversations hadn't happened when we were together in middle school. We dated, and then we broke up. But during that time, we didn't experience everything there was to being in a relationship. There were still tons of first experiences for us. Thinking about that, I felt like a few waves weren't a big deal at all.

After tying our fortunes to a tree branch, we started discussing whether we should head back or go somewhere else. That's when we had an unexpected encounter.

"Huh? Yumechi?"

I turned around to the source of the voice and saw a familiar tall upperclassman of ours and another upperclassman with a childish hairstyle.

## **Showing Off from the Start of the Year**

"You're visitin' the shrine too, Yumechi?"

A girl with a childish hairstyle, half down and half in pigtails, clad in a fur-trimmed coat waved at us while tugging a tall guy along. It was Aso-senpai and Hoshibe-senpai.

Upon recognizing me, Hoshibe-senpai said, "Hey." I politely nodded in response.

"Oh...Aso-senpai..." Yume casually stepped away from me. "Is that what you're doing here? What a coincidence."

"Yeah, a lot of people from our school come here. I wanted to come here and see the first sunrise of the year, but Senpai over here said he'd be too sleepy!"

"There's nothin' good about comin' to the shrine on the first of the year. It's frickin' cold and packed with people," Hoshibe-senpai spat. *I'm with you there.*

Aso-senpai grinned and looked up at Hoshibe-senpai's face. They had a height difference of about twenty centimeters. "You say that, but aren't you thrilled to be able to see your adorable girlfriend right at the start of the year?"

"Yeah, yeah. If you consider girls who call you in the middle of the night



nonstop ‘adorable.’”

“Rude! I was even thinking of praying for you!”

“For what? I’ve already gotten accepted into college!”

“What the heck am I supposed to pray for, then?!”

It seemed that things had been going well between them ever since the trip. I honestly didn’t really see a difference between how they were acting now and before, though.

“Oh, sorry.” Aso-senpai seemed to finally realize that there were other people here besides them and turned to us. As she did, she tilted her head. “Hm? You’re here with your brother?”

“O-Oh, yeah...” Yume said shakily, looking away.

Aso-senpai knitted her brows further and looked back between the two of us with curiosity. “Don’t tell me...”

Suddenly, Yume grabbed me by the arm. “We have stuff to take care of at home. See ya!” Then she quickly dragged me away to the torii gate.

After we passed through it, Aso-senpai and Hoshibe-senpai were just two more faces in the crowd.

“You sure about that?” I asked, turning to her. *I’m pretty sure Aso-senpai helped Yume out. It should be okay to tell her, right?*

“Just a little longer...” she mumbled, wrapping her hand around my elbow. “I want to keep you to myself.” Then she looked at me as if she were a begging child. “Can I?”

As soon as I had the misfortune of laying my eyes on the expression she made, my answer was decided. “Yeah, it’s okay.”

“Heh heh. Thanks.”

I had to look away from her bright, innocent smile. After all, it was important to keep one’s eyes forward when walking. Thinking about how she wanted to keep me all to herself, I couldn’t help but remember that there was already someone that we’d told.

## Setting Boundaries with My Girl Friend

The second of January was a sunny day, and Isana Higashira was in my room, prostrating herself with snacks as offerings.

Both Yume and I were silent at this surprising—but mostly disturbing—sight. Her head lowered, she looked to Yume and spoke.

“I beseech you to grant me permission to meet with Mizuto-kun this year as well!”

I’d already told her that I was dating Yume, but that was at midnight the other day. Then, she’d posted that picture yesterday evening. Today, she had come to our house with offerings, her face pressed against the floor of our home. I was getting extreme whiplash from how different her actions were between just a couple days ago and now.

“Uh...” Yume took time to both process what was going on and find her words. “Why are you asking this out of the blue? You can get up, okay?”

“Since the two of you are now romantically involved, I believe it’s only proper that I gain your permission to continue meeting with Mizuto-kun. After all, I am a female as well!”

“O-Oh. Okay. So yeah, get up?”

I was sitting in my chair observing this strange meeting. “I’m surprised, Isana. I completely expected you to be all like, ‘We’re just friends, so there’s no problem,’ or something.”

“I wouldn’t put it past myself if this happened half a year ago,” Isana said, her head still on the ground.

*Seriously. Get up.*

“However, I have become fully aware that you are not merely a friend to me. You’re a friend I’m so fond of that I will eat you up given the opportunity!” she continued.

*Oh...okay.* Both Yume and I wore awkward expressions.

“Thus, I am certain that Yume-san would not feel comfortable knowing that

her boyfriend is meeting with a woman like that! I have enough common sense to understand that!” Isana concluded.

Around the beginning of our friendship, Isana had been the type of person to say things based solely on logic. As long as she wasn’t doing anything that made her feel guilty, she’d thought she wasn’t doing anything wrong. But now, she was actually considering how others felt. This was without doubt proof that she’d grown. Although it was definitely on brand of her not to suggest we stop hanging out altogether.

“I get it, Higashira-san.”

“Huh? So I’ve received your permission?!” Isana asked, finally raising her head, but Yume put up her palm as if to tell her to stop.

“I know what you’re trying to say. I’ve been thinking that we need to have a talk about this, but I’m really happy that you thought about me and showed your sincerity.”

“N-No, this is only to be expected since I will be borrowing your boyfriend...”

“Well, then.” Yume smiled brightly. “Just how often do you plan to meet with him? And where?” Her questions had an indescribable amount of pressure behind them that shut up not only Isana but also me. “Are we talking at school? Outside of school? Here? Or...your house? My answer will vary depending on your answer.”

Though she sounded like she was being understanding, she was totally acting possessively. She had the same thorny aura as a wife staring down the woman her husband’s cheating with. Isana began shaking like a squirrel in the face of a lion.

People’s core personalities don’t change so easily. Whether time’s passed, you’re hanging out with a good friend, or talking about something you’d previously brought up, fundamentally, you’re still the same, especially with things you dislike.

This seemed a little too much to leave on Isana’s shoulders alone, so I jumped in. “Either way, I won’t go over to her place as much.” Both of their eyes turned towards me as I rested my head in my hand on my desk. “We can discuss her art

online, anyway. There's no real reason to meet up in person. I'm sure that after winter break, Isana's lifestyle habits'll get a little better too."

"Huh?" Isana suddenly looked like a kid who'd been abandoned. "S-So, *during* winter break..."

"You'll need to do your best on your own."

"What?!" Isana jumped up with surprise and then curled up, depressed. "I-I can't... I've no idea how to cook. I'm unable to bathe. I'm not even certain where my clothes are located."

Both Yume and I looked at her, astonished by how she was even alive. It seemed that Isana had begun relying on me a little too much thanks to Natorasan's hands-off parenting approach. She seemed to have become even more helpless than before.

"This is the perfect opportunity to learn how to live by yourself. You can call me anytime," I said.

"C-Could you possibly come by every now and then to check on me? Feel free to bring Yume-san as well."

"All that'll do is increase the number of caretakers you have from one to two."

"I'm begging you! I won't lay a single finger on you! I can't live life without prepared meals magically appearing before me!"

*How pitiful...* It was amazing how spoiled a person could become in just a month.

Yume tilted her head as she mulled it over. "Mm... You won't lay a *single* finger on him?" Then she shot an accusatory glare at me. "I'm sure you'll be okay, Higashira-san, but I'm not sure about Mizuto..."

"Wow, is it already breakup o'clock?" We'd only been dating for a day, but we'd already jumped to the stage where she was wondering if she could trust me.

"So...you can hold yourself back?" she asked, shooting me a sharp glare while grabbing Isana by the arm. "You can absolutely say you won't look at *this* body



with dirty eyes? One hundred percent, you will not look at *this* body without feeling something?!”

“W-Wait, Yume-san!”

Yume moved behind Isana, wrapped her arms around Isana’s waist, and raised her breasts to emphasize them. There was no hiding how heavy they were. Honestly, it seemed like Yume was getting more turned on than I was. Was the reason Yume couldn’t trust me with Isana because she herself couldn’t trust herself with Isana? My training had paid off because I was able to keep my lust under control. Just as I began to confidently answer her that I could hold myself back, Isana took me completely by surprise.

“Then I’ll prove it!” Isana said while being held by Yume from behind. “I will prove that Mizuto-kun only has eyes for you!”

*This is becoming all kinds of messy.*

## Infidelity Test

For the time being, Isana and I passed time as we normally did. Isana worked at my desk on her tablet while I read a book, checked on her socials, and helped get reference material for her. All the while Yume sat in the corner, observing us.

If I shot Isana even the tiniest lustful glance, Yume would step in. *I know it’s only the second day of the year, but still... Don’t you two have anything better to do? How much time does Yume think I’ve spent with Isana in the same room? I stopped seeing her as a girl a long time ago.* As I thought that, I moved over to show Isana something.

“Hey, so—”

“Bzzt!” Yume made a sound like a buzzer. *Huh?* I turned around to see Yume glaring at me. “Strike.”

“H-Huh?! How? All I did was walk up to her. I haven’t even touched her or anything.”

“You were looking at her cleavage over her shoulder.”

“Huh?” Isana’s eyes widened and quickly covered her cleavage with her hand.

*It’s true that the collar of Isana’s shirt is loose, but I don’t think I can peek at her chest from over her shoulder. I definitely wasn’t checking out her cleavage.*

“I was looking at her tablet. You know, the thing on my desk? I wanted to see her progress!” I said.

“Nuh-uh! Your eyes were definitely on her boobs! Your gaze was all over her cleavage!”

*That’s just, like, your opinion, though!* But before I could quip back at her with this, she walked over and grabbed Isana’s sweatshirt.

“Higashira-san, cover your cleavage properly! Here!”

Isana groaned as Yume put it on her and pulled up the zipper, stuffing the huge swellings on her chest inside.

“It’s difficult to breathe... Focusing is impossible in this situation...”

“Then can you at least not wear something so worn-out? This is your fault too! You’re always wearing such defenseless clothes! Anyone—not even just Mizuto—would look!”

*She’s being a lot more strict than I thought she would be. I didn’t expect our subconscious actions to incur her wrath like this.* I understood that since we were trying to get Yume’s permission, we had no choice but to listen to her unreasonable demands to a certain degree, but still...

After closing up Isana’s sweatshirt, Yume returned to her place in the corner. Isana and I exchanged looks and began whispering.

“I blame you, Mizuto-kun! It’s your job to make her feel more comfortable with this...”

“What was I supposed to do in the span of two days?”

“Perhaps if you satisfied her more, she wouldn’t care about me whatsoever.”

“What exactly do you mean by ‘satisfy’?”

“Well, of course I mean...” she trailed off, giggling dirtily.

*You damn perverted girl.* But at any rate, I had to take care of getting Yume to

be more comfortable with both me and Isana, so I needed to figure out a solution. And like that, the test continued with Isana's skin exposure decreased.

"Mizuto-kun, I finished the rough sketch. Could you take a look?"

"Hm? Sure."

Isana stood up with her tablet and came over and sat next to me on the bed, putting her tablet in between us on both of our thighs.

"Bzzt," sounded Yume.

"Huh?!" Both of us looked up at our proctor as she declared this.

"You're too close! Is there a need for your shoulders to be touching to check a drawing?!"

"N-No, but...looking at it together allows the sharing of information to be expedited..." Isana tried to explain.

"There are other ways, aren't there? You two basically look like a couple when you're that close!"

Isana groaned, not able to say a word in response. "What should we do, Mizuto-kun? Yume-san's threshold for what constitutes cheating is much stricter than I envisioned..."

"*You're* the one who suggested this."

"I had no idea all the actions I take without even a second thought could be interpreted as seduction!"

*Took you long enough. An entire six months for you to realize that you've been inadvertently flirting with me?* As much as I wanted to say that out loud, I was already surprisingly numb to her behavior.

"Conversely, if my actions were to be drawn, would it enable me to depict cute couples flirting?" Isana asked.

"I commend you on your ability to so quickly change this situation into something you can use for work, but I'd like you to consider my safety first."

I understood how Yume felt. If our positions were switched, I'd probably be just as angry as she was. That's exactly why I'd thought I would go to Isana's

house less often. But even so, if she was being this strict about our interactions, it would put a damper on Isana's work.

As precious as Yume was to me as my girlfriend, Isana's work was equally as important. I couldn't allow myself to neglect either one. Just then, I thought about a guy who tried to balance family and his career. And so, I decided to compromise.

"Isana, put your files on the cloud. I'll look at them from my phone."

"Okay... It's quite annoying to do; however, I suppose I have no choice."

*Let's try to do this online.* Like that, we could at least avoid unnecessary contact while continuing to work in the same room.

## Winning the Match

### Yume Irido

I silently watched Mizuto and Higashira-san work from my spot against the wall. Though they thought differently, I genuinely didn't want to get in the way of them working together. I knew that Higashira-san didn't want to meet up with Mizuto because of any ulterior motives she had. I was also a little worried that acting like an annoying sister-in-law by watching them like a hawk would make Mizuto lose interest in me. But...I couldn't stop myself.

I'd already learned my lesson in middle school. Because of how irredeemably jealous I'd been, I couldn't even stand him being nice to another girl. Up until now, I'd been convincing myself that it was okay for him to be with other girls because we'd broken up, but now that we were back together, I could tell I was in trouble. Now that I actually had a reason for not wanting him to be with other girls, I was seeing just how shallow I was.

Most likely, this was a manifestation of my insecurities. If I'd had more confidence in my own beauty, then seeing my boyfriend act a little friendly to other girls wouldn't have bothered me in the slightest. I would've been ready for it. I would've totally been able to act like I was the "true wife." In this situation, usually guys would think that they're the ones who aren't being trusted, but I couldn't trust myself.



The naivete of wanting to be reassured and the logic saying that I should accept their relationship messily swirled around inside me. I was sure he would dote on me as much as I wanted if I simply asked him to, but that would just be retreading middle school.

If I'd really grown, I needed to move on from relying on Mizuto spoiling me. I needed to believe in myself, believe in my boyfriend, and overall be more magnanimous. *But...how do I do that?*

How was I supposed to conquer these detestable feelings inside me? I stared at my friend, crouched over her tablet. I'd seen the picture she'd posted yesterday too. *Did she really accept our relationship and become as untethered to her emotions as the girl in that picture?*

I felt like she couldn't have drawn that picture if the feelings inside her had been darker and messier. But as someone who'd never experienced the acceptance stage, I still found myself slightly skeptical. Suddenly, I felt like testing something.

Only the worst kinds of girls do what I did next. Despite being well aware of that, I wanted to feel reassured. I wanted to know that I wasn't the only one with these feelings. So with that, I got up and silently moved through the room to sit next to Mizuto on the bed.

His eyes were focused on the book he was reading. I stared at his fragile-looking side profile. I didn't get as close to him as Higashira-san had. I simply silently sat at the closest distance to him that wouldn't disturb his reading. While I did, I carefully observed Higashira-san.

For a while, her focus remained glued to her tablet. At one point, maybe during a break of her focus, she glanced over at us and noticed where I was sitting.

*How's she going to react? Is she going to make a sour face? Is she going to pretend she didn't see anything? Or...*

Higashira-san tilted her head slightly, looked up, and began thinking before going back to drawing.

*Uh...what kind of reaction was that?* I hadn't anticipated anything like that at

all and had absolutely no idea what it meant. I quietly stood up and walked behind Higashira-san. As I peered over her shoulder, I saw drawings of a girl's various expressions, all arranged in rows.

"Um...Higashira-san, could I ask what you're working on?" It was so confusing that I couldn't help but nervously ask.

She continued working while answering me. "I'm searching for an appropriate facial expression for my current emotional state. Simply looking in the mirror unfortunately doesn't cut it for me. It seems that my facial expressions are slightly difficult to read."

"Your...current emotional state?"

"Simply put... 'Look how close they are. I'm so envious! It's unfair that she gets to do that, but she'd get mad if I attempted the same. But I suppose he *is* her boyfriend. I suppose there's not much I can do.' That emotional state," Higashira-san said, continuing working. As she drew the next face, she gasped. "Oh, this is quite nice."

The expression she'd chosen was one where the eyes were slightly narrowed and the mouth was slightly loose—as if they'd given up. There was a tinge of bitterness from the feelings towards the person she liked. All of that was conveyed with a single glance. This must've been the expression that Higashira-san wanted to make herself.

"That's...amazing." As much as I wanted to apologize, it didn't feel right, so ultimately what came out were those words. "You're so good at expressing feelings. I'm jealous."

Forget about drawings—I couldn't even express my feelings with *words*. After all, I couldn't precisely gauge my own feelings. Higashira-san turned around, a look of confusion on her face.

"It's almost as if *you're* the heartbroken one, Yume-san."

"Huh?"

"You're making this face," she said, pointing with her pen to a sad smile she'd drawn. Then she cleared the page and began doing line art again. "You don't have to concern yourself with my feelings. You're able to date the one you love,

so you should jump at your happiness without reservation, not paying any heed to me.”

“But...”

“I feel like I’ve been born anew after yesterday,” she said, moving her pen across the screen without hesitation. “My emotions have become a lightning rod. The things I do, achieve, and think have all accumulated in me, and are becoming my strength. No matter how many times Mizuto-kun impressed upon me that I possessed talent, I never really took him seriously. It wasn’t until the moment he told me that the two of you had begun dating that I instinctively understood.” Then, Higashira spoke confidently, as if she were full of resolve. “I possess talent.”

I felt an indescribably intimidating aura radiating from her back. “It’s strange, isn’t it?” she continued. “The moment I was convinced I have talent, the way I viewed the world changed. Everything I see appears to me as reference material. Everything I see and touch, my feelings and other people’s feelings—they all get absorbed into my inner artist. That’s why...you really don’t need to hold back on my account. I, Isana Higashira, might have a broken heart, but your happiness has become my strength.” Higashira-san turned around again and was smiling at me from the bottom of her heart. “Congratulations, Yume-san. I apologize for drawing you earlier.”

Wow, /... “I really can’t win,” I said, smiling.

Though I’d won our match, I’d lost the game. I might have been the one to become Mizuto’s girlfriend, but I still didn’t get the feeling that I’d ever win against Higashira-san. That’s why I couldn’t help but try to scrutinize every last part about them together. After all, it made sense he’d choose to spend time with Higashira-san, since she had me fundamentally beat. And yet...Mizuto had chosen me. I needed to remember this very important and precious fact. I had to admit that this was obsequious and retrogressive of me. By accepting this part of me and by remembering the respect I felt for Higashira-san in this moment, I’d overcome this jealous part of me.

**Having My Girlfriend and Girl Friend Be Friendly Is a Problem**

## in and of Itself

### Mizuto Irido

With Yume laying off observing us so carefully, I decided to go downstairs for a little breather. When Yume and I got back together, I knew I had to think about her relationship with Isana, but I had never been that worried about it. *I lived through that part of our middle school life. With how Yume is now, I should have enough of her trust for her to accept my relationship with Isana.*

That being said, I couldn't let Yume carry all the burden. Though she'd become more rational, her personality and sensitivity hadn't changed too much. I needed to make sure I didn't do anything that would be inconsiderate. With this in mind, I returned to my room, but...

"Hm?"

*They're not here? Where'd they go?* Isana's tablet was still on my desk. *I doubt they went to the living room with our parents there, so they must've gone to Yume's room.* I tilted my head and began walking towards my bed. Just then, someone pushed me forward.

"Whoa!" I twisted my body around while falling to my bed and saw Isana and Yume standing behind me.

From the way they were both grinning, I could tell they were up to no good. They'd been the ones to force me down— No, more precisely, they'd knocked me over. The two of them then proceeded to go on either side of me and press their bodies against my arms. It went without saying that I felt the sensation of their soft bodies, including their breasts and stomachs. If this didn't have some kind of sexual meaning behind it, then I needed them to redo sex ed.

"Wh-What are you two doing?!" I exclaimed.

Then Yume whispered in my ear. "I know you won't be swayed by *just* Higashira-san, but..."

Then Isana blew in my other ear. "How about when it's the two of us?"

Their giggles echoed around my skull in stereo. *Th-These two... They're using me as their plaything for their own amusement!* They'd buried the hatchet and

had begun to collude against me!

I had no idea what kind of *fun* conversation they'd had without me, but they'd definitely gotten carried away. They knew that they couldn't win when it was just one of them with me, so instead, they were trying to tease me by combining their forces. *You two are seriously looking down on me. I'm not gonna fall for this cheap harem fantasy!*





“How nice. You have a beautiful girl on either side of you,” Yume said.

“Is it true that girls smell good? Please allow me to use your experience as material I can reference in my work, Mizuto-kun!”

*Stop whispering!* I had two different types of girls on top of me—the slender body of Yume and the voluptuous body of Isana, and both of them threatened to suck me in. I had no idea where my hands were in relation to their thighs, so I simply gripped the covers of the bed.

Even so, the softness that covered the entirety of both of my arms, accompanied by the so-called feminine scent, was impossible for me to avoid. I couldn’t stop my heart from beating faster. I couldn’t run away from the future awaiting me, being toyed with these two girls. If that was the case, then...

“Don’t get so full of yourselves...”

Then, the two of them cried out in surprise as I launched my counterattack. These past few months, Kawanami had been my personal trainer, so I’d gotten a little stronger. I used my newfound strength to bring the two of them against me and forcefully reverse the situation so they were beneath me and I was on top. My shadow covered the two of them. I could see the surprise on their faces as they looked up at me.

“If this is what you want, I’m not gonna hold back,” I declared coldly. Then, in an attempt to replicate what they’d done to me, I leaned in between the two of them and whispered into their ears. “I’m gonna eat you two whole—every last bit.”

The two of them went completely red and practically fainted. They shrunk their shoulders, as they’d shifted from being the predators to becoming the prey. I moved away from the bed and turned my back to them. As I did, I loudly screamed in my head. *I won!*

## **No Holding Back This Time**

**Yume Irido**

It was night by the time Higashira-san went home. I took a bath, dried my

hair, and went upstairs in my pajamas. Mizuto was waiting for me at the top of the stairs for some reason. I was a little confused, but I simply passed by him and said, “All yours” as I headed to my room.

Just as I put my hand on my doorknob, I was grabbed from behind. *Huh?* He wasn’t putting too much force into his embrace, but I could feel his arms wrap around my waist. This was all been so sudden that I was more confused than happy.

“Wh-What’s going on?” I asked, turning around.

Mizuto looked away with embarrassment. “You said it, didn’t you? I’m just...touching you as much as I did Isana.”

*Oh. Right.* During our sibling meeting, we had talked about that. It was true that he’d touched Higashira-san a good amount while I was watching over them. But at most, he’d touched her shoulder. The most that he’d touched her was when we were pretending to be his harem, and at that time, I’d been touching him too. I hadn’t expected him to care all that much about it, and yet here he was, showing his sincerity to me.

*Seriously, Mizuto, you’re so...* He was an expert at making girls go weak at the knees. “I don’t know how I feel about guys who think that a simple hug’s enough to fix things,” I said, wanting to tease him a little.

“Urk,” he groaned softly. “Then...what should I do?”

I turned around in his embrace and raised my chin. “Mm!” I shut my eyes as if to tell him to hurry up.

After a short sigh, I felt the soft sensation of his lips on mine. When I opened my eyes again, I saw him looking at me with an exasperated expression.

“Is this really all that different from a hug?” he asked.

“Maybe you should think a little harder about what will fix things,” I said.

“What a pain...”

As I giggled, Mizuto also chuckled a little. We stood there, our foreheads pressed against one another’s for a bit.

“Mizuto-kun?” mom’s voice rang out, making us move away from each other.

“Are you gonna take a bath now?”

“Be right there!” Mizuto replied before moving to go down the stairs. As I watched him disappear, I went back into my room.

*Wow...I feel so light. My heart... No, my entire body feels as light as a feather.* He'd been a lot stronger, less hesitant, and more passionate than he had been in middle school...

“Heh heh...” My lips curled as I fell onto my bed.

We didn't need to hold back anymore. We didn't need to be afraid anymore. Even if I got overly possessive, we would actually talk through it this time. That was why...

“Heh heh heh heh heh...”

I curled into a ball on my bed, unable to hold back my giggles.

# Secrets Taste like Honey

## A Secret Game

**Mizuto Irido**

I couldn't help but think how it was unbearably cold for the new year as we walked to school, the dry wind whipping past our faces. We stuck close to each other trying to defend against the wind as we stopped in the middle of the path.

"Around here's good, I guess..." said Yume.

"Yeah..."

We were getting to the point on our route where we'd start seeing more Rakuro students. Though people knew that we were stepsiblings, we weren't known to walk to school so close to each other.

Nearly everyone assumed I was dating Isana. So if Yume, a member of the student council, were thought of as a homewrecker, it'd turn into a whole thing. Though after the stunt she'd pulled after we started at school, there'd been rumors about her being a brother lover, but those had since been long forgotten.

Ultimately, we were in the exact same situation we'd been in in middle school, when we needed to split up before we got too close to school. But there was one big difference between now and then.

"Later."

"See you at home," Yume said, gripping my hand through her glove.

"Yeah... See you there."

We said this to each other, sheepishly smiling, before Yume ran off ahead to school. I stood there, watching my girlfriend disappear in the distance, enjoying an almost nostalgic form of anxiety. I could see her as soon as I got home. That



was the biggest difference.

“Hey, Irido. When’s the last time I saw you? Christmas?” Kogure Kawanami called out to me before the third semester’s commencement ceremony.

I furrowed my eyebrows slightly, seeing him. “Thanks for that, by the way. But let’s not talk about how we spent Christmas together. Creeps me out.”

“What gives? Happens all the time—just two single dudes spendin’ Christmas together, leanin’ on each other.”

*Two single dudes? I was single back then, yeah, but I’m not so sure about you.* I sat at my desk and rested my head in my hand when I caught a glance of Yume in front of the blackboard with her friends.

“Yume-chan! I missed you so much!”

“I just saw you over New Year’s...”

“Akki, are you gonna be like this every time we have a long vacation?”

“You’re like a bunny!”

The bunny in question was currently hugging Yume, and was the very same person who made me question whether Kawanami was single. After all, she practically lived in his house. If he insisted he was single, *real* single people would probably want to kill him.

“So?” Kawanami asked me with a vulgar grin. “You fix your problem?”

“Pretty much...”

“C’mon, gimme the deets! You owe me. I gave you a meal *and* a place to stay.”

“I’m not the type of person to gossip about private matters.”

*Doesn’t look like he’s caught on.* Both Kawanami and Minami-san didn’t seem to know that my relationship with Yume had changed. Then I remembered the conversation I’d had with Yume during the break.

*“What should we do?”* I had asked. *“Y’know, about Kawanami and Minami-san?”*

*"You mean whether or not we should tell them?"*

*"Yeah. They did technically help both of us."*

*"Hm... I get the feeling they'll piece things together on their own eventually."*

*"True... I mean, one of them is a self-proclaimed ROM expert."*

*"And the other is a self-proclaimed romance expert."*

I'd never heard Minami-san refer to herself as such, but she'd probably given enough advice that she could be called that.

"So..." Yume had said as a devilish smile crept across her face. *"Wanna test to see if those two will actually notice?"*

"Hey." My thoughts were interrupted by someone calling out to me. I looked up to see Yume. "I have student council stuff to do after the commencement ceremony so I won't be going home right away."

She spoke calmly, yet I was sweating internally. From the way she said that, it sounded like it was a given that we'd be walking home together. Minami-san and Kawanami finding out was one thing, but things would be really bad if our entire class found out. Yume should have known this, so why would she do this right in the middle of the classroom?!

"Mmh. Okay..." As a result of freaking out on the inside, my response came out more brusque than I'd intended.

Sure, I wasn't winning any "boyfriend of the year" awards with my reaction, but it was a perfectly appropriate reaction for family members. Perhaps as a result, Minami-san seemed none the wiser as she hung herself around Yume's neck.

"Yume-chan, when's our next day off?"

"You were *just* on vacation," Kawanami snapped. "How much do you just wanna hole up at home, you NEET?"

"That's not it! I wanna know when Yume-chan and I can hang!"

"Let her take a frickin' break. She's probably busy with student council stuff."

"Oh, it's okay; we're not too busy right now." Yume then proceeded to talk

about the days that she was off from the student council.

Minami-san seemed ecstatic as they made plans to hang out. Before we knew it, it was time for the commencement ceremony. Our classmates filed out of the classroom and headed to the gymnasium. Neither Kawanami nor Minami-san seemed to have realized we were dating, as they both casually headed off to chat with their other friends.

One way or another, I found myself walking next to Yume.

“Heh heh...” she giggled slightly.

I was able to just barely hold myself back from smiling. *They really haven't noticed? Sheesh.* Yume and I exchanged looks, smiling to each other after making sure nobody would notice.

## **The Student Council President Who Was Left in the Dust**

**Suzuri Kurenai**

Seeing the student council members for the first time in a while, I decided to majestically greet them as the president.

“Happy New Year, everyone. Though the year's only just begun, we have a big meeting regarding next year's budget coming up. Let's all focus up and put our best foot forward.”

I nodded as they all responded in the affirmative and then sat down in my chair. I'd become accustomed to sitting here. Some people say you shouldn't take student council too seriously, but we had the opportunity to nourish hundreds of student lives, so why not take it? I'd loosened up a bit over break as well, so I needed to get my head back in the game. However, since today was the first day back, I decided to ease into things. I suggested that instead of our meeting, we have lunch together, and they all agreed.

“All right then, before that, I need to go to the bathroom!” Aisa said, leaving the room.

“Oh...then me too,” Yume-kun said, following after her.

In the meantime, I decided to ask Ran-kun how her New Year's was.

“I studied. I want to finally win against Irido-san in the third term,” she said nonchalantly.

Though I was slightly concerned that she might have been pushing herself too hard again, I could tell that she’d been keeping her promise with Yume-kun and sleeping properly, judging from the color in her face. *Yume-kun might need to watch out.*

After getting ready to leave, I decided to go to the bathroom too. When I got close, I heard two familiar voices from inside.

“Aw, come on. Tell me!”

“Sorry, he’s pretty shy, so I can’t just yet...”

Apparently, they’d been conversing in the bathroom. I had wondered what was taking them so long. As I quietly entered, I saw Aisa and Yume-kun talking by the sink. Noticing me, they quickly turned around, surprised.

“Oh, it’s just you, Suzurin,” Aisa said, relieved.

“What’s going on? Sharing secrets without me?” I asked.

Judging from the way they were acting, it was easy to deduce that they’d been having a private conversation. *You two should work on your poker faces.* Yume-kun especially looked really uncomfortable and was obviously averting her eyes.

“Well...there was something I wanted to consult Aso-senpai about...”

“You can probably tell Suzurin, can’t you, Yumechi?”

“I-It’s not something I’d go out of my way to report to her about...”

“Didn’t she give you advice...back during the sports festival, was it?”

*Huh? Did I? That conversation we had over lunch? Oh, I see... I have a good idea what’s going on now. It seems that there have been developments with him. I’d been aware that she’d been going to Aisa for advice, but how dutiful of her to give updates like this. This was entirely unlike Aisa, who would make it painfully obvious that something had happened with Hoshibe-senpai but insist on hiding it until we pried it out of her.*

“If this is about what I think it’s about, I’m interested. I won’t force you to tell me though,” I said.

“Okay, well then, here it goes...” Yume-kun’s cheeks flushed. *Let me guess, you went on a date? He said something nice to you? You seemed down during the Christmas party, so I’ll take any kind of good news, no matter how small—I...have a boyfriend.*”

I froze up. “You...huh?” *You...have a boyfriend? You’re in a relationship now? Huh?* “Uh...might it be...*him?*”

She fidgeted around embarrassedly. “Yeah, it’s...probably who you think it is.”

“Huh?! Suzurin, you know who it is?! Spill! She won’t tell me!”

*I understand why she hasn’t. It’s not something she’d want to simply tell the world. After all, she’s dating her stepbrother, Mizuto Irido.* I only knew because Joe had a good read on people, but if they could get by without telling anyone, it was probably better that way. Who knew what people might say.

Besides, Aisa looked like a person who couldn’t keep a secret, but also, she didn’t have many friends, so it might not have mattered too much.

*Him though, huh? That fastidious boy... I thought it’d take a little longer for them to get together, but...*

“Congratulations. I mean that from the bottom of my heart,” I said.

“Thank you!” Yume-kun said, smiling slightly.

When I congratulated her, I meant it—honestly and truly. That being said, I... I...

“Yay, Yumechi! Now we’re both taken!”

“Thank you, Senpai! Please continue giving me advice from here on out as well!”

They held each other’s hands, jumping excitedly at the fact that they both had boyfriends. Meanwhile, I couldn’t help as I stood there silently. *Crap. I’ve been left in the dust.*

## A Birthday's Left-Behind Soldiers

On the fifth of January, Joe's birthday, he and I went out on a date. Yes, that's right. A *date*. Last year, I'd failed to learn when his birthday was in time, so I'd been left to buy his present after winter break had ended. That's why I'd made an appointment far in advance to pick out his present together.

Joe looked surprised as he saw me appear at our meeting place. "Kurenai-san... You're looking... How do I put this?"

"Drab?" I asked, proudly showing off my normal coat and wig of an average hairstyle. "It's an outfit to blend into the background. After all, whenever I go out with you, you constantly seem to feel inferior."

"You don't have to go out of your way to suppress your individuality..."

"I'm not. I'm simply trying to draw out yours."

Exactly one year ago, I'd tried all different kinds of outfits on Joe, but none of them had worked. So this year, I'd decided to take the opposite approach and adapt to him instead. There was nothing wrong with one of us being a light and the other a shadow, but every now and then, it would be nice for us to be side by side, walking together at the same speed.

"I may be the epitome of plain from a distance, but..." Then, I grabbed his arm. "If you look at me from up close, you'll see how cute I am."

I stared into his eyes from close proximity, causing him to awkwardly look away. If he had blushed, it would've been more obvious, but still, it seemed I had successfully flustered him. *Excellent*. I felt as if I'd gotten a little closer to Joe during the trip to Kobe. I'd also gone through painstaking effort to obtain and covertly carry the item that Yume-kun had advised me to purchase.

In other words, today was the day! I was going to pluck away his obstinate persona! One could say that there was no better chance!

"Oh, this bracelet is nice and subdued. Maybe it's time that you started wearing accessories like these. How about I get a matching one? I mean, not that I think anyone would notice, but sharing a secret would be nice, right? Oh yeah, it looks great on you! I'm not lying. You should really try to believe me every now and then."

Though I was gentler than usual, I was also one step closer than I normally would be. I was treating him like one would a precious treasure. With every action I took, Joe would avert his gaze. Even so, he neither brushed me off nor pulled away. I knew him well enough to see through everything and know that he was embarrassed. This was proof that he was beginning to accept my feelings towards him.

There was no point in telling him how I felt anymore. Words were nothing but decorations of a distant past. They were outdated. That's why I had no choice but to express myself through my actions. *I'm going to keep showing you how much I like you with my face, my limbs, and my body until you believe me.*

After a day of fully enjoying myself, I took the opportunity to propose what I'd been holding back for the entire day. "It feels sad to simply part like this." *Beating around the bush isn't going to work with him.* I pinched his coat and continued talking. "Would you...like to come back to my place?"

*The entire day, I've moved closer to you. That's why I'd like you to move closer to me, even just a little. I have no ulterior motive. That's my honest wish.* Following the precedent that Aisa had set with her story was nothing but an honest coincidence.

Joe looked around, embarrassed, gently gripped my hand that was pinching his coat, and... "I'll have to decline. I need to help with dinner at home."

Then he quietly walked away as if it were the most normal thing in the world, leaving me speechless. *Why?! How, with this progression of events?!* I was left with no choice but to return to my house like a straggler after a lost battle.

Aisa had gone all the way, and Yume-kun had gotten herself a boyfriend. Aside from Ran-kun, who had no interest in romance, I was the only one left on the student council without a boyfriend! I was supposed to be the one leading the way. *I'm the student council president, for crying out loud! I need to make Joe fall for me, and there isn't a moment to waste! This is an extremely important task for the student council president of Rakuro High School.*

## The Grass Is Always Greener



## Kogure Kawanami

I could generally tell when a new couple was formed. When people were in love, it showed in their behavior, no matter how hard they tried to hide it. They'd secretly exchange looks, "accidentally" brush against each other, and in the most obvious cases, they'd go somewhere they thought was secluded and laugh together at the secret they thought they were keeping. This was especially true during the honeymoon phase, when they were all giddy from the freshness of their relationship. But they couldn't hide from me. As a ROM expert, I had heightened senses and could easily see through anyone with my discerning eye.

"Hey, Gotoh! You started datin' Watanabe-san, huh?" I asked, nudging a guy in our class who had been acting differently.

"N-No..." Gotoh said in an out-of-character, low, sheepish voice, trying to throw me off his trail.

*Christmas really brings couples together. I love it!* Meanwhile, the Irido siblings seemed the same as usual. When Irido came over on Christmas, I'd thought he'd figured something out, but from what I could tell, it didn't seem like anything had changed. *Lame...*

"You don't think so either?" After a few days had passed from the start of the third semester, Minami was complaining to me during our lunch break. "Judging by how Irido-kun acted back then, I'm sure *something* happened, but..." she said as she bit her straw. "Yume-chan's actin' perfectly normal, like nothing happened at all."

"You sure she's not just hidin' it?"

"Huh? I don't think Yume-chan's really the type of person who can hide things."

"You think so? What about that land mine of a secret she's been hiding from her parents for almost a year?"

"That's...true." Minami frowned as if she was pouting while sucking down the rest of her apple tea. "Well, whatever happened, it can't be anything more than

the two of them making up after having a fight or something. She would totally tell me if anything big happened! I doubt Irido-kun would tell you anything, though.”

“Why’s that?”

“You have *some* self-awareness, don’t you? You stupid voyeur.” *True. I can’t call myself a ROM expert if finding out revolves around someone reporting to me that they’re in a relationship.*

“But y’know...” Minami rested her head in her hand while glancing towards the classroom door. Right then, Irido walked out, carrying a book under his arm. “Something did happen.”

“Like...what?”

“Like...something.”

“Like *what*?!”

“You don’t get the same feeling? Don’t you get a sense that something’s different? Can’t you *smell* it?”

“Like her putting on perfume or something?”

“No, like there’s something different about her aura or something...”

For as long as I could remember, Minami had always worked off instinct. She could jump into sports or video games without knowing anything about them and do fine. It was like that when it came to interacting with other people too. Her nose was always right on the money.

“Well...if you’re saying somethin’s up, I guess it is,” I said.

“By the way...” Minami stared at my face.

“What?”

“Have you...mellowed out?”

“Huh?! What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Like, before, you were meddling a lot. You’d be all like, ‘Let’s tail ’em!’ or whatever.”

“I’m not a *real* voyeur like that! I just like to quietly watch!”

“Uh-huh...” She tilted her head and faintly smiled. “Has your interest switched to your own love life?”

“Urk.” I choked and began coughing.

Minami grinned while staring at me. “You’re more interested in looking at a certain someone rather than the couples around you, huh?”

“Y-You’re just being narcissistic!”

“Huh? Who said anything about me?”

*You’re so annoying! There’s nothing more infuriating than a childhood friend who’s overly self-conscious!*

“Romance isn’t something to be experienced. I’m not changin’ my opinion.”

“Well, it’s not like I don’t get what you’re saying, especially after watching Higashira-san recently.”

“Why her?”

“Huh? Don’t you know?” Minami gave me a surprised look. “Gimme a sec,” she said, pulling out her phone and searching for something. Then she showed me a picture that’d been posted on Twitter. “This picture’s been makin’ the rounds.”

“Hm? I feel like I’ve seen it before...”

“Higashira-san drew it.”

“Oh... Wait, what?!” I looked down and saw that it’d been retweeted over three thousand times.

“I heard from Yume-chan and then confirmed it with Higashira-san. Apparently, she’s always been pretty good, but sometime around the Kobe trip she started getting serious. After just a month, she’s trending. She’s a prodigy—plain and simple.”

“I was wondering where she’s been since I haven’t seen her online lately...”

“Irido-kun’s been managing her. They work together to decide what kind of pictures she puts out.”

*“What?!” She’s become so incorrigible. When did this happen?!*

“Don’t say anything extra to her, okay? Yume-chan already knows about it.”

“I know! But seriously...a month?”

I’d had no clue how skilled she was, but having a picture of yours trending was at the level of a pro from the perspective of someone like me, who knew nothing about the industry. Getting that far in a month would definitely leave you without time to play games, let alone pursue a romance.

“It must be nice to have something you can pour yourself into,” Minami said, sighing. “I help with all kinds of clubs every now and then, but none of them really speak to me. I pretty much half-ass them all.”

“Could you have at least half-assed our relationship, then?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” Minami said while looking at Higashira’s picture. “I’ve started pitying how I can only really feel happiness while in love.”

I wanted to quip that that’d make *me* the pitiful one, but I was able to hold myself back. I understood where she was coming from. It wasn’t like I was focused on a single goal. I was just doing whatever, so seeing someone who had a goal made me kinda jealous.

“Being obsessed with drawing isn’t exactly better than being obsessed with a guy.”

“You think so?” she asked.

“It’s just riskier with guys; that’s all.”

“Then I guess I’m okay.” *In what way? I’m saying that the guy is in danger!*

“Aw man, isn’t there someone out there that’ll make me happy?”

“Are you waiting for me to make a joke?”

“I’d love someone who could be completely codependent with me.”

“Are you waiting for me to make a joke?!”

*There’s nobody out there who fits that requirement.*

## **The Remaining “Firsts”**

## Mizuto Irido

I made my way to the multipurpose room on the fifth floor that I'd been instructed over LINE to go to. The room was twice as big as a classroom and had white desks lined up in evenly spaced intervals, but in this huge space, there was just one person waiting. As I walked in with my lunch box and book under my arm, Yume smiled and waved.

"Over here!"

I approached her and put my lunch box down on a desk next to her. "You didn't have to call me over. You're the only one here."

"Doesn't it give a 'rendezvous' vibe though?"

"We're not so inexperienced that we're going for 'vibes' exactly, are we?" I pulled out a chair, sat down, and surveyed the deserted room. "We came here a lot during the cultural festival, but I guess there's nothing going on right now. Shouldn't it be locked up?"

"Heh heh," Yume laughed proudly and dangled a key in front of her face.

"Is this student council privilege? Or an abuse of power?"

"You're making it sound worse than it is. We're planning on using it after school, so I was entrusted with the key." Perhaps because she wanted to make sure she didn't lose it, she put it in her purse. Then she brought out her lunch box. "Plus, it's not like there's anywhere we can have lunch together if I don't do something like this." She glanced at me, gently smiling.

I could feel myself getting embarrassed. I went to undo the cloth wrapped around my lunch box. "Does it matter? We eat together every day."

"But it's the first time we're eating lunch alone, right?"

*That's true. Usually Kawanami or Minami-san is with us. It's never been just the two of us.* We'd previously decided that regular stepsiblings eating by themselves might've crossed a line of what might've been considered normal.

"Honestly, I've always really liked places that seem like a secret hideout. You know, like the spots you see in manga that are in front of the door to the roof?" Yume asked.

“Yeah, but in reality, those kinds of places are pretty dirty, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, probably. They aren’t somewhere you’d want to eat.”

*Makes sense. It’s not like anyone really cleans there.* “I like this more. We don’t have to be scared every time we hear someone.”

On this floor, there weren’t any classrooms—just the library, art room, and crafts room, and these were already places that not many people went to. Even though it was lunchtime, there wasn’t a single sound of conversation on this floor. It was perfectly silent.

“We’re lucky to get this entire room to ourselves.”

We took off the lids to our lunch boxes, which had essentially the same contents, except hers was more green and mine was more brown, which made sense since Yuni-san made our lunches.

Ever since we’d all started living together, Yuni-san had been making our lunches every day, but recently, the number of days she couldn’t make us lunches had increased. She wasn’t slacking or anything, though. Apparently she’d gotten very busy at work, and just like dad, she’d been coming home from work late every day.

“Yours has more meat than mine!” Yume said unhappily as she observed the contents of my lunch box.

I looked back at hers. “Yours has a lot more variety.”

“She’s probably watching out for my figure. But still...I wanna eat meat. Give me a little?”

“You’re gonna get fat.”

“Urk!” Yume frowned, making a pained expression. “Who says that? Especially to their girlfriend!”

“Actually, *have* you gained weight?”

“The only things that have gotten bigger are...my boobs.”

“Don’t make the same kind of excuses as Isana.” *It’s true that Yume’s still in the middle of growing, but still.*

Yume groaned in frustration. “Up until now I was always able to say that the food went straight to my boobs, but now...”

“Time’s up, huh?” I chuckled.

“You’re acting like it’s not your problem! You wouldn’t like me if I was fat, would you?”

“Depends on how big you get. If you get a little bigger, it won’t matter. You’ve always been on the thinner side anyway.” *Honestly too thin. I can tell every time I hug you.* I took my chopsticks and gave Yume one piece of my fried chicken.

“Here.”

She groaned again, this time as if she were trying to resist temptation. “Don’t do it! Don’t give in to my whims. You’re gonna break my willpower to look good for my boyfriend!”

“It’s better than you being skin and bones.”

I brought my chopsticks to her mouth and she opened her mouth like she was a baby bird before biting a bit of the fried chicken.

“It’s...so good.”

Then she proceeded to nibble on it. Looking at her as she did this, I really felt like I was a mother bird feeding her child. After finishing the piece, Yume groaned again, this time with disappointment, a little oil around her mouth.

“I need to look up diets... Maybe I should ask Higashira-san.”

“I doubt she’s on any kind of diet.”

“She has to be! There’s absolutely no way she can have that kind of underbust otherwise!”

“I’m pretty sure she’s losing weight only because she’s too focused on her art.”

Winter break had been a whole ordeal. I’d held off on going to her house, but I’d ended up going once because Natora-san had messaged me saying that she was going out for some fun and that she was leaving me to make Isana food. It was as if I had been dog sitting for her.



“She’s just becoming haggard, then. She’s not really losing weight.” I wasn’t sure if the expression Yume was making now was one of envy or worry.

“The end result’s the same though,” I said.

Isana wasn’t the type to get fat easily. I wasn’t sure if it was just her body type or what, but at the very least, mentally, she wasn’t the stress-eating type. She was the sleep and forget type.

Yume sighed bitterly. “The world is unfair,” she muttered, chomping on her vegetables.

As I watched her, an unsettling feeling came over me. She had slender fingers, and a thin neck, but she had very defined body lines in the right places. *No matter how I look at it, you’re the unfair one.* If she said this to another girl, she’d definitely get on their bad side.

As her boyfriend, maybe it’d be better for me to compliment her body and help her realize her own beauty. But also, saying something, like “Damn, you got huge tits but a super tight waist” sounded like something a stereotypical perverted old man would say. But if I went the opposite direction and praised her on the maintenance of her figure, I could totally see her being like, “Huh? Oh, but I don’t really do anything special.” That only left one option.

“Well, best of luck...for my sake as well.”

“Huh?” Though I’d only really tacked on the last part of my statement as an afterthought, she seemed to have reacted to that the most.

“Hm? What’s the matter?”

“Oh, no... It’s just...” Yume suddenly clammed up and began poking her cherry tomatoes with her chopsticks for no discernible reason. “Keeping up my figure for my boyfriend kinda... It kinda carries the nuance that I’m *offering* you something. You know?”

*Offering me something?* In the back of my mind, I imagined a very clichéd scene. Yume was wrapped in nothing but a thin sheet and was holding out her arms towards me, inviting me. Then, she whispered, “I prepared myself just for you.”

“You call me a closet perv all the time, but you’re really up there too, you know?” I said.

Then Yume got red all the way up to her ears. “I-It’s not my fault! It’s a real problem for girls!”

She was making it sound like it was a fake problem for guys, but in reality, it was something that I couldn’t ignore. It was true that this was the first time that we’d eaten together, just the two of us—but that was just in high school.

In middle school, we’d secretly eat together like this. We had a lot of “firsts” in middle school. We’d had our first date, our first kiss—even though we’d just started dating, we’d already experienced all those firsts with each other. That meant there was but one “first” left. One that we’d tried before but failed at.

We both clammed up and just like that, lunch ended without us being able to get any closer to each other.

## **The Courage Needed to Be Courageous**

**Joji Haba**

*“Would you...like to come back to my place?”*

I sighed as that moment replayed in my head for the umpteenth time. There’s not a guy alive whose heart wouldn’t burst out of his chest after hearing those words.

Kurenai-san was always like this. She was so overwhelmingly transparent with her intentions—it made me feel like a coward for trying not to cross a line. If it had been anyone else, I would’ve thought they were confused, but Kurenai-san was much, *much* smarter than the likes of me. There was no way that she had been being impulsive. She’d thought everything through.

I was scared. I’d felt this as soon as I saw the outfit she wore to fit into the background with me. She’d do all kinds of things for my sake. So on the one hand, I’d felt stupidly excited, but on the other there was an incredible amount of guilt knowing how far she went just for my sake.

Someone like Kurenai-san having any feelings for a guy like me was no doubt

some kind of huge mistake. But there was something to be learned by looking around. Romance only happens in general because of mistakes, but I lacked the courage to accept them. If anything, accepting the fact that of all people I had been the one to influence Kurenai-san to make a mistake wasn't something I could do.

I wasn't aware of anyone who had as low an opinion of themselves as I did. I just naturally assumed that I was no different from a rock by the side of the road. Some people might say that's an optimistic view, in a way. After all, it sounds better than viewing myself as garbage, but in my opinion, that'd be a little bit better. At least with garbage, there's the chance that someone'll pick it up and throw it away. All a rock by the wayside can do is trip people.

*No, all I'm doing is playing with words. All I'm doing is dragging myself down and basking in the resulting self-loathing.* I was just being noncommittal. A dreamlike reality was in front of me, and I was afraid that I'd wake up.

I went to open the door to the student council room at the same exact time as usual and was met with a half naked Kurenai-san.

"Hm?"

"Oh..."

I froze up as her porcelain skin entered my eyes. She wasn't wearing anything but sexy, grown-up black panties. She wasn't wearing anything on her top. Around her neck was a white towel, which just barely covered her breasts, as if she'd just gotten out of the bath.

I immediately looked around the room as if to escape from the sight in front of me, and saw that her gym clothes were on top of the desk. *Oh, right. The last few hours of today were dedicated to gym class, and we had to run a marathon.* Most people went straight home after that, but I could imagine that she'd come straight to the student council room to wipe herself down.

This wasn't exactly the first time I'd seen Kurenai-san in her underwear; actually she'd displayed it to me quite often. I wouldn't say I was used to it, rather that I'd developed a resistance. But the timing of this was horrible. Seeing her like this after she left me with those parting words the other day...

“Sorr—” I began.

“The door,” she said with a troubled smile before I could apologize. “It’s cold. Could you shut it?”

“Oh... Yeah.”

I shut the door as instructed. Several beats later, I realized something. *Why didn’t I leave?* She’d been acting so natural that it didn’t register in my mind that this was something I shouldn’t be around for. *It’s not too late. I can leave right now and—*

“Joe.”

Just as I turned around to leave, Kurenai-san had already closed in on me. I couldn’t step back because the door was in my way. She slammed her hand against it, right next to my face. She wore nothing but a teasing smile and the towel draped around her shoulders, while using her other hand to trace the outline of my ear.

“Your face is red.”

*Oh no, wait. Don’t tell me...* Just as I could tell that the blood had rushed to my face... “You... You were waiting for this?” I asked.

She giggled cryptically in response. I’d thought it was weird that her towel was around her neck instead of being used to dry her body. She’d been waiting for me. She’d *wanted* to catch me after I ran away from her offer the other day. That’s why she’d set up this “accident.” *As always, it seems that the reference materials she’s using to set these things up are off.*

She wedged her knee between my legs. Even though she was a lot smaller and daintier than I was, it was as if I’d been captured by the vines of some kind of carnivorous plant.

“You’ve got some nerve humiliating me the other day,” she muttered, staring into my eyes.



I turned my head away from her. “I-I really did have to go...” I groaned.

But she interrupted my excuse by brushing her hand against the back of my neck. The sensation of her slender fingers creeping across my neck sent electricity radiating through my body in waves. In her eyes, I could tell she enjoyed my reaction, though she still wore the same calm expression. Her cheeks were gradually growing redder; she was almost certainly getting increasingly excited. *C-Crap! I need to run away somehow!*

“P-People are gonna find us! You need to put clothes on!”

“Then you need to promise me you’ll come over,” she said, putting her finger on the towel hiding her breasts. “You’ll be able to enjoy *all* of this without worrying about other people.”

Kurenai-san wasn’t the type to joke about this. She was *always* serious, no matter how much it seemed like she was teasing; I knew that. I was the one who wanted to believe that it was all just an act.

On the trip to Kobe, Hoshibe-senpai had answered Aso-san’s feelings with his own. On the other hand, I’d come up with reasons to turn away from Kurenai-san’s seriousness. That’s why she’d gotten desperate and had resorted to this. I knew. I really did. After all, if there was anything I could be proud of, it was my ability to read other people, and I knew that aspect of myself impressed Kurenai-san too.

Kurenai-san began to move the towel to the side, slowly revealing the youthful, still developing swellings underneath. If I stayed silent, I was sure I’d see everything. But would that make me lucky? No. That... That’d be...

“Kurenai-san!” Before she could move the towel out of the way, I hugged her, pressing my body against hers to hide it from my eyes.

She let out a strange shriek as I did. She was so small, slender, and incredibly beautiful to boot. That’s why, I...

“Please... Not like this.” It was time for me to be honest with her. “If this is happening, I want it to happen the right way... Going in order and not skipping straight to the dirty bits.”

“Huh?” Kurenai-san was taken aback.

But looking at my face from close proximity and sensing my nervousness from my hands, she sighed and smiled as if to relent. *Did she figure everything out? Does she know that I don't have the courage to face her and that's why I can't even look at her?*

“So what do you have in mind?” she asked.

*You know, yet you're still asking? You're still trying to toy with me.* Thinking back to our trip to Kobe, I came up with an answer. “Hanging...out, or something?”

“We've already done that in spades.”

“Holding...hands?”

“We've done that too.”

“Embracing each other?”

“We're doing that right now.”

*Urgh! My head's a mess, I don't know what's going on anymore! If there's one thing we haven't done yet, it's gotta be...* “Kissing...maybe?”

She'd kissed me on the cheek before, but never on the lips, of course. Kurenai-san trembled in my arms. I could tell she was smiling.

“So...you wanna kiss me, Joe?” she asked, her voice growing softer.

“I-It's more that I think that's the next step in general...you know?”

I felt her hands firmly wrap around my back as if she was saying she wasn't going to let me go. “I apologize. It seems that I might have jumped the gun. I'll restrain myself and do this the customary way and make you fall for me more conventionally. There's only a month until Valentine's Day, anyway.”

*Valentine's Day...* “By the time White Day comes around a month after that, I'm sure you'll want to kiss me so badly that you won't be able to hold yourself back, so...” She suddenly slipped out of my arms and turned her back to me, taking the towel off of her. “We'll save this until then.” She turned to look at me over her shoulder, wearing a devilish grin.

I sank to the floor, watching her walk away half naked. Seeing this was not so much alluring as it was akin to watching a heroic visage. *We're going to pick this up again...in two months?* I'd been the one to stop her, but as soon as I had, I couldn't help but feel pathetic. She smirked, and I got the sense that she'd seen through it all.

Suddenly, I heard voices in the distance. *Oh crap!*

"K-Kurenai-san!"

"Hm? What? Change your mind?"

"I hear people! The others are coming!"

In the next moment, Kurenai-san frantically scooped up her uniform and leaped into the documents room. After a few minutes, she reappeared and looked completely normal, like nothing had happened...except her ribbon was slightly crooked.

## Reactive to Retroactive

### Kogure Kawanami

*"I've started pitying how I can only really feel happiness when I'm in love."*

By the time we were about half a month into the third semester, Minami's words had played in my head countless times. It wasn't as if I could sympathize with her sentiment. I refused to think of myself as pathetic for appreciating others' romances.

It was the same for people who loved a certain YouTuber, idol, or game character. Of course, it was freakin' impressive for people like Higashira to be able to switch to the creative side of the industry, but that didn't make people like her better or worse than others.

That being said, Minami's words were probably stuck in my head because I lacked confidence. I wasn't born a ROM expert; I'd only become one after I had a horrible experience with a relationship. In other words, I was a big loser. That might've been a little harsh to say, but it was no different than giving up on something after a negative experience and picking up a different hobby instead.



Thinking about it like that, I knew there was definitely a part of me that felt left in the dust by the people who naturally fell in love with things and could pursue them single-mindedly, as if being led by something greater. Those kinds of people who were purely passionate were too bright.

I felt the same when I saw people around me falling in love. Just like with Hoshibe-senpai during the Kobe trip. I'd gotten irritated with myself, catching a glimpse of resignation and envy deep inside me after seeing him and realizing that I couldn't be pure like him anymore. I needed to be around people, but I envied otakus who didn't.

This intense narrow-mindedness all stemmed from a certain girl. I wanted to tell her to take responsibility for her actions, but let's be real, she totally would, and that was a problem in itself. Ultimately, I had no choice but to think through by myself how I wanted to live my life.

"Hey, wassup?"

As I was walking through the halls after school ended, thinking about philosophy, which wasn't something that suited me in the slightest, I ran into a familiar face. It was the small-bodied Akatsuki Minami, who was for some reason wearing a basketball jersey.

"Yo, what's with your getup?"

"They were down a body so they called me in. We just started doin' interval training," she said, walking towards the water fountain, holding her hair back while drinking. "Phew!"

Then she pulled up her jersey and wiped her mouth with it. As she did, the white of her stomach showed and just above it, the edge of a bluish bra. Seeing it so blatantly out there had me sweating. I thought about warning her, but I could see her interpreting it as me being possessive because I didn't want other people to see. So instead, I looked away, pretending not to notice, but even that kinda felt like I was doing it *because* I was bothered by it.

"Aren't you cold? We're already halfway through January, y'know," I said, trying to mask my thoughts.

Minami let go of her jersey. "Doesn't bother me as long as I'm movin'

around.”

“Got it...”

*I’ve been wondering about this for a while, but why are there so many gaps in a jersey?* It was like a really loose tank top. Just bending over a little bit was enough to give a glimpse of what was underneath. *At least wear it over your gym clothes.*

“Are you even useful, being so short? If you’re going after someone with a ball, can you even reach it?”

“I make up for it with my jumping strength! They call me the tiny giant!”

“What are you, a frog?”

“Call me a serow! You know, the goatlike animal? *Achoo!*”

She suddenly sneezed and began shivering. *Looks like she’s cooled down. I don’t have a choice.* I took off my uniform’s sweater-vest and put it around her shoulders.

“Thanks. Could I also get a tissue?”

“Sure.” I gave her a tissue from my pocket.

She then blew her nose loudly. “But anyway,” she said, crumpling the tissue in her hand, her voice becoming nasally. “I can’t beat actual basketball players one-on-one. It takes everything I’ve got to try and juke ‘em. I’m just kinda there to be nice since they’re down a person. Not like they really need me.” There wasn’t a trace of bitterness in her voice. Her words were completely dry.

Minami helped out a lot of the sports clubs, but she wasn’t an *actual* member of any of them. She was athletically inclined and could pick up the tricks to sports—she even got pretty good—but she didn’t have the drive to take any of them seriously.

“You do all kinds of club stuff, but which one are you best at?” I asked, suddenly curious.

“Hm...” she said, looking up after glancing at me. “Not sure. I get the feeling I’m not really suited for any of them.”

“Even though they ask you for your help all the time?”

“I’m just athletic. But in the end, it’s more advantageous if you’re tall. With running, the taller you are, the more distance you can quickly cover, right? Though, I guess since I’m lighter, I’m faster out of the gate.”

“Oh kinda like how lighter characters have more acceleration in *Mario Kart*?”

“Yeah, exactly!” That said, in competitions, people tended to use heavy racers since they’re the fastest overall. “Honestly, I think my best bet would be in ping-pong.”

“Now that I think about it, you destroyed me during our family vacation.”

“Yeah, I know, right? I remember you sulked so badly, I panicked like crazy.”

“You haven’t thought about playing sports for real?”

“Well, it’s like, even if it suits me, it doesn’t really matter, ’cause I don’t have the drive to stick with it.”

With our freshman year coming to an end soon, I felt like I was beginning to understand people better. For those in the world called prodigies, it wasn’t important if they were born with the latent ability to do something—it was far more pertinent that they had the unlimited drive to do it.

When people learn that they lack motivation, they take one step towards being an adult. I didn’t fully understand it, but it felt like I was being left behind.

“You didn’t have to wait for me.”

“I needed something from the classroom. You just happened to be on the way.”

*Hm?* Minami and I turned around, hearing a pair of familiar voices. We were currently in the hallway leading to the gymnasium. Looking towards the school’s main building, I saw the two Irido siblings deep in the hall. It seemed that Irido-san was on her way home. She had her hand in her bag. Irido was... *Wait, why’s he still at school? I thought he wasn’t hanging with Higashira in the library anymore.*

“There’s something I need to buy on the way home—mom’s request.”

“Fine. I can at least hold the bags for you.”

“Thanks. Here you go.”

“You can at least hold your school bag.”

“Aw, come on!”

Minami and I naturally faced each other. The Irido siblings weren't really friendly at school. That was why the rumor that had started around the beginning of school about Irido-san being a brother lover had been incredibly short-lived. But from the way they were acting with each other...

“Let's go, then.”

“Yeah.”

And then the decisive moment that made everything clear came. Irido-san naturally and casually wrapped her hand around her stepbrother's hand. Then she lovingly bumped her shoulder against his.

“We're still at school,” he said bluntly, cautioning her and pulling his hand away. But even so, they walked towards the exit, lined up with one another like they were on the best of terms.

Minami and I could only stare in absolute astonishment as they disappeared from our vision. There was only one thought running through my head. *They duped us!* Irido had snagged her and hidden it from me?! *I knew it! I knew something happened between the two of them after he stayed over on Christmas!*

“Hey, Minami—” I called out to her, both frustrated and defeated. For some reason, her mouth hung half-open, her eyes glued on them. “Yo, you good?”

“Uh, I'm...” Minami shut her eyes and took some time to find the words she wanted to say. “Kinda heartbroken?”

“Huh?” *Now you're heartbroken? I thought you gave up on Irido-san a while ago.*

“Of course, I'm sad about Yume-chan, but I *did* propose to Irido-kun once too. I dunno how to explain it. It's a mess...”

“I wouldn’t call what you felt for either of them anything as grand as love.”

“Yeah, but still! It’s just...”

*I get it. This is hard to swallow. This situation is all sorts of complicated. You think you’re over someone but you’re not. You think it’s the end of things, but it’s not. Before you know it, you’re being bogged down by feelings.*

“Need me to console you?” I teasingly suggested. This was the best way to deal with her right now.

As expected, she looked up at me and grinned. “My place or yours?”

“Huh? Why are you assuming we’re going to one of our places?”

“Well, why not? Isn’t that normal when a guy’s trying to console a girl?”

“Why’re you tryin’ to make it look like I’m a guy who only thinks with his crotch?!”

Minami’s shoulders shook slightly from her giggling. *I can’t believe you could make such a dirty joke after seeing those innocent two. Innocent...huh?* I might’ve been the only one who saw them like that, but given their circumstances, they might’ve been in a much more difficult position than we were. Even so, they’d overcome it and played innocent. *In that case, how long am I gonna...*

I exhaled. “When’re you done with basketball?”

“Hm? Maybe another thirty minutes?”

“I’ll wait for you, then.” *How long am I gonna stand still when those two have already progressed? I’m not gonna hide behind my observer persona forever.*

“Let’s hang out somewhere on the way home.”

“Really?! It’s been a hot second!”

“Yeah, I’ll even treat you in commemoration of having your heart broken.”

“Sweet! Hell yeah, heartache!”

“That’s not something a heartbroken person should say.”

Minami took off my sweater-vest and threw it back to me. “Kay, wait just a bit. I’m gonna finish the match real quick!” she yelled as she ran off.

“Basketball games are time-based...” I slightly smiled as I gripped the jacket, her warmth still on it.

Despite making up my mind during the Kobe trip, I hadn’t thought about the future at all. *That needs to change.*

## Long-Distance Relationship at Home

Mizuto Irido

In our house, the places where we could act as a couple were limited. We had only until our parents came home to have free rein. After that, they were primarily on the first floor, so we were then restricted to the time when we passed by each other in the hall on the second floor to chat with each other.

“Well, good night.”

“Night.” I waved at her before going into my room.

I could sense that she was in her room as I navigated the mountains of books in my room to get to my bed. Right when I looked down at my phone, a message from Yume popped up.

**Yume:** Night <3

The little heart that she’d added was definitely not a part of what she’d said to me in the hallway. I smiled a bit. *She’s really forcing it.*

I sent her another “good night” and then fell backwards onto my bed. With our phones, we could communicate regardless of time or place. We could send messages to each other over LINE and sometimes video call each other. But the time we could physically be with each other was limited.

At this point, we were essentially in a long-distance relationship. Despite being in the same house, we were as far apart as we could ever be. At least the time to move forward would come one day.

We’d had all kinds of experiences in middle school. Though this was a fresh start, it was also a continuation from where we’d left off. We’d chosen to be a

couple despite being stepsiblings. We...needed to prove that we weren't just doomed to repeat history, and to do that, we needed to take our relationship further than we had back then.

I fell silent with my thoughts. I might've been keeping up appearances, but I was no different from an average adolescent boy with dirty expectations. *I wonder what Yume thinks. Does she want to...take the next step with me?*

## Expectations and Unease

### Yume Irido

I exhaled as I lay on my back on my bed, trying to steady my breathing. My heart was beating unreasonably fast. Starting this month, the entrance to the future suddenly opened up. I imagined myself passing through the gates and couldn't help but start to get embarrassed and worried. It shouldn't have been surprising, but I couldn't believe how all over the place my emotions were. Who could blame me? I couldn't help but remember how happy Aso-senpai had looked as she spoke fondly about her experience, and then I thought back on what almost happened between Mizuto and me in this very house just two years ago.

I quietly screamed into my pillow, clutching it while rolling around. It went without saying that I was prepared yet also anxious about it becoming reality. From what I read online, it normally happened in the boyfriend's bedroom. It was like that for Aso-senpai, at least. But in this case, my boyfriend's room was right next to mine and also in the same house as our parents'. It was hard to really make plans.

But one day... One day, we'd find the timing. We wouldn't rush into it. If anything, this would be a long time coming. That's why we'd made up our minds to just go for it when the time came.

I was equal parts excited and scared. *Is Mizuto thinking about this too? Does he...fantasize about me in dirty ways, thinking about doing this and that with me? Wait, what should I do?! I don't know how to do anything! Should I ask someone? Maybe Akatsuki-san or Aso-senpai? But how am I supposed to ask them?! I'm so embarrassed I could die!*

*First, calm down.* There was no use worrying about the future. It wasn't like we were making any specific plans yet. Right now, I needed to focus on what was right in front of me, and I didn't mean the budget meeting. February 14th—Valentine's Day—was right around the corner.



# A Normal Girl's Confession

## Championship of Those Who Confessed

Yume Irido

"Akatsuki-san...do you have any plans for Valentine's?" When it was just the two of us, I worked up the courage to bring up a certain topic.

Akatsuki-san raised her eyebrows while looking at me as if she'd realized something. I half expected her to say, "Aha!"

"Aha!" *Wait, she actually did.* "Let me guess: you want to make Irido-kun some homemade chocolate, but once you looked it up online and got scared that you wouldn't get it right, so you want someone who actually knows what they're doing to teach you? Yeah?"

"I-I didn't say any of that." *But also, that's pretty much it.*

Ever since the cat had gotten out of the bag about my relationship with Mizuto, it felt like Akatsuki-san was trying to be considerate of me, but sometimes she'd be so on point it was scary. Mizuto was very perceptive too, but Akatsuki's guesses made me uncomfortable for some reason.

"I gotchu! I was already planning on making some myself, so let's do it together! I'll teach you everything from how to melt the chocolate to how to put your hair in it! I'll make it easy to understand!"

"Uh, I don't have any plans to put anything inedible into my chocolate..."

*She's kidding, right?* She ignored me and continued. "Oh, in that case... What would you say to adding another person?"

"Another person?"

"Yep! You should know her. There's a person who won't make obligatory chocolate unless you remind her, right?"

During lunch break, we went to Higashira-san's class and asked someone to call her out for us.

"Chocolate for Valentine's...?" Her eyes were misting over with confusion. "Oh, right. I suppose that tradition does exist here..."

"What do you think Valentine's Day is?" Akatsuki-san asked.

"Well, isn't it a day when a lot of art of beautiful girls professing their love is posted?"

*I'm not even surprised anymore. This is to be expected for someone who isn't very in touch with their romantic side.* I doubted that she had ever exchanged chocolates with friends either.

"Well, Mizuto's been helping you out a lot, right, Higashira-san?" I said. "Making him some chocolates to thank him for everything shouldn't be too bad, right?"

"Oh! I like the attitude, Yume-chan! You've really got the aura of the true wife!"

"Don't make fun of me!"

Higashira-san furrowed her brow in deep thought. "Though I find your reasoning to be sound, I have a deadline I must make..."

"A deadline? For what?"

"A picture I'm posting on Valentine's Day."

"Isn't making a Valentine's gift for some unknown people instead of the one right in front of you putting the cart before the horse, though?" Akatsuki-san said in exasperation.

In my mind, their work was probably more important than some chocolate.

Higashira-san tilted her head. "I've completed the line art; however, I'm still having difficulty with the expression. I wish someone had filmed me asking out Mizuto-kun."

"You really think of your high school experiences as nothing but reference material, huh?"

“Why don’t you ask Irido-kun? He *was* the one right across from you.”

“According to Mizuto-kun, it’s futile because the characters I draw bear absolutely no resemblance to me.”

It’s true that the characters she drew more than often looked like completely normal girls. They were the opposite of Higashira-san, who was the epitome of abnormality. It was a strange phenomenon.

“Oh, a light bulb has gone off in my head,” Higashira-san said.

“Hm?” both Akatsuki-san and I reacted.

“You two can assist me merely by showing me your expressions when you asked out your respective crushes!”

“Huh...?”

“After that, I’ll be able to participate in the chocolate making!”

*U-Uh...what? How did an invitation to Higashira-san become something we had to bargain with her on?*

“Mm...okay fine.”

While I was thinking a very valid question, Akatsuki-san easily accepted Higashira-san’s proposal. “Ahem,” she began by clearing her throat.

With both Higashira-san’s and my gazes on her Akatsuki-san glanced at me and made a meek expression. She began playing with the tip of her ponytail and tried to desperately quell her anxiousness.

“I...I kinda...like you. Is that...okay?”

As soon as we saw this, both Higashira-san and I lost our breaths. The way she’d practically whispered... That vulnerable expression she wore, which contrasted her bright and energetic personality... It all was all more than enough to make our hearts pound despite knowing it was just an act.

“That was extremely adorable! The absolute best I could ask for!”

“Heh heh. Thankies!”

Higashira-san was straightforward with her high praise and Akatsuki-san sheepishly accepted it. I’d always known she was quite skilled, but I’d never

thought that she would be so good at acting. Or maybe she was pulling from something real...?

“Your turn, Yume-chan!” Akatsuki-san said, looking at me with a grin.

I flinched. “W-Wasn’t that enough for your reference?!” I asked Higashira-san.

“The more the better, right, Higashira-san?” Akatsuki-san said.

“I wholeheartedly agree!”

“I can’t act as well as Akatsuki-san!”

“Don’t worry about it! Just give it your best shot!” Akatsuki-san said, grinning widely. “You’ve already asked someone out, haven’t you? You’ve got a boyfriend, don’tcha??”

*Is this what she’s trying to do? Make me gush about my love life?* “N-No, I...” In an attempt to escape from any follow-up questions, I looked away and covered my mouth with my hands to hide my expression.

“Hmm?”

And then, while fighting back my embarrassment, I spoke. “He...was the one who asked me out.”

Back in middle school, I’d relied on a love letter. Though he had accepted, the words to ask him out hadn’t come from my own mouth.

Before I knew it, both Akatsuki-san and Higashira-san had completely frozen, as if their souls had floated out of their bodies.

“Wh-What happened?”

“N-No, it’s just...” Higashira-san said, clutching her face. “It’s difficult to process my emotions after being struck with cuteness, followed by you boasting about your love life...”

“I-I’m so sorry! This wasn’t something I should’ve said in front of you!”

While I was freaking out, Akatsuki-san nodded deeply. “I really get it, Higashira-san... I felt that damage too...”

“Why did *you*?!”

So it goes, this is how the three of us decided to make chocolate together.

## Those Left Behind

Aisa Aso

I stared at Ranran with a serious expression as she munched on my homemade chocolate like a squirrel.

“How is it...?”

Ranran swallowed and then opened her mouth. “Well, my findings are that...”

I audibly gulped in anticipation.

“I ate too much and have no clue.”

Chocolate wrappers were piled up on the table like a mountain of corpses. Every last of them was a sample of my homemade chocolates that I had poured my heart and soul into. Of course, I’d tried tasting them myself, but I thought guys and girls might taste things differently, so I’d asked Ranran to try them since she was close enough. It *definitely* wasn’t because I didn’t have any other friends.

“Though you call these ‘homemade,’ they’re just melted store-bought chocolates, so that flavor’s still there. Is there really a point in making so many samples when they all taste the same?” Ranran asked while wiping her mouth with a tissue.

“You really do say boyish things, Ranran! You don’t even know how much trouble it is to melt down the chocolate and form it into a shape!”

“Maybe you should try to emphasize the difficulty of it? I’m sure Hoshibe-senpai won’t ignore that.”

“Fair point, but...” I put my elbows on the table and rested my chin in both of my hands, slightly frowning. “He’s graduating soon, right? Which means he’s off to college soon. There’s gonna be a bunch of college girls around him. Don’t you get the sense some floozy’s gonna latch onto him?”

“I suppose it’s not too hard to envision, especially with a real life example

sitting in front of me.”

“You’re calling me a floozy?! The very same person to whom you owe a debt for recommending you to the student council?!” *Not that I mind.* “Anyway! I need to make sure that I remove any potential of some rando coming along and tricking him! That’s why I need the strongest Valentine’s chocolate ever!”

“I see. So you’re fighting fire with a dumpster fire.”

“Ranran?” *First you call me a floozy, now a dumpster fire?! Aren’t you being a little rude?*

“I understand where you’re coming from, but could I ask a question?”

“Hm? Shoot.”

“Do you not trust Hoshibe-senpai?”

“Can you not sound like a guy who’s sick of his clingy girlfriend?!” I crashed to the desk and relaxed my cheeks. “I can’t help it. I’m anxious. I get the feeling that he’s getting further away from me than ever before.”

“Hoshibe-senpai seriously has it rough if his own girlfriend is randomly getting anxious over him. He must be exhausted from how clingy you are.”

“Rude! What’s with the thorny attitude?!” *She’s pretty much an enemy that I damage myself on if I attack her with physical moves!*

“I hope for the best,” Ranran simply said before pulling out a textbook from her bag, opening it on the desk and beginning to study.

I looked up and watched this familiar scene while continuing the conversation. “You don’t have anyone you’re gonna give chocolates to?”

“You really think I would?”

“It doesn’t have to be someone you like. It could just be like a guy in your class.”

“Wouldn’t that just earn me the ire of other girls who think I’m making moves on a guy I’m not even interested in?”

“Rrgh! Your words are cutting so deep!”

“That sounds like a you problem,” Ranran said while quietly moving her pen

across the paper.

## **This Is What Happens When You're the Only One with a Boyfriend**

**Yume Irido**

"Listen, Higashira-san," Akatsuki-san explained, "a lot of guys will harp on girls, saying that melting chocolate and putting it into a shape doesn't count as it being homemade, but the shaping part is what the girls of the world pour their blood, sweat, and tears into."

"I'm not so sure about putting bodily fluids into chocolate..." Higashira-san said.

"I wasn't being literal! I was just talking about the effort put in!"

We were currently in Akatsuki-san's kitchen, completely prepared and equipped. We had all the ingredients and were wearing aprons—the spitting image of homemakers...or at least, Akatsuki-san was. Higashira-san and I looked like we were just playing dress-up.

Since last year, I had gotten a lot more used to cooking. I could quickly make simple recipes off the internet. I had even tried making omelet rice! I will neither confirm nor deny that I succeeded, though.

Either way, we followed Akatsuki-san's instructions. It seemed that Higashira-san really wasn't used to cooking, because when she was asked what her best dish was, she answered with "instant noodles." *If that's really the best you can do, you need to get a job.*

In any case, we made sure to keep the kitchen knife away from Higashira-san, leaving the chopping of the chocolate to me and Akatsuki-san. We couldn't let Higashira-san's precious artist hands get hurt. It was overwhelming at first, but after getting the steps down, it got a lot easier.

"So how's it goin', Yume-chan?" Akatsuki-san asked while carefully watching the temperature of the water.

"How's *what* going?" I asked, tilting my head. Her question was too vague for

me to know what exactly she was implying.

“Your relationship with Irido-kun, silly! Things are probably going well enough if you’re makin’ him chocolates. I rarely get the chance to ask you about things with him.”

Mizuto and I were generally keeping it a secret at school that we were dating. The only ones who knew were Akatsuki-san and Kawanami-kun—who’d found out not too long ago—Higashira-san, and President Kurenai. Haba-senpai might’ve figured it out, but I couldn’t say for certain. Aso-senpai knew I had a boyfriend, but she didn’t know who.

“I’m curious as well!” Higashira-san’s eyes lit up. “It’s already been a month, hasn’t it? And the two of you are living under the same roof, so there are plenty of opportunities for...you know...”

“Totally, Higashira-san.”

“Indubitably, Minami-san.”

The two of them looked at each other, dirty grins on their faces. I could more or less tell what they were thinking. If I were in their shoes, I’d probably want to know too. Whether I would ask the person straight up was another story, though.

“Nothing has *happened*, of course,” I said, continuing to work. “We may live together, but we live with our parents too.”

“Oh, what? There’s all sorts of things you guys can do, as long as you’re sneaky about it.”

“There must be a lot of pent-up *feelings*.”

Akatsuki-san’s face made it clear she was in a teasing mood while Higashira-san began to breathe heavily. It went without saying that there were occasions when we’d slip out of the sight of our parents and do more boyfriend-girlfriend things, but the mood was never right since we couldn’t be certain we wouldn’t get caught. We made plans to hang out outside of the house, but being in public didn’t leave us many options either.

“Both you and Irido-kun are so straitlaced.”



“Mizuto is the embodiment of rationality,” Higashira-san said. “If he thinks something shouldn’t happen, he won’t act on it.”

Coming from a person with a huge chest like Higashira-san, the statement had a certain weight and believability.

“It’s okay, though,” I said. “It’s proof that Mizuto’s really thinking about me.”

“Sure,” Akatsuki-san said, “but as a girl, don’tcha just want him to go all crazy over you every now and then?”

“Isn’t it also magnificent when the guy resists with every fiber of his being until the final strand of his will snaps?” Higashira-san suggested. “I truly believe that Mizuto-kun’s that type of guy!”

“Oh, I love that!” Akatsuki-san agreed. “His cool persona is ripped away and replaced with desperation, making him like a different person entirely.”

“Heh heh... Heh heh heh. I can picture this. How attractive.”

“Can you two stop dirtily talking about my boyfriend like that?!”

*That being said...the idea of Mizuto of all people becoming desperate like that... Oh god. Oh my god!* I tried to cool down, but as I did, I realized that Higashira-san was closely examining my body.

“Yume-san, this might be the perfect opportunity to do a certain cliché.”

“Oh, that?” Akatsuki-san said, clapping her hands together as if she’d telepathically received Higashira-san’s thoughts.

I had no clue what she was talking about though. “Explain?”

“You know, wrapping yourself in a ribbon!”

“And then putting some chocolate on your body!”

Higashira-san and Akatsuki-san put their hands together and gave me a slovenly look. “And then you tell him, ‘Eat up’!” they said in unison.

“Absolutely not.”

“But it’d be so cute!”

“Very erotic, indeed!”

“Why are your thoughts, by default, the same as prepubescent guys’?”

## Out of Moves?

**Suzuri Kurenai**

I nodded after trying one of the test chocolates I’d made. “That should do it.”

I’d already researched Joe’s preferences last year. The chocolates I’d made this year had the same sense of obligation to them as last year’s, so I’d tinkered with their shape a bit, but the taste shouldn’t have been different. I hadn’t messed up at all. I was certain that Joe would accept them without any fuss.

*Is this really okay though? Maybe I should try wrapping a colorful ribbon around me, like I read in one of my reference materials...but I’d feel like dying if he ignored me. In that case, maybe I can make a heart-shaped chocolate and sandwich it in between my breasts— Wait, no. That’s not possible with what I’m packing.*

I sighed as I glanced over from the bright kitchen to the dining room shrouded in darkness. I’d tried to appeal to his inner lust so many times already. I’d gotten on top of him in nothing but my underwear, I’d embraced him and whispered into his ear, and I’d even casually pushed my breasts against him.

Going at him using those kinds of tactics wasn’t going to cut it at this point, but I couldn’t picture anything that would. I was no longer sure what to do. Was it because I was still a mere child? If I were an adult with more experience, could I draw his attention cleverly without having to rely on a more pragmatic approach? I was out of ideas. I’d done everything I could at this point. Now, there was only one thing left to do...

## The Third Valentine’s Day

**Mizuto Irido**

“Here ya go, guys. One each!” Yume’s friend (Sakamizu?) tossed out cheap chocolates as if she were feeding pigeons. In response, some guys complained, others thanked her, and some pretended like they didn’t care but still crowded

around her like pigeons.

Handing out chocolate wasn't limited to the people inside our classroom—I saw lots of girls exchanging chocolates with their friends in the hallway too.

*I wonder when the tradition of giving your friends chocolates began. Big Chocolate must be happy about that.*

February 14th—Valentine's Day—wasn't a proper holiday. It was a day of commemoration that I didn't pay any attention to until I was a first-year in middle school. After all, I'd had a girlfriend two years ago. Even now, I can remember it clearly. Early in the morning on our way to school, she looked at me and gave me chocolates. I spent the entire day with them in my bag.

I felt a sense of superiority over the guys in my class lamenting that they hadn't gotten any chocolates, and I was shocked I felt this way. When I returned home, I ate them in secret so that dad wouldn't notice. Then I painstakingly got rid of the empty box.

The following year, nothing happened, which made it painfully obvious that our relationship was on the rocks. And now one year after that, Valentine's Day had come once again, and through some weird happenstance, I was with the same girl as I had been two years ago.

I wondered how my past self would react, knowing I had started dating Yume again. He might've cried tears of joy, or maybe he would've sneered at me with pity. But based on what I'd learned over the past year, I felt as if this outcome had been destiny. Maybe it was just pride, but I felt as if this were no accident, simply a result brought about by my own will. *Well, I guess I haven't received any chocolates yet.*

Two years ago, I'd gotten them at our meeting place on the way to school, but there was no way that she was gonna give chocolates clearly intended for a boyfriend to me in front of our parents. Plus, she apparently had student council duties in the morning, so she left the house a lot earlier than I did.

With Yume's personality, I could be certain she'd give me chocolates; the only question was when. Lunchtime? After school? Spending the day knowing that I was gonna get chocolates but not when made me restless. But getting all giddy about something like this felt kind of pathetic. I needed to relax so that when

she did present them to me I would be calm and collected.

When school ended for the day, I had still received no word from Yume. *Is she going to sneak them to me before our parents come home?* Just as I was getting my things together, I got a message from Isana.

**Izanami:** Please come to the usual spot in the library.

*What does she want? It's been a while since we've met up there. I might as well go. Yume's gonna be home late because of the student council anyway.*

I took my bag and left the classroom, heading to the library. There was about a month left until the finals for our freshman year, but most of the students who were studying by themselves used the study rooms, so the library was still pretty empty. I passed behind some students reading hardcover books in the reading area while making my way to the window.

When I arrived, I found Isana leaning back against the air conditioner unit. Days were shorter in winter, so the sky was already tinged red from the sunset. The light made Isana a fiery red, but it also made her cast a cold black shadow.

"It's been a while since we've hung out here."

"Indeed," she said, standing up. As she did, I realized that in her hands, slightly hidden by the long sleeves of her sweater, she was holding a box with a pink ribbon wrapped around it. "Mizuto-kun..." Her face was a warm red from the sunset. "Please...accept these," she said, slightly embarrassed and hesitant as she offered me the box of chocolates. I couldn't help but remember when Isana asked me out, but my thoughts were quickly interrupted. "What are you doing, Mizuto-kun? Please, hurry up and take a picture!"

This atmosphere had made me envision her professing her feelings for me, but it was dispersed in an instant, leaving nothing but the sight of Isana staring at me. My head went blank.

"Take...a picture?" I asked.

"For reference materials! I will use it for next year's Valentine's Day picture!"

*O-Oh...okay. That's what's going on.* Going off the vibe she was giving and based on her recent and past behavior, I thought that *maybe* she was...

"Oh? What's this?" *Crap. I made my relief too obvious.* Suddenly, she looked closely at my face. It was obvious from her expression that she'd entered a teasing mode. "That's no good. You can't allow yourself to have your heart disturbed by this level of antics. I might need to report this to Yume-san."

"Please don't. Anyone would've had the same thought in this situation."

"Is there anyone crazy enough to ask someone out who got a girlfriend but a month ago? How shameless of a girl do you believe I am?"

"I honestly never know what you're gonna do. Who knows? You might've done a complete one-eighty from January."

"Are you calling me a horrid girl with double standards?!"

"I said absolutely none of that."

Then Isana sighed, relenting. "I'm going to do it again, then. Please take a picture this time, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah."

She proceeded to redo the entire routine, and so I took pictures. After doing different poses and patterns of the confession scene, she finally handed the chocolate over.

"Thanks. What do you want for White Day?" I asked.

"Well...if you could do some nude modeling for me, then..."

"Got it. Cookies from the convenience store."

"I suppose that'll make me happy as well." Isana frowned, making me wonder how serious her initial suggestion had been.

Well, it was true that just drawing pretty girls limited her. I was hoping that she could learn to draw guys soon. Maybe White Day would—

"Oh, right." I walked towards the nearby bookcase with light novels on them and picked out one of them. "Let's take this opportunity to talk about your picture for White Day."

“Yes, please! I’m no longer able to envision anything that isn’t dirty...”

## How to Make Your Troublesome Girlfriend Happy

Tohdo Hoshibe

The ball swished as it dropped through the net.

“Phew...” I watched, out of breath, as the ball bounced high underneath the hoop. *I think my instincts are back.*

I walked over to where the ball had rolled and picked it up. There was nobody else on the outdoor court in February with the cold winter wind blowing. Even so, it was perfect for whipping myself back into shape. I got the feeling that the difference in temperatures between my warm body and the cold winter air made my reactions sharper. That being said, my fingers felt frozen. *Maybe I’ll just go another two or three times and call it a day.*

I gasped, glancing down at my watch as I positioned myself away from the hoop. It had gotten a lot later than I’d realized. Looking up, I noticed that the sun was setting and the eastern sky had already gone dark. *Crap. I’m gonna be late.*

I quickly went to my bag on the side of the court, pulled out my towel, and swiftly wiped off the cold sweat. *I can still make it. Just gotta hurry. Wait, before I do that...* I looked at my outfit, which consisted of a worn-out tracksuit drenched in sweat.

“Can’t meet her like this...”

I was impressed by my growth. The fact that I was able to make decisions like this was praiseworthy. *It’s okay; I came prepared.* I swung my bag over my shoulder and ran to a public bathroom to change into pants and a button-up shirt. Then I put a blazer and a jacket over that and ran out, and got on my bike.

We were meeting up a little bit of a distance away, but I could get there in a flash on my bike. After all, a bike was the fastest way to get around Kyoto. Even so, I ended up being a little late.

“Took you long enough!” Aisa greeted me with puffed out cheeks in her

school uniform. “You made your cute girlfriend wait in a crowded place like this? I could’ve been hit on!”

“Well, you weren’t, right?”

“Not important!”

*Got it, so it’s all in your head. I’m not sure I’ve ever actually seen anyone get hit on, honestly.*

Aisa eyed me as I brought my bike with me with an exasperated expression. “Senpai...I can’t really say I appreciate my boyfriend bringing his bike along to meet up with me.”

“Sorry, I didn’t have the time to park it.”

“All right. I’ll just chalk this up to you prioritizing spending time with me and forgive you.”

“Look at you bein’ all optimistic. Nice.”

In this clearing between two arcade streets, there were a lot of other people meeting up with friends and such. We’d probably be in the way if we kept standing here and talking, so we began walking through the shopping district, completely blanketed in a Valentine’s Day atmosphere.

Aisa slightly bent over and grinned at me as we walked. “Senpai, I like your outfit today. It’s pretty chill. Really has adult vibes to it.”

“Yeah, thought you’d like it.”

“Oh, you really get me!” *Yeah, I was made to get you, thanks to a certain someone’s thorough training.* “But...” She playfully rubbed her shoulder against me. “It feels like we’re doing something wrong, you know, with me in a school uniform and you in your street clothes.”

“Wow, look at the time. Fun date. I don’t wanna lose my college recommendation, so let’s just call it here.”

“H-Hey! Wait! Sheesh, you’re as rude as ever.”

I lightly patted Aisa on the shoulders to soothe her as she frowned.

*That wasn’t entirely a joke. I’m gonna be a college student in a month and a*

*half, but you're still gonna be in high school for another year or so.* As soon as she leaned against me, Aisa brought out a gift wrapped in Valentine's colors.

"Here you go, Senpai."

"Thanks."

She'd offered them to me so casually that I couldn't help but casually accept them.

*This'll be the second time I'm getting chocolates from her, but she gave them to me so naturally. It's hard to think this is only the second time.*

Aisa looked up at me quizzically as if gazing deep into me looking for an answer.

"Senpai...?" she asked hesitantly.

"Hm?"

"Did you...already get chocolate from other girls?"

"Huh?"

I looked at her and saw that there she was anxious. I couldn't help but snort slightly. "Hell no. Third-years aren't even obligated to go to school anymore, remember? You're the first person I've seen today."

"Oh..."

She still seemed a little uneasy, so I decided to follow up with a question of my own. "What's the matter? What're you so worried about?"

"Well, you're a popular guy. I keep thinking about how you're gonna get so much chocolate from girls when you're in college..." Aisa seemed upset.

*She's really getting jealous over something a year into the future? This goes beyond cute and jumps straight to Crazyville.*

I did my best to hold in the sigh itching to escape my mouth and instead began thinking of different things to say. *Hm...I'll go with this.*

"If Valentine's Day falls on a weekday, then I'll probably get some chocolates in the afternoon."



“Yeah, I get it. You’re popular!”

“So that means my last chocolate of the day will be from you.”

Aisa’s mouth hung open, making me smile.

“So do your best to blow them all out of the water,” I continued. “Being cute and captivating’s your thing, isn’t it?”

It seemed that my words had been perfect. Her face immediately brightened, and she excitedly wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

“Okay! Then let’s get started on our date, looking forward to next year!”

“Go home, idiot! I’m not walkin’ around at night with a high school girl in her uniform.”

“Meanie!”

## Multiple-Choice Valentine’s Day

**Kogure Kawanami**

When I got back home, I saw my childhood friend in my kitchen, still in her uniform and with an apron on, making chocolates.

“Oh, welcome home!” Minami turned to me as she slowly mixed the melted chocolate in a bowl. As she did, the tip of her ponytail and the hems of her apron and her pleated skirt swayed simultaneously.

I tossed my bag onto the couch in the living room while questioning her. “What are you doin’ here?”

“Making chocolates. It’s Valentine’s Day, after all.”

“Don’t you usually do that the day before and give ’em out at school? Not *after* school’s already let out for the day?”

“Ah, it’s fine. These’re for you anyway,” she said, scooping out the chocolate with her finger and tasting it.

*How can she say that so brazenly?* Then again, at this time of day, there was only one person she could make and give chocolates to—me.

“Actually,” she continued, “I’d made yours before when I was with Yume-chan and Higashira-san, but I accidentally ate ’em all!”

“Can’t you just remake them in your own house, then?”

“We already had plans to eat here today anyway, so it makes more sense for all the cleanup to be here, right?”

I sat down on the couch and glanced back at Minami in the kitchen. Some guys complain about so-called homemade chocolates being nothing more than store-bought chocolates melted into different shapes, but that process was a lot more involved and annoying than it sounded. Despite all the effort, girls didn’t give up and simply pass out store-bought chocolates, because they wanted to pour their effort into the chocolates.

I held back a wave of nausea and looked up at the ceiling. *Dammit. I’ve gotten so self-conscious. I miss being a fresh, innocent middle schooler, not knowing what’s goin’ on at all.*

“Phew,” Minami grunted as she sat next to me, still wearing the apron.

I turned my attention from the ceiling to her. “You done?”

“Just gotta wait for them to cool down.”

*Wow, she’s gotten good at this. How long has it been since she started giving me chocolates...?*

Minami reached across the couch while looking at me. “We’ve got time. Wanna play a game?”

“Sure...why not?”

“Or would you prefer to fool around?”

“Urp.” I could feel the nausea that I’d had under control suddenly shoot back up. Minami shot me a playful smile. I exhaled deeply to calm myself down.

“Listen, can you not do that anymore?”

“I gotta keep tryin’ exposure therapy every now and then.”

“How do you expect me to eat chocolate if I’m on the verge of barfing?”

Suddenly her eyes flew wide open before she closed them halfway and began

looking at me as if she were examining something. “Oh? Mm-hmm...”

“What?”

“Sounds like you’re lookin’ forward to ’em. Kinda unexpected.”

“It’s nothin’ to be surprised about, especially takin’ into account how much time and effort you spent on them.”

“I like that about you.”

“Urp! S-Seriously, stop!”

If she stayed this close to me any longer, I was definitely gonna hurl. I stood up and tried to run away to my room.

“Hey, stop!” Before I could escape, she forcefully pulled me back.

“Agh!” I lost my balance and fell over. I twisted my body and tried to reach out to stop myself from crashing down, but Minami’s body was in the way.

“Eek!”

Her youthful face was all I could see. My arm flung out into the couch, right where her ponytail was. Her brightly colored hair wrapped around my wrist. She stared at me for a bit, covered by my shadow before her thin lips arched seductively.

“Before you eat the chocolate...how about an appetizer?”

I couldn’t breathe.



“It’s okay,” she said. “Let’s start by having your body remember.”

Her slender fingers undid the ribbon around her neck. I could get a glimpse of her porcelain neck from the button on her collar being undone. There was a slight shadow in the space between the ends of her clavicle. I had no clue why, but my eyes were practically sucked into it. I gulped down the breath stuck in my throat. Right as I did...

“Aha ha ha!” Minami suddenly burst out laughing, clutching her stomach. “Just kidding! Sheesh, you should see your face! You look so serious!”

“Wha... Y-You!” My face twitched as she cackled like a witch. *Minami, you little...!*

Minami curled up into a fetal position, still cracking up. “You lettin’ it out? Not too pent up? Need some *material*? I can send you some selfies.”

“Your shrimpy body’s not gonna be any help, idiot.”

“Hard to believe you with how wide your nostrils got. You *love* my small frame, don’t you? Perv.”

“Urgh!” I had no defense.

“Heh heh. I guess I’ll let you off the hook with this.”

She easily slipped off the couch and skipped over to the kitchen. Then she opened the refrigerator and pulled something out and put it on a silver tray before bringing it over.

“All righty, here’re your obligation chocolates!” she said, putting the tray down onto the table.

*Huh? That’s weird.* I looked down at the chocolate that was about as big as a pudding you could eat in a single bite.

“They’re already done cooling off?”

“This is the obligation chocolate, remember?” She took off the apron and from behind the couch, she whispered into my ear. “I’ve left the *other* kind in the kitchen. Eat it when it’s ready, okay?” I panicked and quickly moved away, covering my ear. Seeing this, she smiled again. “Would you prefer an obligation

chocolate, a romantic chocolate, or maybe..." she said, putting a finger to the loose neckline of her blouse.

*I'm not falling for this again.* I grabbed the chocolate on the tray and loudly declared my answer. "Obligation chocolate!"

## A Normal Girl

Joji Haba

I wasn't exactly sure when, but before I realized it, Kurenai-san and I were the only ones left in the student council room. Aso-san had left early because she had plans with Hoshibe-senpai. Irido-san had finished all her work flawlessly and then left. Asuhain-san had been the only one who'd stayed late, but Kurenai-san told her that we'd do the rest, so she'd left about five minutes ago.

There wasn't much time left until students weren't allowed to be at the school anymore. Now that it was February, it got dark extremely early, meaning that it was already pitch-black outside. It was as if our windows had been dyed by black ink. The lighting in the room was extremely bright in contrast.

The school, which had been so bustling with life in the afternoon, had become silent, as if we'd been left behind. Furthermore, it was just me and Kurenai-san here in this world. It was too good to be true, so much so that it felt manufactured. I didn't consider myself to be dense. If anything, I felt like I was overly perceptive to the point that it left me in troublesome situations.

"The school will be closing shortly. All students, please leave the premises."

Even after hearing the announcement over the PA system, Kurenai-san didn't reach for her bag, which she'd already packed a while ago. I knew why—after all, I had yet to receive a certain item. Kurenai-san wasn't one to renege on something she had previously declared.

"Joe."

After the announcement finished and silence returned to the room, Kurenai-san quietly tottered in front of me. I couldn't help but straighten up.

*How are you gonna come at me?*

She'd thrown down the gauntlet. I wouldn't be surprised no matter what she did. She might've suddenly taken off her clothes and told me that she was my Valentine's chocolate. It'd be completely on brand for her. In that case, she'd probably come up with a way to give them to me that the likes of me could never even think of.

"Here," she said, without any pomp or circumstance.

Seeing her present the heart-shaped box confused me. "H-Huh?"

"What are you so surprised about? They're chocolates for Valentine's. I told you I'd be giving you some, didn't I?"

I accepted the chocolates wrapped in red, still confused. "Th-Thank you..."

It was extremely anticlimactic. Could she have possibly reflected on her previous approaches and finally decided to give up on the reckless seductive antics of hers? I'd be extremely happy if that were the case, though she had also declared that she'd make me fall for her more conventionally. But maybe there was some kind of trap rigged to this box? If so, then opening it here wasn't the best idea.

"Okay... Let's get going," I said. "We need to leave before they close the gate."

I put the chocolate away in my bag and began moving towards the door. Though this was certainly a surprise, I preferred it over her usual forceful antics. If she was going to actually give me chocolates without any unnecessary indecency, then I had no complaints. I was by no means disappointed by how she'd mellowed out.

"Wait."

Just as I went to put my hand on the door, I felt her firmly gripping my arm. I wasn't sure why, but I felt electrified from the force of her hand. I slowly and nervously turned around. What was waiting for me was a sight of a single girl, her shoulders shaking from nerves. There was no trace of the prodigy or the perfect human being people thought she was. She was just a normal girl.

"Ha ha... Sorry. I know I've done a lot, but somehow, when it's go time, I'm hopelessly anxious."

I knew. My needlessly good instincts and my memories showed a common point. The way Kurenai-san looked like now greatly resembled Aso-san when she had tried to tell Hoshibe-senpai something really important on the trip to Kobe.

“Valentine’s has always been this kind of holiday. So I decided to throw away any superficial tricks and silly strategies.”

I got the feeling that her forceful grip wasn’t just to keep me from running, but herself as well. She then took a deep breath and then looked at me, a decisive sparkle in her eyes.

“I like you. Please go out with me.”

She hadn’t been lying. She’d ditched all tricks and strategies. She’d come right out and said it. This was a straightforward confession of love. I’d known for a long time that she wanted to tell me how she felt. It wouldn’t make sense otherwise that she’d bring me to an empty classroom, get on top of me wearing nothing but her underwear, or rendezvous with me wearing nothing but a bunny suit. I knew better than anyone that those weren’t things you’d do to someone you felt nothing for. Even so, I’d never truly believed her.

I’d made up excuses that she was only interested in my peculiarity or that she only wanted me as her plaything. Even though I knew that she wasn’t like that, I couldn’t erase these doubts. After all, someone like me couldn’t hope to understand what was going on in her head.

But... But when someone comes out and tells you their feelings, there’s no running away. It becomes too clear—clearer than explanations in children’s textbooks. That’s why I probably knew from the beginning that Suzuri Kurenai was being serious. The girl in front of me was seriously and earnestly in love with the likes of me.

I failed to say anything. My head was too much of a mess. It wasn’t arousal; that was far too simple an emotion. Usually, nothing could stir my heart, but it was like deep inside my soul, the sea I’d been floating on had been rocked by an intense storm. It had no form, rules, or name.

Why had I ever thought of myself as perceptive? I’d just been ignorant. All of this was just the same kind of thing that someone felt when they began to get



used to something. They felt on top of the world—invincible. But it was only because I was so ignorant that I could feel this way. If it were someone else, I could've come up with the answer immediately, but when it came to me, I couldn't. I was clueless.

In the midst of my confusion, Kurenai-san said, "There's still a month until White Day. You can take your time thinking over your answer, but..." She was still blushing. I was sure that this wasn't something she wanted to show to others if she could help it. Even so, she didn't run away and continued to declare something, looking straight into my eyes. "This took a lot of courage. If nothing else, I want you to understand that."

Then she let go of my arm, put her bag over her shoulder, and quickly left, leaving me by myself in the brightly lit room as if I was a lost child. I was a person without a presence. I could only be the background character in other people's lives. For Kurenai-san, the main character to end all main characters, there was no way that I could be allowed to stand next to her.

Her confession rang in my head, making me think again. *But...when she said that, Kurenai-san was...* I had no words. All I had was one month. Just one month.

## Romantic Chocolate

### Mizuto Irido

"Here, for you, Mizuto-kun."

After dinner, I casually got my chocolates from Yume. Four chocolate cookies packaged in a transparent plastic bag. I could tell at a glance that these were nothing more than obligation treats. This was further evidenced by the fact that dad had gotten the same exact thing from her just a few minutes ago. Actually, rather than being out of obligation, it was specifically meant for *family*.

It was in the same category as getting something from your mom. In Japan, it was probably the lowest tier of chocolate you could get, and after waiting an entire day, that's what I got from my girlfriend.

"O-Oh. Thanks..." After a pause, I thanked her and accepted them.

“What’s the matter, Mizuto? Are you that touched at getting your first chocolates from a girl?” dad asked.

“Now that I think about it, you’ve mostly hung around guys, haven’t you?” Yuni-san said.

“True, but this year you have Higashira-san, right? I’m sure you got something from her, didn’t you?”

Our parents smiled and I tried to avoid them and hold back the huge shock from a completely unexpected situation. *Is this...really it? No way. This is our first Valentine’s since the winding nine-month road that led to us getting back together. There’s no way she’s only going to give me the same exact chocolates as dad.*

But contrary to my expectations and maybe desires, even after I took a bath and waited later into the night, it didn’t seem like I was getting anything more from Yume.

“I’m going to bed.”

Near midnight, or right as Valentine’s was about to end, Yume finally said this and began to go back to her room. Internally, I was freaking out, but I kept my calm demeanor as I stood up and followed her.

“Me too,” I said.

As I followed her up the stairs and into the hallway, Yume turned around. “Night,” she said.

*Is this...really it? Is our Valentine’s Day really going into our respective rooms and nothing else?* But there was absolutely no way I would do something so pitiful as bringing up the topic of romantic chocolate.

“Yeah. Night.” It took everything in me to say that.

I disappointedly watched Yume as she disappeared into her room. *I guess that’s it.* Maybe I was idealizing the Valentine’s that we had the first time we dated. We’d been inexperienced middle schoolers who were both dating someone for the first time. We’d interpret anything—even the smallest thing—as something grander than it actually was. But two years had passed since then.

We'd lived together for ten and a half months. We'd reached the point where couples entered into a mature relationship.

In that context, something like Valentine's wasn't a big deal at all. But it kinda pissed me off that Yume was ahead of me emotionally. I began to enter my room, unsatisfied with the state of affairs, when I noticed an unfamiliar gift bag on my desk.

"Oh..."

Before I knew it, I'd already walked over to my desk. The bag was tied up in cute ribbon, and inside was a big heart-shaped chocolate with "Happy Valentine's" written on it with white chocolate. Suddenly, I sensed someone behind me. The person who'd appeared at my open door whispered a declaration so quickly and quietly that I might not have heard it if I wasn't paying attention.

"Just for you."

Just as I turned around that very same person shut my door and ran back to their room.

"She got me..." I muttered, but I could feel the corners of my mouth rising.

To be able to lead me around by the nose like that really pointed to how much she'd grown over the past two years. I pulled out my chair and carefully unwrapped the ribbon and took a bite of what was inside. It was sweet, but something about it made it somehow even sweeter.

The next day, as soon as I saw Yume in the living room, I boldly declared something to her. "Thanks for the chocolate. It was good."

Dad and Yuni-san were also in the living room, but I had no problems saying that to her. After all, everyone here knew that she'd given me some. The only difference was that not everyone knew that I'd received something out of obligation *and* something out of romance.

Yume smiled pleasantly. "No problem. I look forward to White Day."

"Yeah, don't expect too much."

Neither of our parents found anything strange with what was happening. After confirming that, Yume and I secretly traded glances and snickered.

# That Which Is Obtained Is Nothing but a Bright Illusion

## Found at Dusk

Joji Haba

Has anybody else ever had a time when they felt like there was something special about them? For me, there was just one time that I did.

“Let’s go to the clubroom!”

“Oh, yeah! But I have to help with classroom cleanup... Huh?”

I’d already finished erasing the board, taking out the trash, and all the other busywork, but nobody knew that except for me. As everyone tilted their heads, they moved on to what they needed to be doing—to where they belonged.

There was some convenience in having a faint presence like this. No matter what I did to support others, I never drew any attention. No matter who they were or how they lived their lives, I’d never appear as a main character in their stories. I was like a natural phenomenon—a stagehand who was never noticed but could support others from the background. This was the one thing that I felt was special about me.

I wasn’t especially talented. I wasn’t athletic or academically gifted, nor did I have any semblance of an artistic sense. The only thing I had going for me was my disposition, which prevented anyone from worrying or feeling pity.

*With all that in mind, the way I should live life is obvious, isn’t it? Give me everything that nobody wants to do.* Talented people should spend their time on the work most suited to them, not on extraneous activities. They could leave all of that, the stuff that anyone could do, to me and do the things that only they could do. I was proud of that.

“Haba-kun?”

I was carrying a garbage bag at dusk when I was stopped by someone who actually noticed me.

I'd been proud of how I lived life until I met her.

"Joji Haba-kun, there's something that only you can do."

## **Consoling and Supporting Each Other**

### **Mizuto Irido**

The sound of the clock ticking blended in with the quiet scratching of pen on paper, followed by me turning the page in my textbook.

"Hey, you two, I'm gonna sleep now too, okay?" Yuni-san said, heading towards the living room door. "Don't overdo it with the studying. You've got this!"

"Thanks. Good night!"

"Good night."

Yuni-san nodded at our responses and then left the living room. I heard her footsteps disappear towards her bedroom. I looked up from my textbook and saw Yume silently studying at the kotatsu. This was no longer an unusual sight to me.

Though we'd been stubborn during the first semester and had holed up in our respective rooms, this time, we naturally decided to study together for our finals from the get-go. We'd done a clean split of our best subjects and honestly made good review partners now that we were cooperating instead of competing, but...

Yume slightly yawned and rubbed her eyes.

"Don't push yourself. You're busy with other things besides studying, aren't you?" I said.

"Yeah..."

This time of year was apparently pretty busy for the student council. They had meetings regarding next year's budget, preparations for the graduation

ceremony and the entrance ceremony, and so on. Essentially, their plates were filled with all kinds of events that weren't on a normal student's radar at all.

On top of all of that, we had finals. As the last tests of our freshman year, they were notoriously the most difficult. I could only think that the school had messed up scheduling everything. If Valentine's Day were in March, Yume wouldn't even have time to make chocolates.

"You're not behind on your studies. Why don't you take a break for once?" I suggested.

"Mm..."

"You're the type to overdo things. Don't worry; nobody's watching. You can take a break."

Yume stopped moving her pen and lay it flat on her notebook before loudly exhaling. "I've never had a third semester *this* busy..."

"Usually there's nothing else to do besides study."

This time was typically dedicated to Valentine's Day and White Day—a kind of victory lap or a throwaway match between the two. Or at least that's the impression anyone not on the student council had.

Yume stretched her hands across the kotatsu. "Receipt management is all over the place; it's impossible to put together a budget," she complained.

"Sounds rough."

"Clubs also start buying things they don't even need to use up their budgets."

"Sounds like a whole thing."

"The vice principal also suddenly suggested a farewell celebration, loading even more onto our plate."

"Sounds rough for the middle management."

I mostly gave short comments in response to every complaint she made, but I wasn't trying to act indifferent. As someone not involved in any of this, I felt like making this kind of comment was all I could really do.

Yume began flailing her extended hands. "I'm so tired! Console me!"

“Sure thing.”

I extended my hand to her head, parted her long hair, and began gently rubbing around her ear. Although I kinda felt like I was petting a big dog, she seemed to enjoy it from her relaxed expression and how she was rubbing her cheek against my hand.

“This give you the extra boost you need?” I asked.

“Mm... Gimme a little more.” I smiled at her childish voice and began rubbing the back of her ear. Her lips curled as if she’d been tickled, and then she looked at me gently. “Thanks.” A strand of hair landed on her cheek.

“Don’t mention it.”

“Okay, then I’m expecting something expensive for White Day.”

“Really puttin’ on the pressure, aren’t you?” The worst part was I actually *was* in the midst of figuring out what to do.

Yume giggled, her shoulders shaking. “Are *you* okay, though?”

“Hm?”

“Aren’t you helping Higashira-san study?”

I’d been asked to continue helping Isana study as her tutor. But even if Natora-san hadn’t asked me to, I would’ve wanted to help out anyway. As Isana’s manager, I couldn’t exactly let her flunk out of school. I was in the midst of getting her back on track through study sessions over video, especially since she apparently never paid attention during class.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay? Don’t you have your own studying to worry about?”

“Studying doesn’t take too long for me. If anything it’s scary how long it takes to help Isana study.”

She lost motivation quickly and didn’t understand anything unless I repeated it over and over again. It was horrible. She was the stereotypical person who could only use her full abilities on things she was actually interested in.

Suddenly, Yume extended her hands and put them on my cheeks. “There,



there.”

“You’re comforting *me* now?” I asked.

“I’ll let you lie on my lap if you’d like.”

“I’d fall asleep if I did that...”

“Oh. True,” she said. Everything would be over if our parents stumbled onto me sleeping on her lap under the kotatsu. “Then I guess that’ll also be on White Day?”

“The graduation ceremony’s the same day, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. We’ll still have the entrance ceremony, but overall, everything’ll have calmed down by then.”

“I guess...I’ll just have to look forward to it.”

“Yeah.”

I took the hand she’d placed on my cheek in mine. She squeezed, and for a while, we just sat there under the kotatsu with our fingers intertwined.

“Mizuto?”

“Yeah?”

“Would...it be okay if I move next to you?”

“All right, fine,” I said after a pause.

“Heh heh. Yay!”

I moved a little to the side so Yume could move next to me. As she sat down, I could feel our feet next to each other. Then we leaned against each other, and I wrapped my arm around her slender waist as if to support her.

“Mm...”

It went without saying, but we didn’t get any studying done after that.

## **My Underclassman Commuter Girlfriend**

**Tohdo Hoshibe**

“Senpai, hangin’ in there?”

The door to my room suddenly opened, making me jump from my bed. I automatically hid my phone underneath the sheets without really thinking too much about it. Standing in my doorway was my girlfriend, Aisa Aso, wearing a coat over her street clothes. As usual, she looked at me with her patented cute, devilish grin.

“Where’d you get that key from?” I asked.

“Your mom was kind enough to give me a spare,” she said proudly, jingling the keys to show me.

I was already aware that my mom had taken a liking to Aisa. It was interesting how Aisa’s classmates hated her but their parents loved her schmoozing.

As I sighed, Aisa narrowed her eyes and stared at me. “Senpai...” Her eyes fell on the phone that I’d hidden under my sheets. “Were you looking at something dirty?”

Seeing the inquisitive look of my girlfriend, I looked back at her like a suspect being interrogated by the police. “Are you the type of girl who makes her boyfriend throw out all his porn?”

“Yep.”

*She didn’t even pause to think.*

It was honestly kinda refreshing how quickly and boldly she could declare that. She took one step after another, closing in on me before putting her hands on her hips and looking down on me.

“What’s the point of porn when you have a cute girlfriend like me?”

“To argue on behalf of all the guys out there, there’s a difference between the real thing and created content.”

“I send you selfies every day!” She puffed her cheeks, but I shrugged her off.

*Why doesn’t she understand that girlfriends are different from porn actresses and girls with alt accounts?*

“Well, whatever. I’ll wring out your lust later,” she said.

“You’re scaring me.”

“But first, food. Your mom asked me to make you lunch.” Aisa raised a plastic bag that looked like it had ingredients inside.

“She asked you? How?”

“Over LINE.”

“Why the heck are you friends with my mom on LINE?!”

It felt gross. My mom had already been chewing my ear off, telling me how I shouldn’t let Aisa get away ’cause she’s a keeper. Ever since Aisa and I started dating, she’d been coming over here like a commuter wife, marking me as hers. The reason she was on such good terms with my mom was her frequent visits. Despite how she looked, Aisa was very good at helping out around the house, but for some reason whenever she did, I felt some kind of weird seductive cuteness from her.

“Look, I’m grateful that you’re gonna make me food and all, but...what about studying?”

“Uh... What might you be referring to?” Aisa quickly looked away from me.

*Seriously? You have finals soon. Did you come here to escape from reality?*

“Sheesh, fine. I’ll help you study, okay?”

“Heh heh. Sorry for the burden. I’ll do my best not to bring any embarrassment to the student council name.”

Ultimately, we didn’t end up studying.

I heard satisfied, soft breathing from next to me as I glanced at the closed curtains. It was already dark outside as the night began to roll in. Next, I looked at my naked girlfriend, using my shoulder as a pillow while she slept.

She wasn’t tired as a result of our actions; rather, she’d already been exhausted before coming over. Around this time of year, the student council was extremely busy, which made me want to ask her if it was *really* wise for her to be spending her time not studying.

“We’ve really gotten addicted to this, huh...?” I whispered as I gently stroked

Aisa's hair.

I didn't really have any right to talk down to her. All I could do was hope that everything she'd studied so far was on the test. I took out my phone and began using it while continuing to stroke the bangs of my sleeping girlfriend.

As I did, I heard her talking in her sleep. "Senpai... Mm... Together forever..."

She didn't drop the cutesy act even in her sleep. I did my best to hold back a smirk. Instead, I kissed her on the forehead and whispered my response.

"Yeah. I know." *Why do you think I'm trying to figure out what to get you for White Day?*

## **Not Just Always Being on the Receiving Side**

**Kogure Kawanami**

Every now and then, I looked back on my life. Just like a lot of people, I'd say that my best years were in elementary school. I passed each day surrounded by friends, feeling like I was the main character of the world. What exactly separated my current self from my past self?

Back then, I felt invincible and fulfilled. I was confident that no matter what I did, I wouldn't fail. One might say I had simply never been put in my place, which would be right for that time. Of course I hadn't. I was just a little kid—a frog in a well. But even so, compared to how I was now, I'd take the way I used to be any day of the week.

Now, I was self-aware. I wished I could be the arrogant kid who thought he could do anything. When did I start thinking like this? It must've been around that time—when I was under the wrong impression that just by opening my mouth and waiting, I'd get a girlfriend.

*"I... I kinda...like you. Is that...okay?"*

When the childhood friend I was so fond of randomly asked me out, I probably became a coward. I got used to things being handed to me.

It crossed my mind that the societal belief that White Day is more important than Valentine's Day might be kinda sexist. If our genders were switched, the

girl version of me would fret over what kind of chocolates to give every time Valentine's Day came around. In reality, all I did was wait for her to give me the chocolates and then use that as a basis to give her something back in return.

I got the feeling that ever since we dated, I'd always been on the receiving end of everything. While I'd have liked to believe it was a kink of hers, it realistically stemmed from my pride and indolence.

Even when it came to curing this weird allergy of mine, she had taken the first step. I'd never tried at all. There should've been a responsibility for me to grant her wish that I would be able to freely express my feelings for someone.

"Might be about time for me to show that I'm a man..."

Suddenly I felt my face lightly slapped by a notebook. "Hey! No slackin' off!"

As I raised my head from the armrest of the couch, I saw Minami looking down on me, her eyebrows raised. She was wearing a knitted, fluffy sweater, which was civilized for her.

"I'm not slackin' off. I was just reflectin' on my life."

"Reflect on what's gonna be on the test first. I'm takin' time to help you study since you can't ask Irido-kun, remember?!" Minami huffed, placing reheated coffee on the table.

*Right. Up until now, I've had the help of my best friend who ranks number two in our grade, but now I can't ask him since Higashira went crying to him about failing, and he can't let that happen.* I had White Day to think about, so I wished she'd get off my case, especially since she was the one who gave me romantic chocolates in the first place.

"Okay, let's get back to it!" she said, sitting on her knees at the table. She tapped on the carpet, signaling for me to join her. "I just barely avoided failing last time, so we're gonna do this right, got it?!"

"Yeah. Sorry..."

I got up off the couch and sat cross-legged next to Minami. Then her eyebrows raised as if she was suspicious of something.

"Something's up. You gave in way too fast," she said.

“Chill. It’s just my second wind kicking in.”

Before figuring out my next step, I needed to focus on finals. If I didn’t like being handed things, I needed to handle something this trivial on my own. I picked up my pencil and started taking action.

“By the way, there’s somethin’ I’ve been meanin’ to ask,” I said.

“Hm?”

“What’s somethin’ I could do to make you happy?”

Minami looked taken aback and stared at me. “Are...you trying to make me say something dirty?”

“Hell no! *You’re* the dirty one!” *I’m an idiot for even trying.*

## The Capacity of a Stagehand

Joji Haba

“Why don’t you take a seat, Haba? You’re part of the team now.”

My presence on the student council was more or less a result of me being kidnapped. I was a person nobody perceived—someone who wanted to stay invisible like a stagehand. However, I’d been dragged to the student council before I knew it and had been given the title of treasurer.

The one who’d done that had been the vice president, who was not only a first-year but also my classmate.

“You’re wondering what I’m thinking?” Kurenai-san had asked. “If anything, I want to ask *you* what *you’re* thinking. Despite having both analytical and observation abilities that those of rival veteran secretaries, you insist on remaining in obscurity. It’s only natural to jump at the opportunity for a hidden gem like you.”

Suzuri Kurenai had a silver tongue. Her abilities and beauty were captivating, and she was the very same person who was praising strengths that I didn’t have. I wasn’t a hidden gem—I was just plain hidden.

After joining the student council, I had found that it wasn't as bad as I had originally thought.

"Wow, Joe, you're amazing!" Aso-san said. "You're already done?! Business as usual, huh? In comparison, Aisa's just so slow at work..."

"Hey, Aisa Aso, don't push your work onto Joe!" Kurenai-san snapped.

"Heh heh," chuckled our upperclassman in charge of general affairs. "Isn't it nice that you have such formidable underclassmen, President Hoshibe?"

"What're you on about? They're just annoying," President Hoshibe scoffed.

The general affairs upperclassman gently watched as Aso-san and Kurenai-san bickered with each other, while President Hoshibe yawned as if he was bored. I would've been lying if I said I felt comfortable in this atmosphere.

Being on the student council didn't suit me, but I was fairly certain that being with these people would be fun, and that was enough. Just that would've been more than enough.

"What's the matter, Joe? Are you trying to run away when a girl's trying to show you some fun? You're such a greedy guy. You're really discarding a beautiful girl's offer of her virginity?"

*That's too much for me—a person who's always lived his life as an invisible guy—to handle, Kurenai-san. Accepting someone else's feelings is too heavy for me.*

## **Good Work. Rest Up.**

### **Mizuto Irido**

"Okay. Good."

Hearing my approval, Isana let out a long sigh and crashed onto her desk. "I made it... I truly thought that this might've been too tall an order."

"Good work. Rest up. I'll take care of the upload."

"Thank you..."

As part of my management of Isana, I made sure that she would upload a

picture that tied in with the season's events. Of course, this included White Day. This was the first difficult battle Isana had had to face. She really couldn't come up with anything.

Now that I thought about it, Isana's main source of images came from light novels. Unfortunately, the climax of these series would often fall on White Day, meaning the day itself wasn't typically explored. For romcoms with multiple heroines, usually, White Day would be when the protagonist would choose one of them. Those were definitely prominent, but there weren't many stories that just depicted White Day straight out.

In the first place, it was an event that mostly centered around guys. I thought of maybe having her draw a male character, but ultimately, I had her choose the "winning heroine," which helped her a lot. Since the only real references we could draw from were romcoms, I figured we'd keep things simple.

Heroines winning or losing was surprisingly a fairly widespread topic, so it matched Isana's style of letting the viewer fill in the blanks. I could easily see it getting five hundred retweets.

We'd actually begun getting followed by what I could only assume were official accounts of people in the industry. It was completely possible that we could get requests for actual work. When I consulted Keikoin-san about this, he even said that it wouldn't be strange if we were sent inquiries.

Isana's dream was to work on light novel illustrations, but it might've been a little too early for that. After all, she didn't have much experience at all when it came to drawing characters that weren't pretty girls. First, she needed to learn how to draw guys and adults and stock up on knowledge of how to draw minor characters. I estimated she'd be able to get good enough by next year at the earliest.

*After that, we can make a portfolio, and...*

As I made a plan in my head and left Isana's room, I noticed Natora-san in the living room. She was lazing about on the couch with her knees up while playing a game on the TV. It was a fighting game that probably needed a lot of focus, but as soon as I entered, she called out to me without even turning around.

"Hey, good work. Not too tired, I hope."



“Thanks. No, I hope you aren’t either.”

“Hell no. Who do you think I am, kid?”

*Jeez. I was just greeting you. There’s no need for any of that animosity.* Then again, I’d gotten used to how little like an adult she acted.

“You’re goin’ through hell managin’ my lazy-ass daughter, right? I heard about how she did on the finals.”

“It’s all her. Plus, I’m not the type to spend too much time studying.”

“Take a victory lap. You made my daughter avoid flunkin’ out of a prep school.” Her hands stopped moving and she turned around to look at me. *I guess she finished her match.* “You did good! You can do my daughter.”

“I’ll pass. I’m not looking to get canceled.”

She cackled at my crappy excuse and started the next match. I hadn’t told her that I’d begun dating Yume. I wasn’t sure how serious she was about getting me and Isana together, but I’d probably have to set her straight one day. As Isana’s mom, she had the right to lambast me for being alone with her daughter despite having a girlfriend.

But I’d do that *after* Isana’s situation settled a little bit more. Worst-case scenario, she might forbid Isana from contacting me at all, which would leave Isana completely helpless. In my mind, it didn’t matter how bad her opinion of me could get. I refused to tell her the truth just yet.

After grabbing some water, I went back to Isana’s room, where she was still flat on her desk, passed out. She must’ve been completely exhausted under the weight of needing to study for hellish finals while still having to post art. I grabbed a blanket from her bed and wrapped it over her rising and falling shoulders.

“Good work. Rest up,” I said quietly before leaving a small bag next to her head, the contents of which were some cookies that I’d bought from the train station.

**Senpai**

## Aisa Aso

When I opened my eyes, more often than not I thought it was cold, and it wasn't because of the March weather. Nor was it because I didn't have a thick enough blanket. It was most likely because I had gotten so used to Senpai being by my side.

I clutched my knees under the covers as I yearned for his warmth. I know it's weird for me of all people to say this, but I was beginning to feel uneasy. Something small like him not being next to me in bed made me feel so lonely. This was even in light of the fact that we slept together twice a week. Apparently my relentless desire to be validated by others was saying that wasn't enough. *Am I possibly dependent on him? No, wait, I can make this sound better than it actually is. Senpai has stained me in his colors. Oh my gawd, what a dirty boy!*

In all honesty, the idea of him no longer being my senpai had me kicking and screaming. Ever since I'd met him, he'd been my upperclassman. I couldn't imagine him as anything other than that, which was why even now that we were dating, I still called him "Senpai" and spoke formally to him. I had no plans of stopping either.

Sometimes he'd be all like, "How long are you gonna keep up the formalities?" But being his underclassman felt good to me, and I was fond of how he would dote on me as his kohai. Plus, that dynamic made me feel better about cozying up to him. It was like the same kind of kindness younger sisters got, but with the flirtiness of a couple. *What's better than that?*

Simply put, I didn't have much confidence in who I was outside of his underclassman. I didn't have the confidence that I could be on even footing with him. Despite being someone who wanted to be fawned on by everyone, I strangely tried to write myself off as an insignificant existence. It wasn't any different than how I felt inferior to Suzurin. Was now really the time, though? Next month, I'd be going to a school that didn't have him in it anymore.

"Onee-chan! How long are you gonna sleep for?! The graduation ceremony's *today*, right?!"

My wonderful little sister alarm rang, and I poked my head out of the covers.

The student council was central to the graduation ceremony. I'd already experienced it last year, but Yumechi and Ranran wouldn't know what to do at all. I needed to get going. After all, I was *their* senpai.

The graduation ceremony ended without any problems. The graduates left and the student council helped put away all the folding chairs. Outside, I couldn't exactly tell if they were cheering or crying, but those kinds of emotions were making their way to us.

I didn't cry. The only upperclassman I knew besides Senpai was the one who had previously been in charge of general affairs. But the two of us were mutuals on social media, so it didn't really feel like we were saying goodbye. In the first place, I wasn't the type of person who cried during graduation ceremonies.

I wanted people to cry for me when I graduated, but I never really felt moved to tears when I saw my upperclassmen graduate. I was the heartless type. Or maybe I was just in denial. I didn't want to accept the fact that Senpai wouldn't be my upperclassman anymore, that he wouldn't be in the same school as I was anymore.

"Aisa?" Suzurin called out to me as I carried a folded chair. "We're good here. Why don't you step out for a bit?"

"Mm..."

I could tell that she'd suggested this for my sake, but I reflexively clammed up. Then I spouted a very pathetic excuse. "I'm good. I'm just gonna wreck the mood out there. I'm not exactly popular."

Suzurin furrowed her brow in doubt. "Self-awareness? From *you*? That's surprising, considering how inconsiderate you usually are."

"Senpai's already got the best girl, so there's no need to concern myself with the others. Besides, we already made plans to meet up later. It's all good."

*After all, today's March 14th—White Day.* Senpai had already messaged me, saying that he wanted to give me my gift, so even if we didn't meet up at school, we'd just...

"Other underclassmen might be asking him out, you know?" Suddenly a chill

ran down my spine, hearing Suzurin's words. "After all, it's their last chance. Is that okay with y—"

"Thanks for taking care of the rest! Bye!" I shoved the chair I was holding into Suzurin's hands and then ran out of the gymnasium at full speed.

I knew that my anxiety was pointless. Senpai didn't care that I wasn't gonna be his underclassman anymore, and he didn't care if any of his other underclassmen asked him out. There was no way that any of those inexperienced underclassmen could work as hard as I did to make him fall for them. Even so, I wanted to be his number one underclassman. I wanted it to be like that down to the last minute—to the last second. After all, he was my number one senpai!

"Senpai...?" I'd run to the school gates to find him, but it was different from what I'd imagined. He wasn't surrounded by a huge swarm of girls. It was just him, leaning against the gate's pillar fiddling with his diploma.

And then, upon seeing my face, he called out to me as if everything was perfectly normal. "Hm? Oh, that was fast."

I couldn't stop staring at how there was nobody but him at the front gate. "U-Um, Senpai? Where are the people seeing you off?"

"There aren't really any. I quit basketball in my first year, and all the people I met through student council...well, I guess I saw some of them. But we said our goodbyes pretty quickly."

"Huh? Why?"

"'Cause I've got a prior appointment." He grinned at me teasingly. "Didn't you chew my ear off last month about how I shouldn't make my cute girlfriend wait?"

*I...was just joking. I'm sure he's joking too, but...he probably is prioritizing me here.* "Senpai..."

"Hm?"

I was so easy to sway that what he did was enough to make me forget all about my anxiety. "You're really not popular, huh?"

*Am I pulling off the femme fatale act? None of my relief's showing on my face, right?* That was the only thing I was worried about now.

“Hey, I’m the former student council president. Don’t go thinkin’ that it doesn’t mean squat. I’ve been invited to all kinds of class reunions,” he said jokingly as he moved closer to me. Then he thrust his hand into his pocket. “Bend over a bit, will you?”

“Huh? Senpai, what are you—” Just as I bent over a little, Senpai wrapped his hands around the back of my neck. Then there was a light sensation that spread around my neck and before I knew it, there was a thin necklace hanging off of it.

“Happy— Oh, wait. I hear people say ‘Happy Valentine’s,’ but do people say ‘Happy White Day’?”

I stared at the necklace around my neck. *Th-This...*

“S-Senpai, is this—”

“Yeah, it’s a substitute for a collar. After all, I can’t hold you by the hand at school anymore. Plus...” Then, Senpai looked away, as if he were embarrassed. “It’s the perfect pest repellent, you know? Makes sure nobody’ll come onto you.”

*Oh... Oh my gawd!* “Senpai!”

“Huh? Mmf!”

I pulled Senpai down by his shoulders and pressed my lips to his own. In order to really make the impression of my lips stay, I kept them pressed against his for about ten seconds before peering into his eyes.

“Congratulations on graduating, Senpai!”

“Thanks...” he said curtly, using the back of his hand to cover his mouth.

Seeing this, I couldn’t help but giggle. *I’m the only one who knows his cute side.* Deep inside, I could feel that instead of wanting to be doted on by him, I wanted to dote on him instead.

“By the way, did you know that wearing necklaces at school is against the rules?” I asked.

“Just don’t get caught.”

“Uh, Mr. Former Student Council President? You’re setting a bad example.”

*Senpai’s my number one upperclassman, and I’m his number one underclassman.*



# You Said I Could Do Anything

Akatsuki Minami

Fun fact: if you spend ten or more years being someone's childhood friend, then you will run out of gift ideas for White Day.

At first, it was kinda cute. I'd give him a ten-yen chocolate on Valentine's Day and then get a thirty-yen candy in return on White Day. Apparently, guys take the White Day convention seriously, meaning they have to give a gift valued three times as much as the one they received on Valentine's Day.

The first time I gave him homemade chocolate was probably in our first year of middle school. A month later, he gave me a can of expensive-looking cookies. Apparently, he'd had his parents buy it. We ate them together while playing games.

I didn't mind giving him chocolates every year for Valentine's Day, but it seemed like he had a hard time figuring out what to give me each year, since White Day didn't have any restrictions on gifts. I would've been happy with cookies or candies every year, but apparently, his pride wouldn't allow him to do the same thing every time.

Going the personalized route for gifts was nice sometimes. The last White Day gift I got from him was from our second year of middle school. They were cookies in the shape of letters, and if you arranged them right, they spelled out a message. That gift idea was so chic that he'd never come up with it these days; middle schoolers were much more sentimental about this stuff. I tried for two hours to decipher the message before finally coming up with "HUNT OKAY." *Huh? What does that mean? It's okay to hunt? Could this possibly mean...he's gonna hunt me?!* Keep in mind, I was in middle school, meaning I had the brain of a middle schooler—sentimental, ignorant, and single-minded—and this was the cringiest period of my life.

I squealed in delight as I gave in to the fantasy I'd concocted. But here's the thing: the real message was "THANK YOU." Despite thinking for over two hours, I couldn't come up with the simplest answer. It was kind of on-brand for me,



but also, I must not have wanted that to be the answer. I wanted Ko-kun to have feelings for me other than friendship.

Two years later, there wasn't any chance of that delusion of mine becoming a reality anymore. Or rather, at one point, it *had* become true, but now we were back to regular ol' childhood friends with yet another White Day in front of us.

I didn't bother saying anything when I came home. I'd spent the day saying goodbye to the upperclassmen in the clubs that I helped out from time to time. I'd been invited to celebrations and parties, but since I had just been a standin for their club activities, it felt wrong for me to join in their festivities. Instead, I'd shot them down, saying I had other plans, and come home.

Of course, I used the excuse that I had plans because it was White Day. By saying this, I welcomed them clamoring over me, trying to figure out if my plans involved a guy, but I had just cryptically giggled and dodged their questions.

Technically, I hadn't lied to them. I just hadn't made any kind of verbal promises with *him*.

I sighed as I turned on the heat, took off my coat, and crashed onto the couch, rolling around. *For all the friends I have, I always seem to end up alone during the important times. Am I the type that needs to be around other people? I know that at my core, I honestly lean towards being more of an introvert, but still...*

"I miss Yume-chan..."

I considered messaging her, but she was probably still busy with the graduation ceremony stuff. I briefly weighed my other options—Maki-chan and Nasuka-chan—but decided against hitting them up since they probably weren't available anyway. *Either way, I should go get changed.*

Even though I hadn't been involved in the ceremony, I'd gone to school, so I'd had to put on my uniform. I sat up, undid my ribbon, took off my jacket, and threw off my blouse. Then I stood up, undid the fastener on my skirt and unzipped it, dropping it to the floor.

It was perfect timing because the heating was finally kicking in, so even as I

stood there in my thin camisole and underwear, I wasn't cold. *I should put my uniform into the washer before I put on clothes.* I hooked my skirt around my toe and kicked it up to me. But right as I did...

"Sup. You just get back?"

"Ah."

Kawanami peeked in from the entrance, and right as he did, I lost control of my kick and the skirt went flying and ended up around his neck as if I'd done a ring toss.

"Ah." He looked like a frilled lizard. As he stood there, staring at me wearing nothing but my underwear, with my leg extended upwards from the kick, he opened his mouth. "My bad. Shit timing."

"Don't you mean '*lucky timing*'?" *You should be a little happier being able to see a girl half naked.*

Part of my pride pressured me to stay in nothing but my underwear until Kawanami went red in the face, but also, it was cold, so I decided against being stubborn and went to my room to change. I put on a baggy shirt, which was essentially a dress for someone as short as I was. Then, since my legs were cold, I put on knee-highs, making a perfect gap between my shirt and socks—leaving a glimpse of my thighs between them. It was the kind of defenseless outfit one would wear when they're prepared to flash their panties. *Have fun fantasizing about the panties that your eyes were so fixed on before. Like this, you'll agonize over being so close yet so far from being able to see the shadowy space in between my legs.*

"You can come in now," I called out.

Kawanami cautiously opened the door and peeked through the gap. "Why are we hanging out in your room, today of all days? We always hang out in the living room."

"My parents might come home today. It'd be awkward if they saw, right, Ko-kun?"

A sour expression crossed his face before he stomped into my room, shutting

the door behind him. Our families were close, sure, but not enough that he'd feel comfortable giving me my White Day gift in front of them. We still hadn't even told them that we'd ever dated.

Kawanami walked over to me as I sat on my bed and handed over a wrapped, rectangular box. "Here. For White Day."

"Nice. What's inside?" I asked as I accepted it.

"Macarons," he said shortly.

"Oh, not bad. I like macarons."

"Read the card."

*What card?* I examined the box closer and realized that there was a small card underneath the golden ribbon tied into a cross-pattern. I took it out, flipped it over, and read it. It was a handmade coupon.

This ticket gives you the right to do anything just for today.

"That's what you get this year for White Day," he said, for some reason very haughtily, folding his arms. "You've been very considerate of my condition, so just for today, I'll do you a favor and suppress all that for you. Go on—have your way with me! Do your worst!" he declared like a commander naming himself in his final moments.

I looked up at my childhood friend and half smiled. "I never thought I'd see the day that a guy would pull the ol' 'your present is me' cliché."

"I'm tryin' to be manly here, sayin' I'm willing to endure torture for you! Don't girlify my resolution!"

*Just what does he think I'm going to do to him?* I stared at the card and started thinking a bit before standing up. "Okay, then. I guess I'll take you up on your offer."

"Bring it on." Kawanami opened his arms up as if he was submitting himself to me.

I began closely inspecting the guy in front of me. He was about thirty centimeters taller than I and was wearing a thick, old winter cardigan and some faded jeans. It was hard to tell because of the clothes he had on, but I knew that he worked out daily. I knew that he'd been working on becoming more toned. *Hm... But did he really mean what he said?*

"What's up?" he asked.

I stayed silent. *How far is he gonna allow me to go? When he says that he's willing to endure torture, he means that he's willing to have his allergy flare up just for today...right? Oh no. My heart's beating so hard I might die.* All this time I'd tried to be careful, but now that he was giving me the green light, I felt so nervous and hesitant that I was starting to blank.

*Is...it really okay? You do know that I'm gonna do dirty things to you, right? Well, I mean, it goes without saying that it'll just be me teasing you. There is a limit to how far I should go. But if you're going to say that I can do anything, then something PG-13 should be okay, right?*

I tried to stop my hands from shaking as I put the box of macarons down. I wasn't sure where the line was. What were the rules at this establishment? How was I supposed to know when they weren't written anywhere? By the time the scary men in black suits came to stop me, it'd be too late! My mind was going at a million miles per second as I silently reached out to him, as if in a hurry. Then I touched his pecs.

"Whoa! Don't tickle me!"

I'd been too light with my touch and accidentally tickled him. *Crap. I hesitated too much.* I resolved to use my palm to touch him more firmly. *His chest is hard. It's completely different from a girl's.* It wasn't exactly anything too new. I touched him all the time, but I wasn't usually touching him with any perverted thoughts in my head. That really pushed me over the edge, making this feel so much dirtier.

*Oh, I know. I just have to think about this as a physical examination. All I'm doing is continuing my usual exposure therapy while making sure that his body's okay.* I started from his chest, moved to his ribs, and then to his biceps. *Yep! Totally not doing anything dirty! This is totally rated E for everyone! We might*

*as well just be playing doctor, and as a doctor, you don't look at your patients with ulterior motives.* I tried convincing myself that I was such a professional, one who wasn't flustered by anything. *Well, as a doctor, I can't properly examine him if I'm not looking at his skin directly.*

I pulled up his shirt. He didn't have a six-pack or anything, but his abs were relatively defined, his belly button was visible, and I could see the edge of his boxers sticking out from his jeans. He was also wearing a belt...

Before I realized it, my hands were on his belt, moving to undo it as if it was the most natural thing in the world. I gasped, immediately stopping myself. *Holy crap that was close! I almost took off his pants! I said PG-13, goddammit! Not R!* I had to stop myself. I couldn't go any further. If he gave me control like this, it was only a matter of time until I reverted back to the crazy girl I used to be. This would become a gross story of lust that I'd never be able to tell Yume-chan or Aso-senpai. I couldn't be in the driver's seat. *Oh, wait. But isn't that the entire point? He said I can do anything, so...*

"Hm?" Kawanami looked confused as I let his shirt down and stepped back. "That it? You pretty much just gave me a physical checkup."

"Yeah..." I sat back down on my bed, lay down and then looked up at him. "It's your turn now."

Kawanami's eyes widened as he looked down at me. *If he says I can do anything, then this is fine.* I'd lose control if I was given free rein, but if he was in control of the situation, things probably wouldn't get too out of control. Even if they did...well, I'd be okay with that.

"What's the matter?" I asked, grinning at Kawanami to egg him on as he froze in place. "What happened to your *manly* spirit?"

Kawanami twitched. I'd caught him hook, line, and sinker. "Physical checkup, right?"

"Yep. Every nook and cranny."

To be honest, him going over every nook and cranny would be bad for me, but in the spirit of egging him on, I had to say that. It seemed to have paid off because he got onto the bed, kneeling on it and making it creak. The shape of

my bed changed with the weight of a guy on it as he positioned himself over me. His lips were dry. *Is it because of the air? Or...*

“You sure?”

“Just do it already. You don’t have to keep asking me for permission.”

I tried acting like I wasn’t bothered at all, which helped Kawanami stretch his hand out to my waist, albeit hesitantly. Then he began touching me through my baggy shirt. Because of how thick it was, I doubted he could really feel anything.

“Scared?” I giggled, grinning mischievously at him. “Isn’t there somewhere you really wanna touch, Mr. Doctor?”

“Aren’t you a little too good at acting like a temptress?”

*No clue what you’re talking about.* “Want me to let you in on a little secret?”

“What?”

“I’m not wearing a bra.”

Kawanami froze for about five seconds. “Do you even need one?”

*I can tell you’re trying to act tough, but it’s easy to see through your bravado when you freeze up for that long.* “Why don’t you check? You might find that there’s more than you exp—”

“No, there isn’t.”

“Hey, don’t shoot me down like that.” *There’s really more than you think! A lot more!* “Touch ’em already and feel for yourself!”

“H-Hey!”

I grabbed Kawanami’s hand and forcefully put it over my left boob. His manly, rugged hand covered it entirely over my clothes.

“See? What do you think?” I could feel his fingers wriggling as if they were trying to find something.

“No clue... Not with your shirt in the way.”

Though I’d been the one to put his hand over my boob, I already began to realize that I’d messed up. I should’ve had him touch my right boob. I couldn’t

believe my mistake. After all, my left one was right over my... Suddenly I felt my heart beat harder.

“You...really can’t tell?” Even faster.

“Y’know...it might be a little soft.”

My heart was pounding out of my chest. The huge amount of blood rushing through my body deprived my brain of the ability to think clearly. Kawanami’s lips were chapped. *It must hurt. He could use some lip balm.*

“But it could just be the softness of the clothes,” he said. “Hard to tell.”

*His lips are dry. What’d I eat today? Shouldn’t have been anything too stinky... My breath’s probably okay...*

“But also,” he continued, “caring so much about the size of boobs is kinda childish...”

*Ko-kun’s lips are dry. I wet my own.*

“But yeah, my arm’s starting to get kinda tire—”

“Eek!” I couldn’t help but scream as I felt him squeeze.

“S-Sorry!” Ko-kun freaked out and tried to shift his weight to his other hand, but my bed was small, meaning when he put his other hand down, there was nowhere for him to put it. He fell flat down, letting out a grunt as he fell on top of me. He frantically put his hand on the bed, but at this point, his face was so close to mine, I could feel his breath.

It was over for me.

“Hey—”

*Sorry. I can’t hold back anymore.* I wrapped my hands around his neck and pressed my lips against his dry ones.

He wriggled around, but I kept him in place with my hands, keeping my lips pressed against his. When it seemed like it was hard for him to breathe, I moved away for a second before going in for more again and again, the emotions pouring out from me. It’d been a while since we’d last kissed, and all that I could feel was the dryness of his lips, which kind of hurt. But still, I didn’t

care. I didn't want to stop. I solely focused on kissing him as if I were trying to steal him away from someone.

After who knows how many times and how many minutes, I finally regained my self-control and let him go, exhaling. His eyes were wide open, his mouth hanging half-open with disbelief.

His breathing was just as ragged as mine. A few beats later, I slowly put the back of my hand to my lips. "Sorry..." I used my hand to cover my face and looked away, trying to pretend nothing had happened. "Don't look at me right now..." After all that time, the words that I was able to squeeze out weren't an apology for what I'd forced him into. "If you see my face...you'll probably barf."

Right now, I was making the most girly face I'd made all year.

"Okay..." Kawanami said softly as he slowly got up. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye and saw that he already wasn't looking too great. "Sorry, I'm gonna go home."

"Yeah...probably for the best."

Kawanami left my room, leaving me curled up in my bed. Now alone, I stared at the ceiling, waiting for my body to cool down. *I...really did it. How couldn't I after he said all that? If anything, it's a miracle that ended with me just kissing him. Him declaring that he wasn't going to resist anything I did would usually end with me going all the way.*

"Huh?" Then I tilted my head. "Didn't he get sick a little too slowly?" Up until now, his allergy would act up, making him almost faint, but he'd been able to walk out of here as if nothing was wrong.

I fell silent. *He's better. He's starting to recover.*

## **That Which Was Obtained**

**Suzuri Kurenai**

In middle school, I had helped manage our class's contribution to the cultural festival. Considering my talents, it was only natural. Everyone in my class had wanted me to do it, and I had naturally accepted the position. But that was still



when I hadn't realized that I wasn't perfect.

"Kurenai-san! I think we should do it like this, but what do you think?" a girl asked.

"Good idea. But it's a little unbalanced, so it might increase the workload."

"Oh..."

"Kurenai-san, the guys are fighting!" another girl called out to me.

"It's a waste of time. Leave them be. Work on this instead."

"Huh? O-Okay..."

Thanks to my leadership, our class's contribution had gone over well. Now, though, I understood that the girl who came to me with a suggestion cared more about doing what she wanted to do than the overall balance. The other girl cared more about everyone getting along than work efficiency.

If we were working in a company, the way I worked might've been exemplary, but in a school setting, it wasn't. After all, we were only working on the cultural festival.

Then, I heard them talking behind my back.

"Kurenai-san thinks that she's never wrong."

"It's like she doesn't think it's worth listening to us."

"Totally. It's all about her."

"Our cultural festival really felt lackluster, y'know..."

That was unlikely a mere snippet of my peers' opinions of me. As proof, gradually, people began to stop interacting with me. I'd been so sure that I'd done the right thing. But nobody had been looking for the right thing. I'd been convinced that I had all the answers—that I was the most talented. That being said, it hadn't shaken my pride. I hadn't met anyone who could shake that belief of mine. Even so, I understood that I wasn't perfect. I lacked the ability to give others recognition. I lacked the ability to deny who I was to praise someone else.

It was around then that I found someone—an absolute nobody who was

doing busywork without anyone even noticing him.

“Haba-kun.” He was the last piece to make me whole. “There’s something that only you can do.”

I’d haughtily pushed this job onto him, but at a certain point, it wasn’t just that anymore. It wasn’t because he could do what I couldn’t.

“Joe, I like you. Please go out with me.”

To me, he shined brightly. He stuck beside me despite how I acted. Even though he gave everyone else recognition, he didn’t give himself any at all. That ticklish extent of love and respect with his almost annoying self-hate—every last bit of him shined in my eyes.

*You aren’t more right than I. You aren’t more talented than I. But even so, you shine so much more brightly than I that I can’t see straight. Nobody else has noticed. That light objectively doesn’t exist, but you’re making me dizzy with your brightness. I have no doubt I’m seeing an illusion. But that’s what love is, isn’t it?*

It wasn’t written in any of the reference materials I’d perused—and trust me, I’d read them thoroughly. But as a person who was more correct than anyone else, I had to believe that I was right this time too. This was my answer. This was the thing that only he could do.

After putting away the chairs and removing the green plastic sheets we’d put the chairs on, we’d restored the gymnasium back to what it looked like before the graduation ceremony. I sat on the edge of the stage and looked at the now empty space. I was only halfway through my term as student council president, and I still had the entrance ceremony to prepare for, but even so, seeing this had me feeling accomplished.

There were plenty of third-years who’d shed tears. Graduation ceremonies weren’t events where the personality of the organizer could be shown off. Even so, just that made me feel a little better than the cultural festival in middle school. *Am I going to cry like they did when I’m in their position next year?* Would the three years I spent here be powerful enough in my heart to evoke tears?

“What a sad dream...” I muttered, mocking myself.

I knew who I was better than anyone else. I was a pretty heartless person, unlike someone like Aisa, who would cry even though she declared she wouldn't.

Right then, the door by the stage creaked open, and there was suddenly one more person in what had otherwise been a deserted gymnasium.

“Kurenai-san... Both Irido-san and Asuhain-san have gone home,” Joe reported in his usual low voice, which echoed loudly in this empty space.

“Okay,” I replied shortly, not moving from my seat on the stage.

Joe stopped roughly three meters away and looked up at me. “That’s a wrap on our activities for this school year.”

“Yep. Next up is the entrance ceremony in April,” I said.

Joe went quiet as if he was waiting for something. No, that wasn't it. Though I wasn't nearly as astute as Joe, I could somewhat read people as well. As someone who'd been by his side for so long, I could pick up on the minute changes to his facial expression. He was hesitating. He couldn't decide whether he wanted to take another step forward or not.

I could tell that it was a big decision for him. The choice he was facing wasn't even whether to be courageous or not. The way he conducted himself was set in stone. He wouldn't challenge things or try to do things. Even if he didn't make decisions, his life was fulfilled.

If he wished for anything more than that—if there was even a chance that he wished for more—the mere fact that he was considering it and not sure what to do was enough of a result in my mind. My lips curled into a smile and I exhaled into the chilly gymnasium before starting the conversation.

“It's just like the first time,” I said.

“Huh?”

I jumped down from the stage, my landing echoing pleasantly across the empty gymnasium. It really felt like the entire gymnasium belonged to just us.

“It's like that time I called out to you when you were throwing out the trash.

Back then, Aisa, Yume-kun, Ran-kun, President Hoshibe, and our other upperclassman in charge of general affairs weren't around. It was just the two of us."

I walked towards him, my hand on the edge of the stage as if I was tracing it.

"I felt like I'd found a missing piece of myself. Something more important than a right-hand man. Maybe a leg. With you, I felt like I could go anywhere." I naturally pointed my self-mocking smile towards Joe. "That's the extent of how I felt for you back then." *You think I overvalue you, but I think I undervalue you.* "You taught me how to understand other people. You helped fix my haughtiness, and taught me how to make friends. But even more importantly, you annoyed me by your own low self-value, you touched me by how deeply caring you are, and you pissed me off by how stubborn you are." I looked straight at him as I said this. "All of it was a first for me. Did you know that?"

*I'm sure that you'll say it's all a coincidence. You'll say that there's someone more fitting out there I could've met first. But if that's the logical argument you want to pull out, I'll shoot it down with logic of my own. I met you first.* Even if it'd been a coincidence, it was the undeniable truth. Even if, hypothetically, this wasn't the best possible outcome, I could hold my head high knowing that I'd met him—the best possible person for me.

"So?" I took a step towards him. "I've made my case." Then another step. "Do you finally believe me?" A third step.

Moving towards him instead of making him come to me was probably the best approach I could take right now. But the last three steps between us were ones that he had to take, otherwise there'd be no point.

"I..." Joe slightly opened his mouth. "I've never thought that I have any value. I never really had any reason to think so, I just...assumed it as a matter of fact. It's been like that ever since I was little." Joe hesitated. "But...it's probably the same for everyone. There's nobody who knows their value from the get-go. As a kid, people baby you and don't let you see reality, but in time, you end up running into the real deal. I'm sure that you've gone through the same thing, Kurenai-san."

The way Joe spoke sounded like he was sighing.

“From the start, I thought I was different,” he continued. “I thought that we all started life with different things...but what was actually different was what we obtained. Aso-san and Irido-san...Hoshibe-senpai and you—watching you all change made me realize that, whether I wanted to or not.” Then Joe continued. “I’m fine being in the background,” he decisively declared. “I’m not changing my answer. I have pride in who I am. I know better than anyone what’s great about being in the background. I’ve realized that it isn’t something I was born with, but something that I obtained.”

Joji Haba was the guy who had the least amount of presence in the Rakuro Student Council...no, in the entire school. That very same guy was being assertive and overwhelming in this empty gymnasium! He was asserting his existence.

“Kurenai-san...the two of us aren’t a good match.” Those words should’ve hurt, but they didn’t—quite the opposite, actually. My heart was beating harder and faster. “But...that doesn’t have any bearing on what I obtained and what I think.” I didn’t take my eyes off any action he took, even the smallest movements of his lips. “You have everything I don’t. You shine like the star of a play.” He took a step towards me. “I’m just a worthless stagehand, but you still found me in my place in the back of the stage.” Then another step. “That’s why if you ask me the exact timeline, I have only one answer...” A third step. “I’ve liked you from the very beginning.” He stood right in front of me and gently held my hand, placing a small bag of chocolate in my palm. “I’m sorry for pretending I didn’t all this time.”

Suddenly his voice was back to the pessimistic, mumbling tone that he usually spoke in.

I couldn’t help but giggle and look at him as he looked down. “You made these yourself?”

“Well...the only idea I had was answering you with the same thing you gave me...”

The assertive presence he’d had before was completely gone, as if it’d never existed. He was back to his usual timid self, which only made me giggle more.

“The same thing... So does that mean it’s okay if I interpret it with the same

meaning that I gave you mine with?" *I asked you to go out with me when I gave you mine. Now you're giving me the same chocolates back.*

Joe's ears went pink and he mumbled out a response. "Well...you *can* interpret it that way..."

"Well then, there's something we have to do, right?"

I put the hand holding his chocolate against his waist and leaned against him.

"Huh? Oh..."

"You've toyed with me long enough. Don't you think it's okay for me to be a little bit impatient?"

As I stared at him from a distance where he could feel my breath, Joe's eyes darted around before he clenched them shut. "O-Okay, then..." he said, opening his eyes, his mind made up.

I naturally closed my eyes and felt my body being embraced in his arms. No more words were left between us. I could tell exactly what he wanted to say as he held me tightly in his arms, making me smile. *I was talking about a kiss, not a hug, but...this works. This is the first time he's hugged me.* We stood there in the empty gymnasium for who knows how many seconds or minutes, in the comfort of each other's arms.

## **Where Is the Goal Line for Love?**

### **Yume Irido**

After coming back home, I changed out of my uniform and slipped out of the house before our parents could see. If they saw my date outfit, which I'd spent a lot of time putting together, I had no doubt they'd try to pry, and I was already running late. Sure, I *could* have worn a coat over my clothes, but it was a date, and I wanted to be able to go on one with the outfit I'd worked hard on in full view.

Today, I was going on a date with Mizuto as his White Day gift to me. Well, there was that, but it was also to celebrate getting past the hellish period of finals, the graduation ceremony, and all the student council work I'd been busy

with. Having Mizuto plan all of this for me really helped it sink in that we were dating. I was so touched by the effort.

Normally when we went on dates, we avoided the usual places we frequented, not only to avoid our parents but also anyone we knew from school. Worst-case scenario, we'd have to try and pretend as if we were nothing more than a pair of very close stepsiblings, but it'd be best if we could avoid that situation entirely.

I took the train from Karasuma Oike and got off three stations later. It was just a few minutes on the train so it kinda felt like a waste, but Mizuto had offered to pay for everything. As the person being celebrated today, it was only right that I didn't try to act reserved and let myself be treated.

*Hang on, this is all money he's earned by working as Higashira-san's tutor, right? It's a small price for him to pay for cheating on me with her. Not that he actually is.* While riding the train, I sent Mizuto a message.

**Yume:** Be there soon.

I got a response right about when I got off the train.

**Mizuto:** I'm killing time at Book Off.

Our conversation didn't sound like that of a couple meeting up for a date, but it was very characteristic of Mizuto—my boyfriend.

I passed through the station's turnstiles and took the escalator up to the Book Off. There were actually three floors to this particular store, but I had a good idea of where I'd find Mizuto. When I got off the escalator on the third floor, I walked to the paperback section and saw the back of someone familiar.

As I got closer, I called out to him in a soft voice. "Sorry I'm late."

"Mm." Mizuto glanced at me and then returned the book he was holding to the shelf.

“You’re done?”

“Someone wrote in it.”

“Oh...” *This kind of thing happens every now and then.* “What’d they write?”

“You’re better off not knowing.”

“Why?”

“Dirty jokes at an elementary school level.”

“Oh...” *I get it. I remember similar things in the school library’s dictionaries...*

“Anyway, let’s get going.”

A bookstore wasn’t a place that we should stand around and talk in, so we left. After getting outside, we crossed the street and went towards Sanjo Ohashi to cross the Kamo River. We walked over the bridge with wooden railings that had onion-shaped knobs on them in even intervals and then headed towards the shopping district.

During this, Mizuto suddenly made a comment out of the blue. “Y’know, I’ve thought this since I was in middle school, but I struggle to have fun out on the town.”

“Yeah, I more or less knew that...” I said, wryly smiling.

Who knows how many times it’s been brought up, but in the first place, our old dates never really followed any particular pattern. I got the feeling that Mizuto especially had no interest in even leaving the house. Essentially, I had no clue what a guy like that had planned for us in the shopping district. *Seriously, does he know how to have fun? I bet he’d prefer to just stay home and read.* Of course, he’d never say this to his girlfriend’s face, but after living with him as his stepsister for almost a year, I pretty much knew this as a fact.

“I thought you had a pretty good time at the aquarium, though...” I said.

“I was just impressed by how great that aquarium was.” *I won’t press any further. If he has something to do, like looking at fish, it makes sense that it’d be easier for him to enjoy himself.* “Anyway, as the person who invited you out today, I thought up a lot of different things, but...”



“Yeah?”

“I gave up. I have no clue what to do,” Mizuto conceded.

*Here’s a guy who gives up on making date plans, and wouldn’t you believe it? He’s my boyfriend.* “So...you don’t have any plans for today’s date?”

“I’d prefer if you call it being super flexible.”

I found myself giggling, a proud grin on my face, which only served to confuse Mizuto.

“Well, there it is. Plain as day how differently we each spent last year,” I boasted.

“For reference...why don’t you tell me what exactly you’re feeling superior about?”

“Well, for one, I’m in a position to help my poor fun-illiterate boyfriend who only knows how to hang out at bookstores and libraries.”

Mizuto seemingly decided to give up and accept my superiority to him in this regard. “I’ll leave it to you...”

“Mizuto,” I said, putting all the confidence I’d gained over the past year into my smile. “Have fun vicariously by watching me have fun!”

Seemingly even more resigned than before, a gentle smile filled his face.

As we walked around, we went into the stores lining the street one after another.

“What do you think of these clothes? Cute, right?” I asked.

“Well, they probably are if you think so.”

“Wrong answer! I’m asking about what *you* think! Can’t you read between the lines? I’m saying I want to buy clothes that fit your tastes! I can buy the kind of clothes I like on my own time!”

“Reading between the lines? When’d this become a test?” Then he picked out something and put it against my shoulders. “But I guess this might be nice.”

“Really? Have your tastes changed?”

He used to really like the really girly styles with innocent and pure looks to them. But what he'd picked out was a shirt, which wasn't very flashy but had a loose collar. It was the kind of thing that Akatsuki-san would recommend I wear.

"Well, you've gotten taller, so it's hard to recommend the same kinds of clothes as before."

My eyes narrowed at his comments and I stared at him.

"Wh-What?" he stammered uncomfortably.

"Let me let you in on a little secret. When a guy's preferences change, people might think that it was influenced by another girl—or at least, *I* do." Mizuto awkwardly looked away. "I knew it. This has Higashira-san written all over it."

"Wait, no. I can explain myself."

"Go ahead."

"So you know how I help her gather reference materials, right? It means I've gotten more opportunities to look into fashion, especially for girls. And so...I also get to thinking about what kind of clothes'll look good on you."

"Uh-huh..." I drank in the expression on Mizuto's face. It wasn't every day I got to see him on the back foot. "I'll forgive you," I said, smiling. "This just means that you've been thinking about me a lot, right?"

"Yeah, exactly..." he said, sighing after getting out of trouble.

But my smile widened even further. "Just keep in mind that any reference to another girl while on a date with your girlfriend is forbidden. Don't forget that, okay?"

"*You're* the one who brought her up. What am I supposed to do?"

"Your best!" I answered.

"That's really not fair..."

I giggled after successfully teasing him and bought the shirt he'd picked out. Mizuto had said he'd pay for everything today, but I felt like having him pay for this was kind of a waste of White Day.

“Next up is finding pants to match this,” I said.

“I think anything’ll go with it.”

“You’re not wrong, but it’d be nice to buy something specifically to match it.” Then I tilted my head slightly. “Don’t you want to see your girlfriend in clothes you picked out for her?”

“You’ve gotten quite shrewd, you know that?”

“I’d prefer if you call me *sophisticated*.”

I enjoyed the glimpse of possessiveness that my boyfriend let show while we continued walking around the shopping district.

We might’ve been a couple who lived together, but our reason for living together was different from normal couples’. After all, we were living together because we shared the same parents. Obviously, that put a restriction on the lovey-dovey stuff we could do at home. But it wasn’t like we could be all over each other in public either. This begged the question—where exactly *could* we act like a couple? We’d come up with this answer already during the past two and a half months—a two-person room in an internet café.

“I feel conflicted...” I complained as Mizuto came back into the room.

“The idea to meet up here came from your experience with Higashira-san, right? I’m embarrassed by how I’m constantly jumping to see traces of Higashira-san’s influence.”

Mizuto’s expression changed into a halfway point between a wry smile and an affectionate one. “Well, I guess all I can really do is listen to your complaints,” he said as he sat next to me. “But in terms of burden on the wallet and fitting our requirements, there isn’t a better place than this, right?”

“Yeah, I know, but still...” I pouted.

Seeing my reaction, Mizuto lightly bumped his shoulder against mine. “I’ve only been to a manga café once with Isana. But this is the third time we’ve come to an internet café. You’ve won.”

I leaned on his shoulder, pushing back on him, and he put his arm around me,

supporting me. Then I remembered how he'd said that he'd do everything that he did with Higashira-san with me. It was such a childish promise, but he was faithfully keeping it.

As a result, I couldn't help but remember that a certain accident had happened between the two of them when they'd been in a two-person room like this. Higashira-san had told me all about it.

I fell silent and began shooting side glances at Mizuto. He was in the middle of booting up the computer, placing his hand on the mouse. It didn't seem that he was thinking about the same thing at all.

"Wanna watch something?" he asked.

I reflexively moved away from him. His arm that he'd wrapped around me had come close to touching my chest.

"Mm... Yeah, put whatever on."

Then, we continued spending time in that small room, and I was the only one thinking of what'd happened between him and Higashira-san. The things we did here were really trivial. We'd watch videos on the computer, read books that we'd brought, and of course read manga. We were spending time together much more freely and in closer proximity than we had in middle school.

We weren't always talking to each other in these rooms. Because the two of us lived together as stepsiblings, we didn't fear silence. The purpose of us being here was to pass the time, being ourselves without having to worry about other people watching.

That's exactly why we could do things that couples could only do behind closed doors. Of course, I wasn't talking about dirty things. That'd be against the rules of the café. Besides, the soundproofing wasn't exactly great, meaning if you weren't whispering, other people might be able to hear you. But being this close to each other in a small room like this, an accident or two was bound to happen...right?

I continued shooting glances at Mizuto while slowly putting my hand over his. As I did, he shot me back a glance and then slowly squeezed my hand. *This much is okay.* I moved myself closer to him, pressing our shoulders even closer

together. Then, I leaned into him, putting more of my weight onto him.

*It's okay... This much is okay.* Then, I slowly let go of his hand and instead hesitantly wrapped it around his waist, asking him if I could without actually using words. Surprisingly, it felt like I was begging him.

Neither of us opened our mouths. The room was completely silent. We used the mood to sense our intentions. Eventually, he hesitantly put his arm around my waist. Then he placed his hand on my ribs and lightly pulled me closer in a hug. *It's okay... This is still completely okay.* If I lost my balance, Mizuto's hand would slip and...he might touch my boobs. But that'd just be an accident. *Accidents are okay... It's okay...* Mizuto's hand slowly but surely began to slip farther and farther until eventually, his hands began tracing my rib cage and found themselves directly underneath my boobs.

"Oh." Suddenly, Mizuto made a sound, making me jump a little.

"Wh-What's wrong."

"Time's almost up. What do you wanna do?" he asked.

Feeling his gaze on me made me flustered. *You're asking me what I wanna do? Will you extend our time here if I ask for it? What will you do if we have more time?*

I shook my head. "We should probably leave. Our parents are probably home by now anyway."

"Yeah..."

Then, Mizuto took his arm off of me and began cleaning up. I quietly sighed. *Even if we stayed longer, there's a limit to what we're allowed to do here. But there is a place we could go where we could...* I lightly shook my head, trying to disperse the thoughts that were lighting my brain on fire. *How am I always thinking about these things?! When did I turn into such a perv?!* Of course, some day we'd...do it. It didn't have to be here...or now. *But when and where?* No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't come up with an answer.

When we went on dates, we had a rule that we'd be back in time for dinner. Even though it was already March, the days were still short, and the sky had

already grown dark. I was sure that we'd miss these days when the shoe was on the other foot and it was still bright when we were coming home from school in the summer.

When we were home, we could still be together, but we couldn't do anything like normal couples. As stepsiblings, we couldn't hold hands, kiss, or even lean against one another. This grated on my mind day after day. It made me realize that there was no limit to human desire. The more I got used to the happiness, the more I desired.

How far did we need to go before I'd feel satisfied? Without a clear goal line, I was left in despair. No matter how happy I was, the happiness I'd gained became a given, and I ended up wanting more. If that's how romance was, then I couldn't help but wonder how deep the rabbit hole went. Would I continue like this until I died, continuously yearning for something more?

"You really chose something simple," Mizuto said, looking down at the bag he was carrying. "It's White Day. You could've been a little greedier with what you asked for. It's tradition for the guy to give back a gift three times as great as the girl's, but you still opted for cookies."

"I'm happy with my decision. I can eat them out in the open at home."

*As long as Mizuto's by my side, I don't need anything else.* Or at least, I wished I was someone whose desires weren't so bottomless, that I would be fulfilled by just that. Neon lights flashed in the shopping district as we slowly walked through it. Up until now, I'd never carefully looked for a certain kind of place, but if I did, I was sure I could find one or two of them. There was a certain adult place where we could indulge in certain activities in private—a place where we didn't have to be stepsiblings. The only thing was, going in there as high schoolers wasn't exactly allowed. The fact that I was on the student council would make it even worse if we were caught. *There's already one member on the student council doing these kinds of things, though...* Thinking about it like that, I couldn't help but feel that maybe it wasn't as big of a deal as I was making it out to be.

As I walked next to Mizuto, internally I whispered to him. *Mizuto...do you want to do...it with me?* The reason that I didn't say this out loud was most

likely because I was a coward. I wasn't decisive, so I left all the decisions to Mizuto and took it easy despite already knowing my answer if he asked me.

"Yume..." Suddenly, Mizuto called out to me in a low voice making my heart skip a beat. "Thanks for today. I had fun."

I smiled. *Oh, that's it? Phew.* "Do you get how to have fun as a high schooler a bit better now?"

"Not sure. If I'd been by myself or with Kawanami or Isana, I'm sure there'd be a different vibe." Mizuto looked up at the darkening sky. "You know how I am. I'll probably never change, but if you keep changing, you'll make it so that I'm never left behind...or at least that's the feeling I get."

"Left behind by who? The world?"

"Yeah, I guess you could put it that way, if you want to make me sound cooler than I actually intended."

Thanks to me, he'd changed from a boy crying while reading *The Siberian Dancer*—a book nobody knew—in a dim study, to one who was out in the world.

I gripped his hand tightly. "Then you need to make sure you hold on tight so you're not left behind."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

*I take back everything I said. As long as Mizuto's by my side, I don't need anything else.* At the very least, I felt like I'd be able to keep thinking that for a little bit. Or at least, that's what I thought until a certain incident transpired when we got home.

"Huh?"

"What?"

My face and Mizuto's went blank as mom and Mineaki-ojisan smiled brightly at us.

"Well, you know our anniversary's coming up," mom said.

"We're thinking of using spring break to go on a trip as newlyweds," Mineaki-

ojisan said.

“So we’ll need the two of you to watch the house while we’re gone for three days.”

“It’ll just be the two of you, but we’re counting on you.”

The reason that Mizuto and I were both frozen was due to the amount of trust that filled our parents’ eyes as they dropped this news on us.



# Within Arm's Reach

## A Guy's Determination

**Mizuto Irido**

I surveyed the entrance to a convenience store a decent distance from our house for no particular reason. If I went straight, I'd hit the shelf with the onigiri on them. If I made a left, that'd get me to the magazine rack. Then there was a certain area that I never usually paid attention to, but today, I couldn't help but zero in on it.

I couldn't help but remember how, when I was in middle school, I'd gone to a pharmacy to procure a certain item, but I didn't know where they were, so I had to go around the huge store twice. Even after finding it, it had taken me another three laps around the interior of the store until I'd worked up the nerve to actually grab it. I must've looked so suspicious, I was surprised I hadn't been reported for suspected shoplifting.

But today was different. I finished everything on my first try. I bought a drink I didn't really want, headed towards the magazines, picked out a manga magazine at random, flipped through the pages before putting it under my arm, and then extremely naturally turned around. There, I saw a good number of boxes with white masks drawn on them, but they weren't what I was looking for. I dropped my gaze to the shelf beneath them and spent a few seconds looking around until I finally saw *them*. They'd been hidden between the bandages and wet wipes as if they were trying to tell me that they weren't to be touched.

I ignored the fancy design on the package. All I could focus on were the numbers on the small box that read "0.01 or 0.02." The only ones who'd understand the meaning to those numbers were the people who came here with the will to buy these products.

For a few seconds, I stared at the masks before steeling myself and casually

looking back down at the small box at the bottom of everything. The differences between the small boxes were just the numbers representing how many were inside each one and the number value of the items themselves. Last time, I'd thought that it'd be best to buy ones with more as long as they were the same price, so I'd bought a box of twelve.

But could I make the same decision now? Maybe quality was better than quantity in this case. If I was gonna buy these, then it'd probably be better to go with something nicer. It'd probably be better for her that way too, right?

That being said, buying a three pack was kinda... I mean, going off of pure simple math, it was four times as expensive as a pack of twelve. Hypothetically—*strictly* hypothetically—if we ran out, I'd have to go out and buy more. I don't think I could survive having to come back over and over again to buy these. Worst-case scenario, we'd run out in the middle of things...

If that happened, could I really trust myself to think straight? I shuddered imagining the situation. If that happened, I might've ended up making a mistake I'd never be able to take back. If I wanted to avoid that risk as well as show consideration and respect to her, then the choice was clear. I decided to buy the six pack for a thousand yen. But as I reached for it, a thought crossed my head. *Do I really need them?*

After tomorrow, dad and Yuni-san were going on their trip, leaving me and Yume alone for two and a half days. I'd thought that we might need these, especially since the ones I'd bought in middle school had vanished from my desk about a year ago. *But do I really need these?* I'd been ready to use them before, but ended up fumbling the attempt completely.

*No.* I grabbed the box. *It doesn't matter if we go through with things or not. I should have these.* It was partially my show of will as well as my responsibility. Surely I had matured from my childlike thinking from middle school and gained the ability to think about things more optimistically.

So then I took the box of contraceptives to the counter, hiding it behind the manga magazine I was holding. I might've had the determination to buy them, but I wasn't nearly brave enough to buy them without anything hiding them.

# A Girl's Determination

Yume Irido

*I...really bought it.* I was currently in my room staring at the clothing I'd laid out on my bed. I didn't normally put that much effort into picking something like this out, since it wasn't meant for showing off, but I had an upcoming opportunity to do just that. I mean, sometimes it's nice to just buy something cute for yourself, but this wasn't for me.

See, the "clothing" I'd bought just so happened to be lingerie. I had no doubt that a hundred percent of people would agree that the baby doll and matching panties in front of me were lingerie. I'd chosen to get something with an intricate flower design that was mostly black—a color I didn't wear too often. If that's all it had going on for it, one might've written it off as an expensive-looking set of underwear, but there was more to it. The top of the cups and the sides of the panties were made of see-through lace.

The translucent fabric would display the skin underneath, both heightening the confidence of its wearer and alluringly hiding just enough of the naked body, only allowing for small glimpses. By doing so, it would entice its prey to approach, almost like a carnivorous plant. Lingerie was meant to be shown to the opposite sex.

Most people called this the underwear that one would wear when going in for the kill. I'd been thinking for a while that I might need lingerie. After all, I was living with Mizuto. Who's to say that when our parents weren't around, we wouldn't get in the mood sometime?

But also, buying lingerie could've been interpreted as me hoping for that kind of situation to arise, which was incredibly embarrassing, so I'd put it off. I'd also been busy with the student council, so I'd ended up dragging my feet until today. As soon as our parents had announced their trip, it was almost as though a deadline had been set. I'd...*had* to buy it.

I knew that I'd regret this for the rest of my life if I chickened out. My thinking was that I should at least have things ready just in case. I'd researched what I should buy a long time ago, so when I got to the lingerie shop, it honestly didn't take too long to make a decision. When I put the lingerie over my clothes, I felt

a strange sense of excitement from how adult it made me feel. But after that excitement faded, I was left with an unprecedented amount of anxiety. The fact that I had the lingerie meant that in the near future...*it* would happen.

*What am I thinking? Of course it will! That's why I bought the lingerie!* My inner voice was practically screaming this. Even so...having something so *related* to the event made things feel fake, somehow. I couldn't help but ask myself if this was really happening and it wasn't just one of my fantasies. It was as if I was trying to run away from reality. I would hear rumors every now and then that people saw me as the student council's ambassador of morality. For the record, President Kurenai was the ambassador of coolness, Aso-senpai was the ambassador of seductive cuteness, and Asuhain-san was the ambassador of tsunderes. *I've never seen her act sweet, though.* Rumors were stupid, but I couldn't help but keep in mind what people thought of me, so I ended up acting the way they expected someone with high morals to act. *But now, I'm finally gonna...*

I paused as a slight nervousness ran across my body, making me tremble.



*No. Nuh-uh. Calm down, Yume. You're being way too self-conscious.* We'd been home alone without our parents plenty of times, and nothing had happened. Having a piece of lingerie like this—that's essentially just underwear—was totally fine. I might not have known what I was going to do with it, but I knew it was better to have than not. That's all it was. There was no deeper reason than that. Thinking that, I neatly folded it all up and put it away in a drawer.

Now, with those black, see-through articles of clothing out of sight, I felt like I could finally breathe again. *Sheesh. Our parents haven't even left yet, but the way I'm acting is gonna raise eyebrows.* How long did we have to put it off? It'd already been a year since we'd started living together. We'd been stepsiblings for an entire year already. I thought about this while going down to the first floor.

Mizuto arrived at the exact same moment. "Hey."

"Oh. Welcome back."

"Thanks," he said, greeting me as he normally did before slightly nodding and walking past me.

As he did, I realized that he was carrying something under his arm. *A manga magazine? Since when did he buy those?* As I tried to figure out this puzzle, I realized something else. There was something inside Mizuto's jacket pocket. It was a little bulge that opened his pocket a little, allowing me to catch a glimpse of a small box with a familiar design. *I know what that is. About a year ago, I threw something like that away.*

I clammed up as the sound disappeared around me, only leaving my loudly beating heart in my ears. *Oh. I see. We're...really gonna do it.*

## Day One: Part One

### Mizuto Irido

“Bye, kids!” Yuni-san said.

“Bye, have fun!” Yume said.

“You can reach out if anything happens, Mizuto.”

“I get it already. Don’t worry about us,” I muttered, brushing off dad’s worry.

Then our parents said goodbye to us one more time before leaving. After the door shut behind them, Yume and I were left standing there, listening to their footsteps and voices disappearing farther and farther into the distance. Eventually, Yume slowly lowered her hand.

Not a word was said between the two of us as the silence became increasingly louder in the entrance. Starting today, for two days and some change, it’d just be us here—unsupervised.

There was absolutely no fear of anyone overhearing our conversations or need to be careful about anyone seeing us together. No matter what we did...we didn’t have to worry about frantically stopping whatever we were doing because our parents might stumble in on us. We could keep going and going without stepping on the brakes.

Still, neither of us could find the words to say. Sounds like the floorboards creaking became amplified. Most likely, Yume was shifting her weight to one of her legs. Being able to hear that was proof of how heightened my senses had become in this situation.

*What should we do? Even though we’ve already been living together for a year, I have no clue where to go from here. At the very least, staying in this silence is dangerous. The longer this goes on, the longer we’ll be trapped in this situation and the less we’ll know how we should handle things.*

“So—” I was finally able to open my mouth, but at that exact moment, there was a loud click from the changing room, making my shoulders jump slightly.

Most likely, it was the lid of the dryer unlocking because the cycle was done.

“I-I...” Yume stammered, obviously flustered. “I’m gonna go fold the clothes...”

Then she scurried off to the changing room as if she were running away. *Is she running away from me? Or did I let her go?* But as I watched her disappear into the changing room, I also couldn’t help but wonder if she might be wary of me. *No way...right?*



## Day One: Part Two

Yume Irido

“Hey—”

“S-Sorry, I’m busy!”

He tried again later.

“You got a sec?”

“Oh, I... I need to go grocery shopping!”

Then again later.

“Hey.”

“Sorry, phone call!”

Each time he tried talking to me, I ran away. Despite it finally being just the two of us, I kept running from him. There were so many things I’d wanted to do with him, but I got so nervous whenever he called out to me that I had to run away because I couldn’t handle it.

It was still early in the day, so I should’ve known that he wouldn’t be trying to jump right into things. But when night came... Thinking about that, I couldn’t help but become more and more aware of what was potentially to come.

*Are things going to work out? Will Mizuto ask me...tonight? But how? What will he do?* I couldn’t imagine what was going to happen even a half day into the future, but it was making me so incredibly anxious. I might’ve been overthinking things. This all might’ve simply been my usual overly self-conscious side talking. In the first place, that small box I’d gotten a glimpse of yesterday might not have even been what I thought it was. It could’ve been a box of candy for all I knew.

By the time I’d cleared the negative thoughts from my head and calmed down, Mizuto was calling out to me while I was on my phone in the living room.

“Hey,” he said.

This time, I wasn't going to run away. I just needed to stay calm and talk to him like usual. "Yeah?" *Good. Just like this. Keep things normal. There's no guarantee that something's happening toni—*

"Do you know where the...nail clippers are?"

*Nail clippers?* Though something about that caught my attention, I couldn't figure out what the intention behind him asking about them was.

"I'm pretty sure they're..." I got up and went to a small drawer by the door and pulled them out. "Right here," I said, offering them to him.

"Thanks."

As Mizuto took them from me, I looked at him. It was just a fraction of a second, but from what I saw, it didn't seem like his nails were really that long. Usually, he found maintaining his nails to be too annoying, so he'd wait until they got really long to cut them. Before I knew it, my heart was beating quickly before I realized why. *He's cutting his nails just in case? Oh, right. I guess that's one of the things to do in preparation.*

"U-Um," I suddenly called out to him as he turned around. "Let me have them after you...okay?"

*I'm not misreading the situation, nor am I being overly self-conscious.*

## Day One: Part Three

### Mizuto Irido

While I tried to look calm by focusing on reading, night fell. This was around the time that Yuni-san would happily be cooking. Realizing that I'd yet to talk to Yume about dinner, I went down to the first floor. As I opened the door to the living room, I heard the sound of the refrigerator door closing.

"Oh..." Yume turned around to face me from the kitchen.

In her arms were various vegetables, tofu, and other items from the refrigerator. I walked to the kitchen as she put everything down by the sink.

"So...I was thinking about making dinner for us. Well, I mean, it'd pretty much just be miso soup, but..."

"What about the rice?" I asked.

"It's cooked."

I looked at the rice cooker, which was currently keeping the rice warm, before moving next to Yume. "I'll help."

"Th-Thanks..."

"I'll be eating this too. Of course I'm helping."

Over the past year, Yume's cooking skills had developed to about the same level as mine. There was absolutely no worry in leaving all the cooking to her, but it kinda felt like I was being *that* kind of guy, and I didn't like that.

I took my position next to her and silently helped. After we were all done, we had miso soup, a salad, and store-bought hamburger steak on the dining table. Lastly, Yume brought our rice over and sat down. Yume neatly took off the apron she'd been wearing and then took a seat where Yuni-san usually sat, right across from me.

"Thanks for the food." Yume politely put her hands together before starting to eat.

I followed suit, picking up my chopsticks, and for a bit, there was nothing but

the sound of our utensils and bowls. *The silence hurts.* Usually, I wasn't bothered by it, but today was an exception. After all, when we were done eating, we'd take a bath, and then... By that time, I was supposed to have worked up the nerve to do what was gonna come next, but it didn't feel like I was even close.

I turned on the TV with the remote. Despite never watching the type of show that was on, the cheerfulness of it somehow soothed me.

"Hey..." I wasn't sure if it was because of the TV, but Yume hesitantly began asking me something. "Do you...have any plans for tomorrow?"

"No... Not really."

"Oh..."

"You?"

"Me neither..."

"Oh..."

Then silence once again. Our conversations were going nowhere. It wasn't as if we were constantly having conversations at home, and we weren't exactly chatty when we'd dated in middle school either. So the fact that we weren't really talking to each other wasn't exactly out of the ordinary, but for some reason, today felt worse than usual.

Since no words were really exchanged, I finished my meal quickly. Before I knew it, the plates in front of me had been cleared, and I was full. As a result, there was no need for me to be here anymore. As a last-ditch effort, I tried to stick around by washing my own dishes, but that had a limit.

Yume brought her plate and everything over a little later. "See you..." she said, surprising me.

"Yeah," I said, grasping at straws to buy more time. "I'll clean the bath."

"Oh. Yeah... Thanks." Yume nodded before leaving the living room.

*Are things really okay like this?*

## Day One: Part Four

### Yume Irido

I sighed, exhaustedly looking up at the bathroom ceiling as I soaked myself up to my shoulders in the hot bathwater. We hadn't done anything, but today had been so stressful. I might've been more anxious than on the day of the entrance exam. At any rate, this was when things got real.

I loosened up my tense body with the hot bathwater and then got out to stand in front of the mirror. I wiped away the fog on it and checked out my naked body in the opening I'd made. *I'm okay...right?* I didn't see any excess fat around my stomach, and there weren't any marks from my underwear. I felt very justified in all the effort I'd gone through to care for myself.

*Now all that's left is...* I looked down at my breasts. I'd honestly gotten a little bigger over the past year. In terms of bra sizes, I was about a C or a D a year ago, but now I was an E cup. When I had gotten measured at the lingerie shop, I'd been surprised that my top bust had grown from eighty-one to eighty-five centimeters.

Sure, I was normal in comparison to the crazy ninety-eight centimeters of Higashira-san, but I was apparently on the thinner side in regards to underbust, much to the envy of the store clerk who'd helped me. Most likely it meant that overall, I was at a good size, and that they should feel...good. I had someone with a 60F and someone with an H cup around me, so it was hard to tell, but I was pretty sure I was right.

Currently standing in front of the mirror was a girl fondling herself with a stern expression. Maybe the world was against me having any kind of confidence. I had a body that would usually make anybody feel confident, but those two girls were so abnormal and irregular that my self-esteem was struggling. It was also funny that they were the same two people who I couldn't even imagine ever getting a boyfriend.

Mizuto was used to seeing Higashira-san's boobs. Would I really be able to compete with her? *No... No way, right?* After futilely fighting against reality

with my boob massage, I spread some soap onto a towel and carefully washed every last nook and cranny of my body. I had my own good points. I had no choice but to trust that.

After I was done, I carefully washed my hair until I felt ready.

“Okay...” I muttered before stopping the shower.

*Tonight’s the night. I’m going to climb the steps to adulthood. I’m finally going to finish what I started two years ago. I’m ready. Let’s do this!*

My heart beat loudly as I used the blow dryer, and again as I heard Mizuto come out of the bath. Then, once more when he bid me good night outside of my room. Then again as I lay in my bed under the sheets.

*Uh...huh?* My eyes had become accustomed to the darkness as I lay there, staring holes in my ceiling. As I did, I couldn’t help but wonder how I was going to bed without anything happening. *Huh? Why? Why?! Was today not the day?!* I’d thought this would be the day to retire as the student council ambassador of morality. I’d thought that as it got later into the night, there’d be more or less be some kind of signal, and he’d end up on top of me! Then I paused my thoughts, realizing something. *“More or less”? “End up”? What’s with all those wishy-washy ideas? Now I see. It’s all clear to me. I’m an idiot. How could I not have realized this?*

For normal couples, being in the same room was already some kind of signal to engage in those kinds of activities. A couple living together would usually already have had their first time together, so they probably had some kind of signal for when they were in the mood. Mizuto and I had neither of those.

We lived together, but had yet to have our first time together. We had no kind of signal at all. We had no way of knowing when it was time. It was impossible for us to know when the other person was ready! The only way was for one of us to come out and say that we wanted to get down and dirty!

## Day Two: Part Zero

### Mizuto Irido

Morning came, and with it, a wave of lethargy that felt like an adhesive mud. *Nothing happened...* There had been no sexy mood between the two of us, and Yume hadn't come to my room either. Of course she hadn't. Just because our parents weren't home didn't mean that things would just naturally progress to *that*.

If I didn't express what I wanted to do—or conversely, if *she* didn't—then nothing was gonna happen between the two of us. But also, there was one very clear reason I hadn't made a move. Coming out and declaring that I wanted to get down and dirty with her was just way too embarrassing.

Ideally...in a perfect world, she would've made it obvious that she was okay with the idea, giving me the green light. If she did, it would've made it easier for me to say something. Without any kind of sign, it'd just seem like I was pressuring her and it'd turn her usual slander of calling me a closet perv into a true statement. In other words...

## Day Two: Part Zero

### Yume Irido

In other words, initiating things was the losing move. As I carefully washed my underwear for the ensuing battle, I finally understood the rules. With my pride as the ambassador of morality, I couldn't be the one to initiate. It'd simply be too embarrassing.

In conclusion, I needed to drag the words out of him instead! That's the game we were playing. We both only had one first time, and it was time to see who'd reign supreme. The battle that would hang over our heads for the rest of our lives had already begun!



## Day Two: Part One

### Mizuto Irido

I changed out of my pajamas, left my room, and took one step after another down the stairs. I felt my will becoming stronger with each step I took. We'd been annoyingly stubborn about a lot of things until now. We used our sibling rules as a stupid way to try and get a leg up over each other. We'd done this so many times in this house—a stupid battle trying to gain a sense of superiority over the other person by trying to show how one person was so one-sidedly into the other, and vice versa.

This would probably be our final battle. Tonight, we'd probably finally get rid of the natural barrier between guys and girls. The outcome of whose efforts would bring that about would affect our very future.

In middle school, I'd always thought I was one step ahead of Yume. But now, Yume was on the student council while I was just a normal student. I had to teach her that titles meant nothing. *I'm not ready to be left in the dust by you, and I need to shove that in your face. I need to prove that your boyfriend is still the same guy you look up to.*

So with that in mind, I decided not to show any of my desires so easily. I wasn't going to let our once-in-a-lifetime experience be called a folly of youth. I yanked the frosted glass sliding door into the living room aside. It was too late to be called morning or early afternoon, so I knew that an honor student like Yume was already awake. As expected, she was sitting on the couch reading a book.

She noticed me and looked up. "Morning." After that short greeting, she went back to her book.

"Morning..." I said back to her before walking to the kitchen.

I grabbed two slices of bread and put them in the toaster, setting it for five minutes. In the meantime, I got water out of the refrigerator and drank some while shooting Yume a side-glance. *She's keeping a poker face... Doesn't she know what I'm going through?*

When the toaster chimed, I put the toast onto a plate and brought it to the dining table, then went back to the refrigerator to get butter. As I coated the toast with butter, I used my other hand to check Isana's account on my phone.

After a while I heard Yume suddenly call out from the couch. "Hey."

"Hm?"

Yume twisted her body to turn to me. "What do you wanna do about tonight?" I felt my heart jump out of my chest. *Wait, does she mean...?* "For dinner."

Hearing these words made all the tension in my body dissipate. *Oh, she's talking about dinner?* "We can make something or just order in. They left us money for food."

"Let's make something, then."

"Why?"

"We don't get the opportunity to make meals for ourselves very often."

"That's your only reason?"

"Ordering in with just the two of us feels like a waste."

*Oh that's what you mean?* "Sounds like a pain..."

"I can make dinner by myself if you want."

"Pass. Not sure if I fully trust you yet."

"You of little faith..." *Like hell I'll let this all end with me missing our window because I get food poisoning!* "Then let's go shopping later."

"Don't we have stuff here?" I asked.

"Yeah, but I don't know what to make."

"If we're just making curry or fried rice, we can get it done with what we have."

"That sounds like a meal for a guy living by himself!"

"Who are you trying to show off for?"

"I'd rather you interpret this as your cute girlfriend trying to show off her

growth,” Yume said, frowning.

I snorted. “Fine.”

“Hm?”

“I’ll go with you as the bag holder and advice giver.”

“And since when did you have the right to act all high and mighty?”

After that, Yume went back to her book. After finishing my toast, I didn’t really have a reason to stick around, so I left. It all felt *too* routine for us. *Does she really understand what’s going on?*

## Day Two: Part Two

### Yume Irido

I had one advantage: I'd seen that Mizuto bought contraceptives the other day. But Mizuto had no idea! In other words, Mizuto was not aware of whether or not I was prepared to do *it*. He might not have known I was ready, but I knew he was. There was a high possibility that in this situation I could lead him on and also act like I had no interest, seducing him without him even noticing it! All I had to do was naturally stimulate him. That way I could get him in the mood without actually having to come out and say anything!

I was going to use this advantage, which was so big it practically ensured my victory, spend the entire day egging Mizuto on to bring home the win. When night came around, I'd attack and get him in one fell swoop! This was the best course of action!

## Day Two: Part Three

### Mizuto Irido

Holing up in my room wasn't gonna get me anywhere, so I came up with an excuse to go down to the living room. As usual, Yume was there as if she was waiting for me, but it wasn't as if I had anything to talk to her about, so it wasn't long before I found myself back in my room. Unfortunately, it felt like I was running away with my tail between my legs, which slightly grated on my pride.

By the time it was three in the afternoon, I was getting peckish, so I used that as a new excuse to go back downstairs. I'd had udon for lunch, but it didn't keep you full for too long, so I decided to look around for a snack.

As expected, Yume was still there. Most likely, she'd finished her book, which was why she was now watching TV and browsing her phone. *Seriously. It's like she owns the living room.* As I opened the cabinet in search of something to snack on, I noticed from the corner of my eye that Yume's gaze had fallen onto me.

"You want some cookies?" she asked.

I turned around and saw that there was a plate with a stack of cookies on top of the coffee table.

"Where'd those come from?" I asked.

"From me. Akatsuki-san taught me how to make them when she helped me for Valentine's Day."

"So they're homemade?" *That's a pretty girly thing for you to do.*

Yume wryly smiled. "Well, yeah. I haven't tried to make them when mom's around because she'd tease me."

"Oh. Gotcha..."

Parents loved to overreact when they saw their kids doing something out of character. That was partially the reason I'd never said anything to my dad about having a girlfriend in middle school. It would have been too embarrassing.

Since I couldn't find anything I wanted to eat, I decided to take Yume up on her offer and indulge in some of her cookies. As I walked over, she opened up a spot next to her, and I took it without making a fuss.

Just as I did, I felt my pocket vibrating. "Hm?" I took out my phone and saw a familiar name; I was getting a call from Isana Higashira. "Hello? What's up?"

"Hello, I've something I wish to discuss with you."

"Yeah?"

*We're done with the April Fool's picture, so she should be working on a new one, unrelated to any seasonal event.* Though normally discussion was to be praised, Isana's topics of conversation weren't productive, nine times out of ten.

"I don't seem to be able to prevent the nipples from showing."

"Not surprised."

"Not mine!"

"I know. So, what do you want from me?"

To the untrained ear, this might've sounded like a straight-up vulgar conversation, but it wasn't to me, so I tried to give her my full attention. As I did, Yume suddenly leaned against me.

"Mizuto-kun?" Isana asked.

*I must've stayed silent for longer than I expected.* "It's nothing..."

I glanced at Yume, who was now resting her head on my shoulder, similar to what happens when you fall asleep on the train. She was looking up at me as if she wanted something. *Do you want attention? I'm on the phone with Isana right now. You do know you're a person, not a cat interrupting someone at work, right?*

"As I was saying, the girl I'm drawing doesn't wear a bra when she's at home!"

While listening to Isana's passionate explanation, I mouthed to Yume, asking her to move away. But she just mouthed back her refusal, and instead began rubbing the back of my hand. I couldn't tell if she was acting this way because I

was talking to Isana or because it was the second day of us being alone in the house.

“What my heart desires is the fantasy of a beautiful girl who has impossibly perky breasts! To that end, it is imperative that I casually, however blatantly, depict the fact she is not wearing a bra!”

“I mean, in that case, couldn’t you just have her wearing a strapless bra or something?”

“Keep your ideas to yourself and allow me to draw nipples!”

“So that’s what this is all about...”

While I continued the conversation with Isana, I used my free hand to deal with Yume. As I did, the situation evolved in terms of difficulty. Yume’s head slid from its position on my shoulder to my lap. As I looked down at her, her lips curled into a smile, which made it obvious she was up to no good.

“I wish to be intimate with a girl whose nipples are visible beneath her clothing! I’m speaking of how I wish I could live a life in which I am a guy whose eyes inevitably fixate on a girl’s nipples, even if I have no intention of doing so! There’s value in a SFW-only artist such as myself occasionally dipping her toes in more lewd art!”

*Can you stop saying “nipples” so much, especially considering the situation I’m in?* When I looked down to see if Yume was able to hear our conversation, she was reaching towards the table to grab a cookie. Then, she brought it near my mouth with one hand.

She grinned as she mouthed for me to open wide. *I doubt she’ll be deterred if I ignore her.* Ultimately, I resigned myself and opened my mouth slightly before she shoved it in. *It’s sweet. A little hard around the edges, but the taste gets passing marks.*

“Are you...eating something?” Isana asked as I munched on the cookie.

“Sorry. I’ve got cookies.”

“This isn’t the time! I’m baring my heart to you about this serious topic!”

*I’m sure that’s true in your mind.* I felt a little bad, especially because I had no

doubt that she'd be pissed if she could see what was happening on the other side of this phone call. I could easily see her saying something about how she was perfectly happy without a real-life example.

But of course, Yume wasn't like the girls Isana was talking about, who'd be so unguarded that they'd let their nipples show through their clothes. Yume was wearing her usual knitted off-shoulder sweater with a knee-length pleated skirt, paired with familiar black stockings. The only person who'd go around the house in the kind of outfit Isana was envisioning was probably Isana herself.

Yume continued to take cookies from the plate and bring them to my mouth, and I continued eating them while listening to Isana ramble endlessly about her fantasies, or rather, whatever her imagination could conceive.

"Fine," I conceded. "As long as they're not too conspicuous."

"I've your permission?!"

"If we lean too hard into being SFW-only, it's gonna hurt your brand down the road when I let you draw whatever you want. Just make sure you do it in a tasteful way that won't lose you any of your female fans."

"Leave it to me! There's no better person for the job since I am a bona fide girl myself!"

"See, that's what worries me..."

"I'll send you the rough sketch once I've completed it!" Isana said excitedly before hanging up.

Finally, I could move my phone away from my ear. After I did, I just stared down at Yume, who was still curled up on my lap.

"Seriously?"

"Did she notice?" Yume giggled. Her behavior suggested she wouldn't have cared even if we had been caught.

"What would you have done if she had?"

"Nothing. We're dating," she said matter-of-factly.

"We were having a serious discussion, you know?"



“But I...” Yume rolled over and buried her face into my stomach. “Every now and then I want to be like Higashira-san... All over you.”

Her sweet, almost childlike plea struck a chord in me, and I knew exactly why. If I were the same as I’d been in middle school, the cuteness, preciousness, or the endearing attributes of her actions might’ve put me down for the count. But I was a little bit more callous than I was back then. I didn’t let any of what I was feeling show on my face.

I ran my finger through a lock of her hair while whispering, “She hasn’t been too clingy lately.”

“Yeah, but she was before.”

“It wasn’t that bad, right?”

“When you two watched a movie here, she was lying on your lap.”

“Oh, right...”

“It would have been totally natural if you’d started fondling her.”

“Even she would’ve gotten pissed off if I’d done that.”

*Then again, I can picture her instead simply berating me, not for fondling them, but for not giving her any warning.* Yume glanced at me before turning her body again, this time so that she could look up at me. She extended both her arms up like a dog surrendering.

“I...wouldn’t get pissed off, though.”

I looked down at her, forgetting to breathe as the two swellings wrapped in her knitted sweater welcomed me in. *Wait...is it possibly time for that? But it’s not even night yet. Then again, there’s no law or anything saying these things have to happen at night.*

I thought back to about a year ago when we’d just started living together and Yume had come out of the bath, wearing nothing but a towel. Both of us had almost lost our minds, leading us to nearly cross the line on this very couch. If our parents hadn’t come home right then and our lips had touched... I had no doubt that we wouldn’t be the same people as we were now.

“Liar...” I said, delaying things again. “I’m sure you’d get pissed. You’d be all

on my case for not choosing a better time or place.”

Yume stared at me for a bit before her face loosened. “True. You got me.”

“Of course I did. It’s already been a year since we started living together.”

“Yeah, I can’t believe it’s already been a year...” Then Yume sat up and ran her fingers through her hair to straighten it up before standing up. “Wanna go shopping now?”

“Yeah... It’s gonna be busy.” I stood up too. “I’m gonna get my coat,” I said, leaving the living room.

I still had no clue whether or not she’d been serious or joking about being okay with me touching her boobs. Even so, I’d been able to confirm one thing. *You’ll be okay so long as I choose the right place and time, right?*

## Day Two: Part Four

### Yume Irido

“What are we making?” I asked Mizuto.

“Curry or fried rice.”

“Are those the only two things you can make?”

“Those two are just the least of a headache to make. It’s a waste of time to spend ages cooking.”

“I get what you’re saying, but still...”

“What do you wanna make, then?” he asked.

“Hm... How does omelet rice sound?”

“That’s a pretty clichéd suggestion...”

“Rude.”

“Well, worst-case scenario, it’ll just end up being stir-fried rice with ketchup.”

“Don’t make it sound like you’re convinced I’m gonna mess up putting the omelet on top!”

We continued our debate about dinner as we walked around the supermarket. There was no trace of nervousness between us like there’d been a year ago. This was no more than an errand to us. I used to look down on my middle school self as being a kid, but looking back, I was plenty childish just last year. I began thinking about what I’d lost while we made our way to the meat section.

“Hm.” Mizuto stopped in front of the pork. “We could do ginger pork instead.”

“It’d taste good, but...”

“But what?” he asked.

*Ginger has a smell to it, doesn’t it? I’m not sure if I want the memory of my first time to be sullied by curry or ginger. Sure, the ketchup from omelet rice*

*might present the same problem, but I think it'd be a simple matter of brushing our teeth.*

"O-Oh, hold on," I said, pretending like I'd received a message. I turned my back to Mizuto so I could look at my phone.

I quickly searched whether or not ginger pork gave you bad breath. *Wait, what? It has the opposite effect?!*

"Sorry about that! Just got a quick message," I said, putting my phone away and turning back to him.

"You good?"

"Yeah, it's not life-or-death or anything. So what was that about ginger pork again? I think it's a good idea."

"Okay, then. Let's buy the pork," he said.

"Yeah."

*It might actually be the perfect dish for today. What a coincidence... Wait, is it a coincidence? Don't tell me he suggested it on purpose... We made our way to the produce section after putting two people's worth of pork into our basket.*

"Do we have cabbage at home?" Mizuto asked.

"Uh...we might not."

"But we have ginger at home—the kind that comes in a tube, right?"

Mizuto efficiently led us around the supermarket as he carried the basket. *Is this all a part of his plan? Is he making preparations for tonight? Is the real entrée tonight not the pork, but me?! No. Nuh-uh. There's no way he knows what's going on in my head. Besides, sexually speaking...there's no way he'd be so straightforward in his approach.* At the very least, I was sure that he was thinking about things, and he'd chosen the ginger pork because he was hoping that things would turn in *that* direction. *Or at least I think so... Probably...*

After buying what we needed, we left the supermarket. Mizuto carried what little we'd bought without a word. The sky was already growing dark, meaning night was coming...a night that I'd remember for the rest of my life. I felt a pleasant nervousness while matching Mizuto's walking speed. I didn't feel

particularly worked up or anything. I surrendered myself to the natural silence between us and felt the presence of my family member next to me.

“This feels kinda nostalgic...” I said, finally breaking the silence. Mizuto slightly turned his head towards me. “It’s been a while since we’ve passed the time by so peacefully.”

“True. You’ve been busy with one thing after another lately.”

“Yeah...”

I’d been working on getting used to my new life at school and living with Mizuto, all while doing my best to maintain my grades. From the second semester onward, I’d worked on the cultural festival committee and met President Kurenai.

After joining the student council, I’d had new experience after new experience. I’d had to negotiate with clubs and committees, had to help with preparations for school matters, and I had even gone on a trip. Finally, right as the year ended, Mizuto and I got back together, and we’d been working hard to make sure that neither anybody at school nor our parents found out.

“Everything I was busy with felt so new. I kinda liked it...” I’d never had these experiences in middle school. I hadn’t been capable of much, so my world was small. “But yeah, it’s nice having these kinds of moments too,” I said.

Everything required stamina. Though I’d looked forward to the seemingly endless school activities, in reality, after doing them, I couldn’t help but find myself being tired every now and then. When I did, I felt so happy and fortunate that I had someone who could pull me away from it all.

I was probably incredibly blessed. In the past, I’d been extremely unhappy with who I was as a person. I’d worried about how I was going to act like a normal person, but that all turned on its head when I met Mizuto.

I wouldn’t blame anyone for saying I was shortsighted because that’s exactly what it was. If I hadn’t met Mizuto, I doubt I would’ve tried to change. I wouldn’t have even attempted a high school glow up. As cringeworthy as it might have been, my life was influenced by love. But that’s how I became the person I was today. The only reason I was going in the right direction is that I

fell in love with Mizuto. *If it's Mizuto—the guy I'm walking side by side with—then...*

“Mizuto?” I asked shortly, not waiting for his response before I grabbed his hand and leaned against him, feeling his warmth.

“What's gotten into you?”

“Want me to stop?”

*It's okay. I know it is. He hasn't seen through my resolve. I'm just being a cute girlfriend and this is just a cute girlfriend's brand of physical intimacy. Actually, no. This war of attrition and stubbornness is probably a form of our physical intimacy. It's like stretching before exercising...before destroying the last wall between us.*

We both fell quiet and didn't say another word until we got home. All I could hear was my heartbeat quickening.

## Day Two: Part Five

### Mizuto Irido

We finished eating dinner without incident. The ginger pork turned out perfectly, and nobody got hurt julienning the cabbage. There were no awkward silences as we ate dinner. We had a perfectly normal conversation about the books we were reading and the start of the school year in April.

“You can take a bath first.”

“You sure?” I asked Yume.

“I’m gonna take longer,” she said.

I took her up on her offer and submerged myself up to my shoulders in the bath, heaving a long sigh.

“Okay...” I said softly.

Then I took more care than usual cleaning myself before switching with Yume. After I was done, I went upstairs to begin preparing.

## Day Two: Part Six

### Yume Irido

After getting out of the bath, I first stood in the changing area in just my towel so I could dry my hair. After I finished, I grabbed my change of clothes, which included the battle underwear that I'd left out to dry in my room after last night's failure. Luckily, they'd dried in the nick of time.

I got the feeling that the sexy lingerie I'd bought didn't really suit me, so until the very last minute, I thought about wearing my usual underwear, just a cuter pair, but ultimately, I'd decided to go with the determination I'd had when I bought the lingerie.

I fit my boobs into each of the cups. I would never say it to Aso-senpai's face, but this was a part of a girl's charm. After checking myself in nothing but my underwear, I put on my pajamas.

"Okay..." I said softly before leaving the changing room, undoing my hair from its usual low pigtails hairstyle. Then I exchanged looks with Mizuto as I entered the living room.



## Day Two: Part Seven

### Mizuto Irido

I glanced at Yume as she came into the living room after finishing her bath. She walked over to me wordlessly and sat next to me on the couch. There was about a person's space between us. If I reached out, she was right there. If I didn't, she felt insurmountably far away.

We stayed in silence, but it didn't feel like an awkward one this time around. If anything, it was a bashful one. We were covered in a ticklish silence that stemmed from a mixture of anxiety and nervousness.

While we continued to not say anything, I put my hand on the couch, about halfway between us. There were certain things that needed to be spelled out. It was tough to get the timing right, but we managed it. By placing my hand there, I was signaling to her what I wanted without being too obvious about it. I believed that we had a connection of trust strong enough that she'd understand without me having to say anything.

## Day Two: Part Eight

### Yume Irido

I put my hand over the hand that Mizuto had put down. I gently squeezed it, making him slowly look at me.

I slightly smiled and whispered, "I win."

Literally, Mizuto had been the one to make a move first.

But then he grinned. "Don't you remember talking about the right place and time?"

"Oh..." *Well, what do you know? Looks like I spilled the beans already.* "Should I call you 'Onii-chan'?"

"Why?"

"The rules," I said, bringing up what we'd decided on a year ago.

"Oh... Nah, forget it."

"Why?"

"Because we're not stepsiblings right now."

*Oh, right. That's true.* Mizuto squeezed my hand back and quietly got up. I followed his lead.

"You...nervous?" I asked.

"Yeah," he responded immediately, but he was gently smiling. "Not nearly as much as you were when you asked me out, though."

"Can you forget about that? That was forever ago."

I used my free hand to lightly tap on his chest, making him softly chuckle. Then, we left the living room, holding hands. There was nobody else but us in this house, but we still went up the stairs quietly. As we entered the second floor's hallway, I lightly tugged his hand.

"Mizuto..."

“Hm?”

“Let’s do it in...my room.” Mizuto turned to look at me. I could feel my face getting red. “If...there’s blood, and someone sees, then...”

“Oh... Right.” Mizuto sheepishly looked away. “Good idea. Let’s do that...”

He didn’t put up a fight, seemingly sensing what I was trying to say. His understanding of what I was thinking felt so nice.

Then the two of us walked into the same room, our fingers entwined.

## Day Two: Part Nine

### Mizuto Irido

The light flickered on, revealing Yume's room—a sight that I'd become accustomed to. I'd only really seen glimpses through the crack in her door, but because of how busy she'd been with the student council, both her desk and floor had been messy. She'd obviously cleaned up since then.

Her room was also warm thanks to her heater being on. She must've turned it on before taking her bath. After all, it was still plenty chilly in March.

Yume closed the door behind her and let go of my hand to grab the remote by her pillow to dim the lights.

"U-Uh, so..." Yume, noticing my gaze, turned around and stammered out an explanation. "I-I was just thinking that it'd be better if it wasn't so bright..."

"Yeah...probably..."

I found myself looking at the window. The curtains had already been closed. Yume sat on the edge of her bed, and I hesitantly took a seat next to her. She nervously began running her hand through her hair, but it wasn't as if she was especially worried about it being messed up and she needed to fix it. She was simply unsure of what to do next.

Everything was already set in motion; that's why it was best for me to take the lead here, so I gently touched her shoulder.

## Day Two: Part Ten

### Yume Irido

I unintentionally let out a soft yelp as I felt Mizuto's hand on me. He pulled back.

"Oh..." I nervously looked at Mizuto, thinking I'd messed up.

He was stuck in the same position, halfway between raising his hand and trying to touch me. I could sense a nervousness that was absent from his usual levelheaded persona, making me giggle before I even knew it.

"You're so cute," I whispered.

Mizuto looked unhappy with my words, but seeing him like this only made me want to play with him more, so I gently gripped his raised hand and began rubbing his palm with my thumb. He seemingly gave up and relaxed his shoulders, instead placing his hand against my face.

"Yeah," he said, pausing before whispering the rest. "You're cute too."

*Good job.* I internally complimented him as I felt his lips press against mine.

## Day Two: Part Eleven

### Mizuto Irido

I gently held Yume's shoulders as we locked lips, moving my tongue deeper than I'd ever gone before. After kissing, we opened our eyes, but didn't move apart. We just continued looking at each other in close proximity.

When we kissed again, I slowly began moving my hand down her shoulder. I might've been rushing things, but I got the feeling that I needed to make it clear that we were doing this. I slowly but surely moved my palm downwards until I touched the swellings on her chest.

Feeling them through her clothes didn't really change my life or anything. I honestly wasn't really sure how I felt. But Yume didn't move away. That fact was enough to give me courage to keep going.

## Day Two: Part Twelve

### Yume Irido

Even after we stopped kissing, we continued looking at each other, softly breathing. I could feel his hand on my breast, but he wasn't dirtily fondling it. It was as if he was trying to find my heartbeat. *I don't hate this feeling.*

My heart might have been beating hard, but it was peaceful. Thinking about how that was being conveyed to Mizuto made me feel at ease. I put my hand to his chest and felt his heart racing. *This should be so matter-of-fact, but why does this make me so happy?* The sound of my clock and our breathing faded, leaving nothing but the sound of our heartbeats. When it felt as if our heartbeats synced, I felt Mizuto press gently against my other shoulder.

I made a sound of resistance, stopping Mizuto in his tracks.

"Our clothes..." The words that naturally fell out of my mouth pushed us further forward.

## Day Two: Part Thirteen

### Mizuto Irido

Yume had turned her back to me, pulling up her pajama shirt over her head. Her porcelain skin was revealed for a brief second before her long hair came fluttering down to cover it. I found myself entranced by the sight and couldn't tear my eyes away.

"Not fair..." Yume said, turning around to me, her eyes seeming to accuse me of something.

*Oh, crap. Right. I need to take off my clothes too.* While I was undressing, Yume finished taking off her pants. I was a little sad that I'd missed all of that, but that regret only lasted a second before I was stunned silent by the sight of her sitting on the bed, her legs to the side, in nothing but a black bra and panties.

As soon as her visage entered my eyes, my heart, which had already been beating out of my chest, practically exploded. The bra that supported her bountiful breasts was translucent at the top. It was a sexy design that was probably something a high schooler shouldn't have been wearing. I'd no doubt that she'd worked hard to get them just for today. That was predominantly sweet rather than only sexy. She shifted her butt, which was clad in panties that matched her bra, as she looked at me, her face red, waiting for something.

"U-Uh..." I couldn't find anything clever to say. "I-I think you look very pretty..."

*Even I'm surprised by how ordinary a comment I made.* But I couldn't think of any other combination of words that would honor my girlfriend, who'd gone out of her way to pick out this underwear for me.

"Th-Thanks..."

Yume put the arms that she'd been using to hide her waist behind her. I could have stared at her forever in this sexy underwear that I'd never imagined her in, but this wasn't the main dish. We were just getting started.



Yume let out a long exhale to calm herself down. Then she pursed her lips and moved her arms behind her back. In the next moment, there was a decisive click. I could easily tell that the straps of her bra had loosened. Yume held down the cups of her bra while lowering the straps, past her shoulders. Then she kept her eyes shut, her hands trembling as she let the bra fall to her knees.

I had no words to describe Yume's naked upper body. Neither the shape nor the size mattered. Seeing them meant that a wall had been broken between us. It was the final wall between us. That was the most important part of all this.

"Yume."

Before I knew it, Yume softly yelped as I gently pushed her down against the bed. Her untied hair flowed across the sheets. Right now, the most important girl in the world was right before me.

We had no words to say as we stared at each other in the dimly lit room. The girl before me was the same age as I was. But she was more than that, and I wanted her to continue being more than that. There wasn't anyone more important to me at present, in my past, or in the future.

I reached out, touched her, and wrapped my hand around her breasts. No walls were left between us.

# Day Two: Part Fourteen

## Yume Irido

Love is full of things I didn't understand. I wondered about what he liked, what he was looking at, what he wanted to touch, and whether I was a part of those thoughts at all. I made guesses and delusions about somebody I couldn't even see, fretting about it all on my own.

## Day Two: Part Fifteen

### Mizuto Irido

Even though I felt like I understood, I was immediately set straight by realizing I was misunderstanding things. It was like I was getting scolded for getting ahead of myself. If that was the case, all I had to do was learn from my mistakes, but I kept making excuses—probably because I wanted someone to understand me.

# Day Two: Part Sixteen

## Yume Irido

It wasn't possible to always look into the heart, regardless of your understanding or affectation. Just when you thought you had come to an understanding, the next day came, and you'd find something else you disagreed on and fight again. But each time that happened, it felt like you were making progress. Slowly but surely, you were getting closer to taking down the wall between you two.

# Day Two: Part Seventeen

## Mizuto Irido

After the wall disappeared, your words reached the other person. When those words reached, they resonated in their heart. If you could do that, you could reach out to them. When I reached out, you were there.

# Day Three: Part One

## Yume Irido

I was sure that we'd squabble with each other again tomorrow. We'd be stupidly stubborn and try to protect our pointless pride. But I was sure that by the next day, we'd feel like we understood each other a little more.

## Day Three: Part Two

**Mizuto Irido**

It was okay if we didn't really understand each other.

# Day Three: Part Three

## Yume Irido

It was okay if our understanding of each other was just surface level.



## Day Three: Part Four

Mizuto Irido

If we kept digging, then eventually...

# Day Three: Part Five

## Yume Irido

...We'd come to treasure each other more than anyone else in the world.

## Day Three: Part Six

### Mizuto Irido

"You're too bony. It's hard to sleep like this," Yume unfairly complained, making a displeased expression as she rested her head on my arm.

*"You're the one who insisted on trying this."*

"Can you blame me? This is up there with a princess carry for things that girls wanna experience. Are you saying you're not interested...?"

"I'm losing interest with each passing second. My arm's getting super numb."

"Seriously, where's the romantic in you?"

Yume lifted her head a little, allowing me to move my arm out from under her and put it underneath the blanket. Yume fell back onto her pillow, her face still a little sweaty. I saw a strand from her ruffled hair across her face, so I brushed it away.

Yume yawned. "I wanna sleep, but I kinda wanna take a bath before that..."

"You okay?" I asked, trying to be considerate.

"Yeah...I am."

"That's good..."

"If you're so worried, wanna join me in the bath?" she snickered, sweetly smiling at me.

"I guess it'd be more time efficient."

"The bathwater's probably not warm anymore, though..."

"I'll make an exception and heat it up again, just for you," I said.

Yume grunted, reaching over the bed and down to the floor, inevitably pressing her upper body against me. As she did, I couldn't help but curiously stare at her boobs as they squished against my body.

"I'm pretty sure it's around here... Found it!" Then in the next moment, she picked up her bra. The bed creaked as she sat up and began threading her arms

through the straps.

“You’re putting your clothes back on?” I asked, curiously.

“Huh?”

“What’s the point when you’re just gonna take them off again?”

Yume froze, her hands on the straps of her bra. *You’re gonna take your clothes off to take a bath anyway, right? It doesn’t make sense to get dressed right now, does it?*

“B-But going downstairs buck naked’s kinda...”

“No one’s home. What’s it matter?” I asked, pulling back the sheets and sitting up to get off the bed before walking to the door. “Besides, it’s the dead of night. Even the mailman’s not gonna...” Then as soon as I opened the door, I was met by a cold gust of air, prompting me to quickly shut it. “It’s freezing...”

*Oh, right. Yume might have warmed up her room, but the hallways haven’t heated up at all. It might be March, but we might as well still be in winter.* I determined that this was not the kind of weather to be walking around naked in.

“Might be better to put on clothes...” I concluded.

“Y-Yeah... True... Now that I think about it, the water won’t get hot immediately either.”

I could tell that there was disappointment in her face and voice. “Let me guess. You wanted to give it a shot?” I grinned.

“O-Of course not...”

“It’d be the perfect adventure for the student council’s honor student and ambassador of morals.”

“How do you know what people call me?!”

Suddenly, she was filled with embarrassment again and quickly used the blankets to cover herself up. She kind of reminded me of Eve once she’d gained knowledge.

“I understand why the idea of it entices you, but it’s better if you get dressed.

What're you gonna say to our parents if you catch a cold?"

Yume groaned. "True. I don't want us to be outed by something so stupid..."

She then began to eagerly finish putting her arms through the straps of her bra and then hooked it closed. Then she put her feet on the floor and picked up her panties. Finally, she put her legs through the holes while sitting, and then stood to pull them up the rest of the way.

I found myself folding my arms as I observed her body. "Y'know, seeing you like this again..."

"Huh?" Yume gave me a confused look.

Like this, I was able to see her skin through the see-through design of the underwear. "You really put in a lot of effort."

"Wha—?!"

"I didn't think you really had any knowledge about this kinda stuff, but you're surprisingly well-read."

"Shut up and put your boxers on already!" she yelled, throwing them at my face.

*That's rude. I was thanking you for all the effort you went through. I guess this side of her won't ever change.* After putting our underwear and pajamas back on, the two of us went downstairs.

As we waited for the bathwater to heat up again, I decided to get some water for my parched throat. After I felt satisfied, I fought back my fatigue by going on my phone and looking at my feed, which wasn't updating at all since everyone was asleep this late at night.

"Oh. The water's ready," Yume said, rubbing her eyes as she slowly got up from leaning against my shoulder.

After that, we went to the changing room. Yume began to undress, letting out small noises as she took off each piece. All I could think about was how this would be the second time I was witnessing such a sight. Not too long ago, my heart was about to explode, but this time, I felt calm. It seemed that it was true that there was a certain composure that came from experiencing it already.

I quickly followed suit and took off my pajamas and boxers before throwing them into the washing machine. Yume left her bra and panties on the edge of the sink, apparently because they needed to be hand-washed.

“Be careful making sure our parents don’t find those,” I cautioned.

“Yeah, I know.” Yume wryly smiled while looking down at them. “I can only imagine the follow-up questions...”

In the next moment, Yume took a hair tie and used it to deftly tie up her long hair. I briefly considered offering to help, but she was a pro since she had done it daily for so long. Anyway, after we were done, we went into the bathing area.

“Eek, the water’s cold!” Yume recoiled as the water came out from the showerhead. Seeing this, I pointed the showerhead at her for a quick second. “Ack! Come on! Really?!”

I chuckled as Yume knitted her eyebrows. As revenge, Yume took her cold, wet hand and touched the back of my neck. While we messed around, the shower water heated up. I gave myself a quick rinse and then turned the showerhead to Yume. The water flowed down the curves of her body like a river.

“Want me to wash you?” I offered.

“Perv.”

“Yeah, so?” There wasn’t any reason to hide anymore.

“Maybe later,” Yume said, stealing the showerhead from me to rinse herself.

As she did, I submerged myself in the bathtub. I looked over at Yume as she showered. It went without saying, but this was a new sight. We were both naked, being ourselves without putting on any appearances.

“Hey,” Yume said, water dripping off her skin as she put her hand on the edge of the bathtub. “Make some room for me.”

“It’s cramped.”

“It’ll be okay.”

I bent my knees a little, making room for Yume to put her legs into the tub.

My impression was that she'd sit across from me, so imagine my surprise when Yume shoved her butt in my face. Her white-as-snow backside descended in front of me and landed right in between my legs. The water splashed and overflowed, immediately going down the drain outside the bathtub.

"Phew..." Yume exhaled as she lay back against me, relaxing.

"Why are you sitting like this?" I asked as I looked down at her.

"Oh... Well, you know..." Yume nervously laughed. "I don't think I could relax with you sitting across from me, ogling my naked body."





*Oh, I see.* “Surprisingly, when we were doing it, I didn’t really have the chance to see anything but your face and your pillow,” I said, wrapping my arms around her waist.

“Yeah...I only really saw your face and the ceiling.”

Then again, looking down, I could see the reflection of two pale swellings on her chest.

Yume let out a long exhale. “We...really did it.”

“Any regrets?”

“Nope. None.” She rested her head against my shoulder and looked up at the ceiling. “I was pretty nervous after hearing about Aso-senpai’s first time, but now that everything’s all over, it’s like...”

“It felt good, yeah?”

“Ew. Shut up.” *At this point, I know that I can joke with you like this.* “To be honest, I’m still not really sure if it did. That being said...it’s like our connection’s gotten deeper, or maybe like I feel fulfilled?”

“I get what you’re trying to say.” *After all, you’re not alone on that front.*

“Thanks, by the way...”

“For what?”

“For working your hardest to try and be a gentleman.”

“I’m always a gentleman.”

“Just in the beginning.” Hearing me clam up, Yume began giggling. “Heh heh.”

Her face melted into a smile and she submerged herself a little bit more. I tightened my arms around her waist to support her.

“Washing my hair is such a pain...” Yume complained.

“Didn’t you already wash it today?”

“Oh, right. I did.”

“Just wash off the sweat and let’s get out.”

“Yeah...” From her unsteady voice, I could tell that she was slowly getting more and more tired. “Mizuto?”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s sleep together.”

“Sure. After we get out of the bath.”

“Yeah...”

“I guess you don’t care what’s gonna happen to you if you fall asleep, do you?”

“Mm...”

Then there was silence before my next move, which was promptly broken by a surprised shriek from Yume. I’d tried sucking the nape of her neck like a vampire, to astounding effect.

“What if that leaves a mark?!” Yume angrily exclaimed.

After that, the two of us got out of the bath.

## Day Three: Part Seven

### Yume Irido

I gripped onto something nice and warm as my consciousness became hazy. It took a bit for my five senses to come back online. When my hearing booted up, I heard someone's soft breathing as they slept. As I relinquished my body to its rhythm, I gradually remembered what'd happened last night as if it had just been a dream.

*Oh...right. We...* I slowly opened my eyes and Mizuto's face came into focus. I wasn't surprised by him sleeping next to me. I neither panicked nor felt embarrassed. We had entered the next stage of our relationship.

"Mm..." My eyelashes fluttered as I searched around my pillow, still half asleep, for my phone. When I finally found it, I checked the time. "It's already this late?"

It wasn't morning anymore; it was pretty much the afternoon. The blanket had gotten warm from our body heat, and it sucked me in like a bottomless swamp. Fighting back the urge to sleep again was hard, but the realization of how late in the day it was made me wake up whether I wanted to or not.

*Wait...* "This is *your* phone."

I sluggishly got out of bed and put the phone back where I found it. Then I picked up the phone next to it and carefully placed my feet on the ground, making sure not to wake Mizuto up.

"Close one," I said as I almost kicked a pile of books.

*I almost forgot—I'm in Mizuto's room.* I wasn't sure if it was the smell, atmosphere, or whatever, but sleeping together in my room had kinda felt weird, so we'd slept here instead.

Hearing him groan in his sleep, I turned around. Mizuto rolled over and cracked open his eyes a little.

"Morning," I said.

“Morning...” he hoarsely replied.

“I’m gonna go wash my face.”

“Mm-hmm...”

“Don’t go back to sleep. You’ve already slept enough.”

“Mm-hmm...”

*He’s definitely gonna pass out again. But that’s cute, so I’ll cut him some slack.* I’d thought about giving him a good morning kiss, but I’d heard that some people got pretty bad morning breath... I decided to err on the side of caution and go brush my teeth first.

I put my hands on my waist and stretched my back. *My body feels fine.* I left Mizuto’s room and thought about going straight downstairs, but then I remembered something I needed to take care of, so I went back to my room.

I’d left my window open overnight to make sure that none of the smell remained. *I also have to take care of the sheets.* Of course I had to worry about stains, but I also had to worry about the smell. It would’ve been better to wash everything last night, but then we would have had to wait for the washer machine to end its cycle, and I definitely hadn’t been in any condition to do that since I’d been on the brink of passing out.

Our parents were coming home tonight, so I’d probably make it in time if I took care of it now. I took the sheets and carried them downstairs. I put them down for a bit when I entered the changing room so I could take out our pajamas and underwear out of the washer. That’s when I realized that I’d left my sexy underwear on the edge of the sink!

First, I put the sheets in a mesh laundry bag before tossing them into the washing machine. Then, I turned it on. Next, I quickly washed my bra and panties. I had no choice but to dry them in my room, and I wasn’t sure if they’d dry in time. Worst-case scenario, I’d have to hide them while they were still damp.

After all that, I could finally heave a sigh of relief and wash my face. *This is a lot more work than I expected.* Akatsuki-san was right—sneaking around your parents’ house *is* essentially a fantasy.

After washing my face, I began getting ready to brush my teeth. That's when I heard someone coming downstairs. When the door opened, I was greeted by Mizuto with bedhead.

"Morning..."

I turned around, holding my toothbrush. "That's the second time."

"Hm?"

"Saying good morning."

Mizuto tilted his head. *You really aren't a morning person.* I put my toothbrush in my mouth before opening the cabinet above the sink. Mizuto walked over next to me while using his hand to try and fix his hair.

"Oh..."

But before he turned on the water, he turned around and noticed the washing machine. "I forgot..."

"I took care of everything."

"Sorry."

"For what?"

"For leaving everything to you."

I wasn't sure if it was just because he'd woken up, but he was so earnest, I almost felt bad. *He must be trying to be considerate.*

"Don't worry about it," I reassured him.

"I'll take out the trash..."

"Thanks."

Then it was silent except for the sound of me brushing my teeth. Mizuto quickly washed his face and then followed my lead and brushed his teeth. By that point, I'd already gotten to the point where I was gargling, but I waited with Mizuto until he was done. Finally, he gargled, spit, and wiped his mouth with a towel.

As he turned to me, I gently smiled. "Good to go."

Mizuto tilted his head in confusion as I stood before him and tilted my chin up slightly.

“Mm!” I made a noise to get his attention.

“Oh...”

Mizuto wryly smiled and then put his hands on my shoulders. I closed my eyes and felt his lips press against mine.

“Mm?! *He’s sticking his tongue inside?!*”

As he held me in place, he had his way with my mouth until he let go of me, finally allowing me to protest.

“Really?! This early in the day?!”

“I thought you were egging me on,” Mizuto chuckled.

*Wow, here I was acting nice, and you take advantage of that? What a horrible personality. Can’t you act lovey-dovey like a normal person?*

“I’m starving. Wanna change and grab a bite somewhere?” he asked.

“Like?”

“I mean, we still have a good amount of money left from our parents, so we could stand to go a little big. Y’know, as a celebration.”

“Celebration...” I wryly smiled while walking out of the changing room. Right as we did, my phone buzzed. I checked it to find that I’d gotten a message from mom. “They’re apparently gonna be back at four or so.”

“That’s sooner than I thought.”

“So that leaves us about another four hours, huh?”

“I guess we’ll have to get back in time...get back to being a family.”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

“But,” Mizuto said, lightly cozying up to me. “A little more won’t hurt.”

We were a couple, but we were also stepsiblings. We had no intention of being one and not the other. So long as we were both, I was sure that we could remain happy.

# Shout of Victory from the One Left Behind

Ran Asuhain

I stared at the ceiling of my room, but my focus was on the memory of something that'd been burned into my brain. It was a large, white piece of paper that'd been posted onto a bulletin board. It had a good number of names written on it. After seeing it, I'd immediately gone to a certain place where I had the highest chance of meeting a certain person.

"What should girls do on White Day?"

"We gotta hunker down and brace ourselves!"

"It's hard to just sit around and keep waiting."

I opened the door, hearing three familiar voices. As I did, they all turned to me.

"Oh, hey, Asuhain-san!"

After running here, I was out of breath, but even so, that didn't stop me from going up to her.

"Irido-san! Did you see?!" I asked.

"Huh?"

"I..."

I stopped myself from replaying the scene again. I'd already played it back in my mind a million times. Instead, I got up from bed and looked at my answer sheets for the finals that I'd left out on my desk about half a month ago. The majority of the papers had "100" written at the top of them. What'd been written on the large, white piece of paper that'd been posted onto the bulletin board was the school rankings for the finals.

1st: Ran Asuhain

2nd: Yume Irido

*Irido-san... Irido-san, I won, you know? Irido-san? Hey...*

## Class 2-7

### Mizuto Irido

After two weeks passed, it was the first semester of the new school year. Yume and I were now heading to our classroom.

“I can’t believe we’re in the same class again,” Yume said, smiling happily, contrary to the expression one might expect from her words.

A new year meant a new class, and we’d just received our new school IDs with our new class written on them: 2-7. From what I could remember judging by our first-year class, it hadn’t been like the school had assigned classes by the quality of the students’ grades, but ultimately it seemed that the school had decided it’d be okay to treat Yume and me as a paired set and moved us to the same second-year class.

I’d heard that we’d be separated into different classes depending on our plans for the future when we became third-years. I was bound for a literary track while Yume would most likely do something related to science. That meant this would probably be the last time we’d be in the same class.

“I wonder if Akatsuki-san, Maki-san, and Nasuka-san are in our class...”

“Must suck to have to worry about all that. I’ve got it real easy in that regard.”

“Such optimism from a guy with no friends.”

We began looking at the placards above the doors for our class. As we did, I saw the figure of a familiar girl who was nervously waiting outside of a classroom.

“Isana?”

“Wha—?!” Isana Higashira turned around to face us. Before seeing us, she’d been shrinking her shoulders, but as soon as she saw us, she excitedly surveyed the two of us. “Oh! C-Could it be?! Are the two of you perhaps in class 2-7?!”

“Yeah, but... Wait, are—”

“Thank goodness!!!” she wailed, letting out a heartfelt sigh of relief as she hugged Yume. “I’m so relieved! I won’t have to be alone this year!”



“Are you in our class too, Higashira-san?” Yume asked, finishing her thought.

“Indeed!”

“Oh, yay!”

Yume took Isana’s hands and began jumping for joy with her. This went without saying, but Isana didn’t have grades even remotely similar to ours. Most likely, the school had shown Isana mercy and put her in our class instead of leaving her isolated.

We cut the touching reunion short to open the door to our new classroom and go inside. As we did, I felt all sorts of gazes fall on us. As expected, I didn’t know most of them, but it seemed like they knew us because I heard them whispering.

“Whoa, she’s from the student council!”

“Those are the Irido siblings!”

“Aren’t they too smart for this class?”

As expected, I stood out with Yume by my side. Isana quickly avoided their gazes by taking cover behind me.

Suddenly someone flew at us like a flying fish. “Yume-chan!” It was Minami-san.

“Whoa!” Yume exclaimed as she caught her small body.

“Same class?!”

“Same class!”

Then resumed the excited squealing. But aside from the familiar excitement, there was a guy who quietly walked up to me.

“Sup, Irido?”

“You’re here too?” I asked.

“You make it sound like you hate that. Sheesh, that hurts.” Kogure Kawanami made a fishy smile, making me shrug my shoulders.

Regrettably, this felt like one of those times we couldn’t get away from each

other. After Yume and Minami-san stopped their squealing, Yume looked around the classroom.

“What about Maki-san and Nasuka-san?” she asked.

“They ended up in different classes, but there’s still another familiar face around here for all of you.”

It seemed that Minami-san had included not only Yume, but me and Isana in this statement. She pointed into a corner and right at the front desk by the window, desk number one. For some reason, there was a tense atmosphere that only existed in that area of the classroom. It seemed to originate from the student sitting there. She was small-framed, but had a very strict aura about her. I distinctly remembered her.

“Oh!” Yume let out a sound of surprise while quickly going up to her.

Up until then, the tense aura had been keeping everyone else away, so Yume was the only one to try getting close to her. She easily slipped into her territory and energetically put her hands on the girl’s desk.

“We’re in the same class! Looking forward to it!”

The girl who was simply gazing out the window, her face in her hand, turned her head to look at Yume.

“Likewise...Irido-san,” Ran Asuhain said in a low, emotionless voice.

10 My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex  
"Within Arm's Reach"







"Oh, that?"

"Why are your thoughts, by default, the same as pubescent guys'?"

"Yume-san, this might be the perfect opportunity to do a certain cliché."

Akatsuki  
Minami

Yume Irido

Isana Higashira





Yume glanced at me before turning her body again, this time so that she could look up at me. She extended both her arms up like a dog surrendering.

"I...wouldn't get pissed off, though."

I looked down at her, forgetting to breathe as the two swellings wrapped in her knitted sweater welcomed me in.





Author  
Kyosuke  
Kamishiro



Illustrator  
TakayaKi

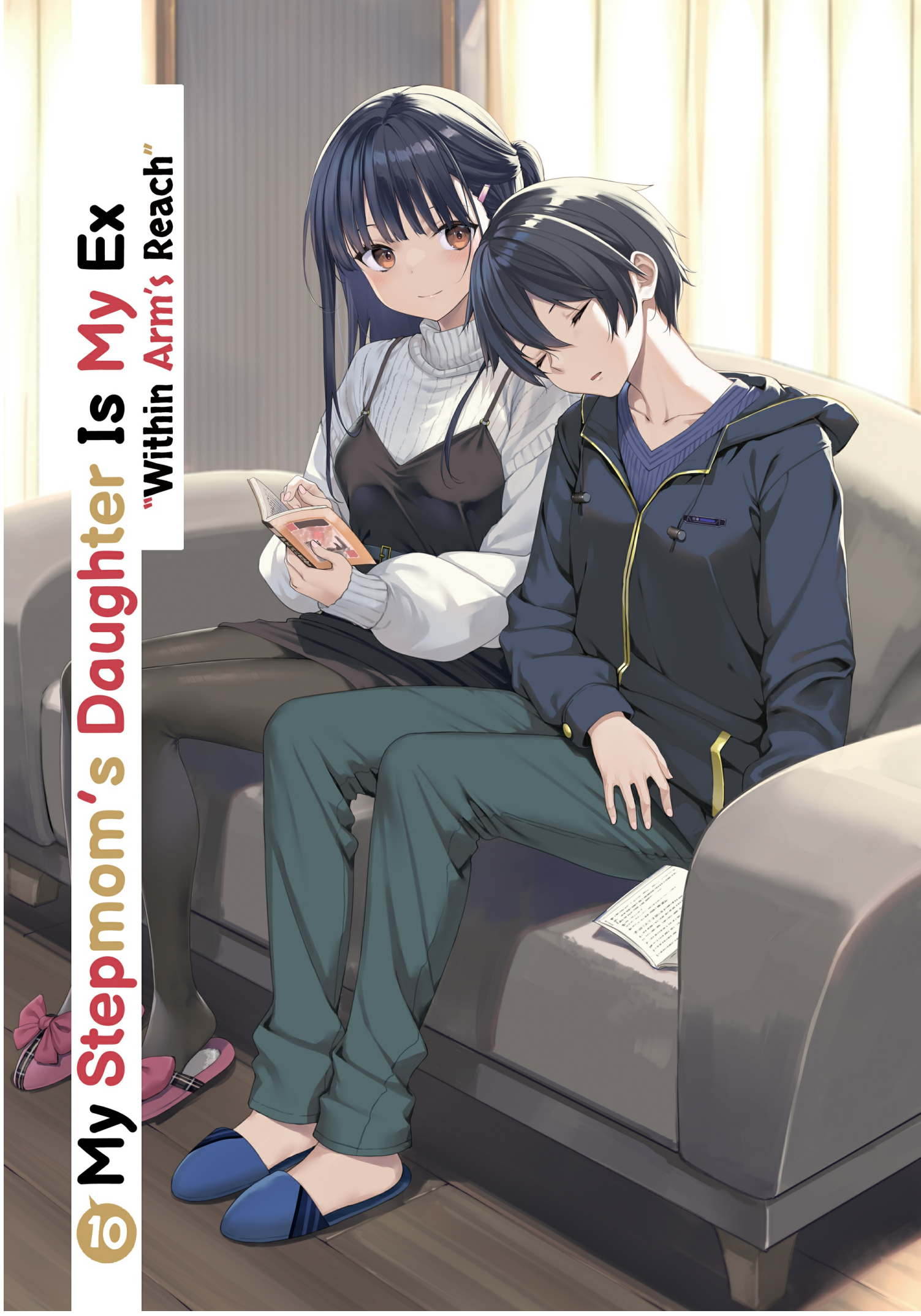
10

# My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"Within Arm's Reach"



10 My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex  
"Within Arm's Reach"







"Oh, that?"

"Why are your thoughts, by default, the same as pubescent guys'?"

"Yume-san, this might be the perfect opportunity to do a certain cliché."

Akatsuki  
Minami

Yume Irido

Isana Higashira

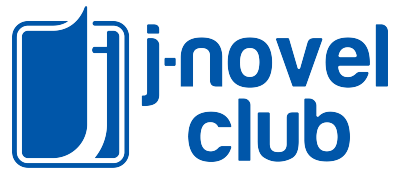




Yume glanced at me before turning her body again, this time so that she could look up at me. She extended both her arms up like a dog surrendering.

"I...wouldn't get pissed off, though."

I looked down at her, forgetting to breathe as the two swellings wrapped in her knitted sweater welcomed me in.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

# Copyright

My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex: Volume 10

by Kyosuke Kamishiro

Translated by Geirrlon Dunn Edited by Samantha J. Moore

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Kyosuke Kamishiro, TakayaKi First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

[j-novel.club](http://j-novel.club)

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: March 2024

Premium E-Book for faratnis