Author
Kyosuke Kamishiro

Illustrator
TakayaKi



1

My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"Why Can't We Move On?!"

Author
Kyosuke Kamishiro

Illustrator
TakayaKi



1

My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"Why Can't We Move On?!"

Table of Contents

Cover

Don’t Call Us an Ex-Couple

The Ex-Couple House-Sit

The Ex-Couple Start School

The Ex-Girlfriend Gets Measured

The Ex-Boyfriend Nurses Back to Health

The Ex-Girlfriend Is Waiting in Dreams

The Ex-Couple Try [redacted]ing (Part 1 of 2)

The Ex-Couple Try Dating (Part 2 of 2)

The Couple Exchange Gifts

Afterword/Author Comments

Color Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Don’t Call Us an Ex-Couple

“I really hated that about you.”

“...”

“...”

I stood at the front door of my house, doing my best impression of a delinquent’s angry glare. The target was a girl my age—nothing more, nothing less. Well, actually, as much as I wish that were true, it wasn’t. She was—and still is—something much, much more.

“Where are you off to, Mizuto-kun?”

“How about you? Where are you going, Yume-san?”

We exchanged words and then fell into a silence for the third time.

Truth be told, I didn’t even need to ask. I knew she was going to the bookstore above the burger place at Karasuma Sanjo. A new mystery novel had come out today, and it seemed that both of us wanted to go buy it.

However, leaving the house at the same time posed a problem. We would have to walk there together, head to the same section in the store, and line up behind one another at the checkout.

If that happened, how could anyone see us as anything but a couple that had the same taste in books?

Both of us wanted to avoid being perceived that way at all costs, but right now, we were at an impasse. All we had to do was leave at different times, but the question was who would get to go first. This little nonverbal back-and-forth mind game we were currently having would determine that.

Sure, we could have just talked it out, but also, no. No way. Not a single thing in this world could be resolved by talking things out with this girl.

“Oh, Yume and Mizuto-kun?” Yuni-san emerged from the living room, dressed

in her suit. “What are you two up to?”

Yuni-san had just become my stepmom a little less than a week prior. In other words, she’s both the woman who married my father, and the mother of the girl standing in front of me.

“Are you two heading out?”

“I was just about to,” I said, smoothly trying to use Yuni-san’s question to push myself into the lead.

“Oh, you wouldn’t happen to be going to the bookstore at Karasuma, would you? I know how much you love books! That’s where Yume’s going too, right? I swear, she only ever leaves the house to go to the bookstore or the library.”

“Uh...” I faltered.

“Mom!” Yume protested.

“Don’t tell me you’re going there together! I’m so happy, Mizuto-kun! You’re really doing your best to be friends with her! Please keep being good to her. She’s just so gosh darn shy!”

“S-Sure...”

If looks could kill, I’d be dead from Yume’s death glare. But what else could I have possibly said after all that?

“Well, I have work, so I’ll see you all later. Be good siblings to each other, okay?” Yuni-san said as she left, slowly disappearing out the door.

That’s right. We were siblings. Stepsiblings. The children of our remarried parents.

“Why did you agree with her?” Yume asked me.

“With the way that conversation went, how couldn’t I?”

“Why do I have to be on good terms with someone like you?” she hissed.

“Bite me. I don’t want to be buddy-buddy with you either,” I retorted.

“I really hate how you just roll over for anyone and everyone, you shitty bookworm.”

“And I hate how you’re always so self-centered, you shitty fangirl.”

Our parents had no idea about our true relationship. Only she, Yume Irido, and I, Mizuto Irido, knew that we used to date and had just split up less than two weeks ago.

◇

I’d been involved with her from eighth to ninth grade, in what can only be called a folly of youth. We first met at the school library. It was the end of July—the start of summer break. She was standing on a stool, trying her best to reach for a book on the highest shelf. I’m sure you can already guess what happened next. I reached up and got the book for her instead.

If I had the power to go back in time, I wish I could tell my past self to not get involved with her. But tragically, he had no idea what the future would hold. He foolishly grabbed the book and struck up a conversation with the girl.

“You like mystery novels?”

I’m the type who will read anything. Proper literature, romance novels, light novels—you name it. If it has pages and a spine, it’s mine. So that’s why, when I grabbed that book and saw its title, I already knew it was a classic mystery.

I’d heard of it before, but it wasn’t necessarily my kind of book. Regardless, as an avid reader, if I saw someone getting a book that I knew, it was like an automatic hit of serotonin—like a bull seeing red and going wild. It was that kind of loss of oneself. More than likely, this was some kind of trap that had been set by a higher power.

In other words, it was destiny. It was destiny that brought the two of us together, led us to hit it off, and rendezvous in the vacant school library throughout summer vacation.

Then when school started again at the end of August, she asked me out, I said yes, and that’s how I got my first girlfriend. Her name? Yume Ayai—or at least, that’s what it used to be.

Well, it goes without saying that was where things started falling apart. But seriously, what middle school romance *hasn’t* fallen apart? Couples have something like less than a five percent chance of their relationships actually

working out after confessing. Realistically speaking, there's no way that a middle school couple would stay together for the rest of their lives.

But back then, we truly believed that we would. Neither of us stood out too much at school, so we were able to date without being bothered. We grew fond of one another through our hobbyist conversations in the school library, the public library on our days off, and at a bookstore café.

Of course, we did couple things as well. We went on dates, held hands, and shared extremely clumsy kisses. For better or worse—definitely worse, looking back at it—we did all the stereotypical couple things slowly, one by one.

Our first kiss was when we were saying goodbye on our way home from school against the background of an orange-tinged sky. Our lips barely touched—it was more like they brushed up against each other—but even now, her slightly flushed cheeks and smile are firmly burned into my mind.

However, there was one thing my present self would like to have said to that memory.

Go to hell. To both her *and* past me.

At any rate, we continued dating and getting closer to one another, but began to drift apart when we entered the ninth grade.

It all started when Ayai became more outgoing. Thanks to all the time we'd spent together, she'd gotten better at communicating and made a lot of friends in her new class. It was hard to believe that this was the same girl who hadn't even been able to find a partner in gym class just a year before. Her growth was astonishing.

She was really happy about it, and I told her I was too. Right, that's what I'd *said*, but it wasn't what I *felt*. Confession: while I was congratulating her, I had felt an uncontrollable possessiveness welling up within me. I was supposed to be the only one who knew her cuteness, her smile, her cheerfulness.

But that was a problem. One time, I accidentally put those feelings into words, resulting in a bewildered Ayai who tried to assuage my feelings without really understanding. That had just irritated me even more.

Yes, I know. The catalyst leading to our breakup might have been her growth,

but the actual cause was my stupid possessiveness. She'd done nothing wrong. I have no problem admitting that it was all me from beginning to end.

But, that being said, I wasn't *completely* at fault. Even I—being the idiot I was back then—saw that I was the problem. I tried to apologize and explain to her that it was my fault that I'd grown jealous for various reasons. I apologized for taking my emotions out on her and asked her to let this all be water under the bridge.

And then, that girl... What do you think she said?

"So, you can be friendly with other girls, but you get mad when *I* try to be friendly with other people?"

I don't think anyone could blame me for having reacted with a dumbfounded, "Huh?!"

According to Ayai, I had apparently cheated on her in the very same school library that we met in. But with whom? I had no idea. She probably saw me talking to a librarian or some random person and misinterpreted that as me cheating, as me definitely cheating, as me cheating without a doubt in her mind. She wouldn't listen to me at all.

In the end, I apologized.

I have no clue why, though.

Had I been at fault for lashing out at her way more than what was necessary? Yes, that's why I apologized. It was up to her whether or not she forgave me. That much, I understood.

But on what grounds did I deserve verbal abuse due to her own baseless misunderstandings? Everyone, especially me, has their own impulsive verbal outbursts, and I'd already apologized for that. So where was *my* apology? Why didn't she apologize to me like I did to her? I certainly deserved it after she unfairly turned it into the *Nonstop Mizuto Apology Show*. It made absolutely no sense that not even a single word of remorse came out of her mouth.

We'd ended up superficially making up with each other and continued dating for a few more months, but I couldn't drop the negative feelings I held against her. In the end, what once was broken could never be mended. Things that we

had once found endearing about each other became annoying. We began shooting sarcastic comments at each other to the point that it became a pain to even text one another. Despite that, we'd get mad at the other person when they didn't respond, which just added another wedge into the growing divide between us.

The only reason our relationship lasted until we graduated middle school was because neither of us had the courage to break up—we were both cowards. We were just trying to cling to the times when we had been happy together. When Valentine's came and not a single word was exchanged between us, that's when we knew for sure that it was over. That's when we knew that there was no going back to the way things were. That's why, when we graduated, I took the opportunity to say it.

"Let's break up."

"Yeah."

Just like that, it was over without a single tear shed.

She wasn't angry at all. If anything, her expression seemed to say that she'd been waiting for this. My expression probably said as much too.

She used to be so dear to me. I liked her so much, and then she became my mortal enemy. Romance truly is a flight of fancy, and I sure was glad to be free of it. With that heavy burden lifted, I was able to graduate from middle school as light as a feather.

One fateful night, my dad came to me with a serious look on his face and told me that he was thinking of getting remarried.

I was taken aback. It became apparent to me that people lose their minds when they hit the age that my dad did. Of course, I had sympathy for him as a single father, so I wasn't opposed to the idea of remarriage, or rather, marriage in general. I had no objections whatsoever. I'd just completed my compulsory education as it was, so I was already in a great mood and feeling open-minded. Maybe that's why I kind of just shrugged off his question about whether I'd be okay if the woman he was going to marry had a daughter.

I was going to have a stepsister my age! It was like something straight out of a

light novel. I couldn't help but laugh because, if anything, I was excited.

At this point, I had probably lost any and all rational thought. So that's why it felt like a splash of cold water in my face when my stepmother-to-be brought over her daughter so that we could all meet.

"..."

"..."

Of course, the one standing there was Yume Ayai—no, now she was Yume Irido.

We just stared at each other, flabbergasted, while the same thoughts probably ran through each of our heads.

"God, why?!" I shouted in despair.

And that's how my ex became my stepsister.

◇

"Thanks for the meal," Ayai—I mean, Yume said curtly before stacking her dishes and utensils and bringing them to the kitchen.

Dammit. The timing could not have been worse. I had *just* finished eating, but I couldn't keep sitting here to avoid her. That'd be weird.

"Thanks for the meal," I said, grabbing my own dishes and bringing them to the kitchen as well. When I arrived, there was Yume. Between her borderline unhealthily thin body and her annoyingly long but well-kept jet-black hair, I thought that instead of washing dishes in the kitchen, she should be crawling out of a well after seven days.

As I walked in, Yume said nothing but gave me a quick glance, her long eyelashes barely moving from their closed position. The only sound coming from her was the clatter from the dishes being washed. I didn't have anything to say to her either, so I silently stood next to her and began to wash mine too.

I really wanted to avoid a situation like this where I had to stand next to her in the kitchen, but blatantly avoiding her could lead to problems of their own. Especially since...

“Phew, I was worried about two young adults living together under one roof, but I’m so glad that they’re getting along so well,” my dad said cheerfully.

“Seriously! Did you know that Mizuto-kun and Yume went to the bookstore together today? I guess things are easier when they have a shared hobby,” added Yume’s mom.

“It’s such a relief. I was so worried about whether they’d get along.”

Our parents happily discussed our relationship at the dining table. After getting married, they’ve spent every day happy—the exact opposite of us two.

“You understand?” Yume asked in a low voice so that she couldn’t be heard from the dining room over the sound of the water.

“Understand what?” I asked.

“We can’t give them any reason to regret this.”

“Of course. I’m taking our secret to the *grave*.”

“Good.”

“When did you start getting so high-and-mighty over every last thing?”

“If I wasn’t like this in the past, it’s one hundred percent your fault I’m like this now.”

“Excuse me?!”

“What?”

“Hey, what are you two talking about?” We immediately reset our angry facial expressions as we heard dad call us from the dining room.

I quickly tried to explain. “We were just, like, talking about the book we, like, bought today.”

“Yes, that is right! We were discussing the book,” Yume said in a cheery voice while delivering a low kick to my leg at an angle that no one else could see.

“Ow!”

“What are you, a valley girl? You don’t need to use ‘like’ that much. Are your language arts grades all right?” she snapped in a whisper.

“Sorry to disappoint, but I placed in the top one hundred on the national mock exam,” I whispered back.

“I hate how past me would have praised you for that.”

“I hate how past me would have just accepted your praise.”

In front of everyone else, we played the parts of stepsiblings building a better relationship. This was due to the single shared opinion that we had: we didn’t want our parents to regret getting married. That was truly the one thing we agreed on.

I was in my room reading the book that I’d bought that day when I heard a knock on the door.

“Dad? Need something?” I called out.

There was no answer. I didn’t want to put down my book and stop reading, but I also didn’t want to put a damper on his newlywed life with a bad attitude. I bookmarked my spot and went to the door to open it, but the person standing before me wasn’t my dad, but the girl that I hated most in the world—none other than Yume Irido.

“What?” I asked her in a tone of voice that was a hundred or so degrees colder than the one I’d just used.

Yume raised her head and let out a short huff as if to laugh in my face and say that the coldness in my voice wasn’t even enough to make her flinch.

“I need to talk to you. Busy?” she asked.

“You know what I bought today. Of course I am.”

“I do know, and that’s why I’m here. I already finished reading it.”

I clicked my tongue in annoyance, realizing that she’d come here with the purpose of interfering with my reading.

Her reading speed had always been just a little faster than mine, which is something that never changed while we dated. We’d buy the same book at the same time and start reading at the same time too. But just around the time I would get into the climax, this girl would finish it first. It was an extremely nasty

part of her—something I really hated. I'm glad that we broke up.

"Keep it short," I demanded.

"Let me in. I don't want our parents to hear."

"Tsk."

"Can you stop clicking your tongue every time I say something?"

"I'll stop as soon as I don't have to see your face anymore," I retorted.

"Tsk."

I cautiously peeked around the hall to make sure that neither dad nor Yuni-san were around before letting Yume inside.

"What a dirty room. Do you have anything besides books? I feel like I'm getting dirty just being here," Yume quipped, watching her step as she walked inside my room.

"That's not what you said when you came here while dad was away on that business trip. Your eyes glistened, and you were like, 'Wow, it's just like a library!'"

"Nothing is forever. Just seeing the complete Sherlock Holmes series neatly lined up makes me so annoyed I could *die*."

"Just die then. I'll push you off the same waterfall that Professor Moriarty was." I sat down on my bed that was half-filled with books. "So, what do you want to talk about?"

Yume kept on standing and coldly stated, "I don't think I can keep doing this. I can't handle it anymore. How much longer do I have to endure you nonchalantly calling me by my first name?"

I knit my brow in annoyance. After all, there was no reason to hide my displeasure in front of her. "Yeah? I seem to remember *you* calling *me* by my first name though," I shot back.

"Better than having you call me by mine. I can't *stand* hearing my name come out of your mouth. I didn't even let you use my first name when we were dat—when we were in middle school!"

Interesting. You can't even stand mentioning our time together, huh? Oh, now I see.

"We have the same last name now. What do you want me to do?" I asked her.

"There's *got* to be a good solution."

"I'm all ears."

"Call me 'onee-chan.'" *Come again?* "We're siblings now, so it only makes sense that you call me 'onee-chan,' right?"

"Nuh-uh. Hold up," I said, cradling my head in my hands. "You think *you're* the older sibling? Keep dreaming. You have that backwards."

"Huh?"

"*I'm* the older brother and *you're* the younger sister. *You* should be calling me 'nii-san,'" I said in rebuttal, wondering what the heck she was babbling about.

"Oh no, how terrible. It seems all your brain cells are asleep right now, my little stepbrother."

"Want me to put you to sleep? Forever?" I snapped back at her.

"Fine! Listen up: as someone who ranked in the top one hundred on the national arithmetic mock exam, I'll be nice and explain this to you," Yume said, sticking up her pointer finger as if she were a teacher.

Unforgivable! You don't deserve to be an avid reader if you score better in math than language arts.

"One," she continued. "In this world, the one who is born first is the older sibling. Two, I was born first. Therefore, we can conclude that since I was born first, *I* am the older sibling. Got it?" Yume said all this with a confident, smug look on her face while talking about logic—not math!—but that wasn't the part I wanted to confront her on.

"If I remember right, we have the exact same birthday," I pointed out.

This was just another one of the traps that fate had laid for us. We sure do share the same birthday. It might not have been the reason why we had hit it

off so well, but it certainly did have a hand in us having that disgusting talk about celebrating each other's birthdays together and going through the horrible ritual of exchanging presents. It'd be great if I could erase those memories from my head.

"That's why, between us, there *is* no older sibling," I concluded.

"Didn't you just practically shout at me, declaring that I'm your younger sister?"

Yeah, but I had no ulterior motive saying that. You just feel more like a younger sister than an older one.

"Either way," she continued. "Our birthdays may be the same, but it changes nothing. After all, our birth times are different."

"Birth...time?"

"I've already looked into them," she said, as though she were some kind of detective, while taking out her phone and shoving it in my face. "See?"

Displayed on the screen was a photograph of a baby with writing under it. It looked like it was part of a family album.

"You were born at eleven thirty-four in the morning." She swiped to the next baby picture and pointed at the time written beneath. "And according to this picture, I was born at least thirty minutes prior. *I* was born first. Got it?"

Is this girl for real? Did she really dig up my family album just to look for this?

"Yikes, weirdo..."

Yume's face turned red upon hearing my unfiltered opinion. "H-How?! A perfect deduction requires there to be complete evidence!"

"There they are—the words of a true mystery fangirl. If you like puzzles so much, why beat around the bush? Go solve a *real* puzzle."

"Now you've done it! You've just picked a fight with every true mystery fan out there! Are you prepared for that?!"

"All right. I'll play along with your mystery game, even though you never come up with your own theories before the solution is revealed. As much as

you fuss about what's fair and what's not, there's a hole in your argument."

"What hole?! You must be talking about those rotten holes in your head that you call your eyes!"

Just like all mystery fans (people who ignore any challenges to the reader), she entered her angry mode because I was right. And so, I presented my rebuttal to her theory: "In your argument, you stated that in this world, the firstborn child is the older sibling. However, that's just a fallacy. In ancient Japan, when twins were born, the one who came out first was considered the younger sibling."

"Huh? Why?" Yume said, tilting her head out of genuine curiosity.

"There are lots of different reasons, like the first child born acted as an usher to the other, or that the first child must have been lower in the womb than the other. Either way, in the event that we—stepsiblings who share the same birthday—are determined as steptwins, it would mean that you—the one who was born first—are the younger sibling. Got it? Good. Your counter?"

"W-We're not really *twins*..."

"Yeah, and we're not really siblings either. We're just the children of our respective parents."

Yume groaned in frustration in response to my logic, glaring at me spitefully. I wanted to laugh in her face and tell her to just bow down before me, but then she realized something.

"Wait a second."

"Nope. Get out of my room."

"What does our birth order have to do with ancient Japan? In modern times, the first one born is the older one."

"Tsk. You should've just kept your mouth shut and let yourself be deceived."

"Huh?! Y-You tried to trick me?!"

"At any rate, I'm the older sibling. QED. Case closed," I said, standing up and glaring at her. "Now get out of my room."

“*I’m* the older sibling! Just thinking about being your little sister makes me want to throw up!” She returned my glare.

It felt like sparks were flying between our eyes, although that seemed like a bit of an understatement. It was more like we were in one of Futaro Yamada’s ninja novels, furiously clashing swords with one another, blood spraying everywhere.

I let out a sigh and calmed myself as I began to feel Shiro Amakusa or some other warrior reincarnating from hell in Yume’s fierce gaze.

“Us staring at each other isn’t gonna solve anything. I think the rational decision is to settle this with a game or something,” I suggested.

“I don’t like the way you phrased that, but I agree.”

“So, what’s it going to be? Rock paper scissors? Drawing lots? Coin flip?” I asked.

“Wait a second.”

“No. Get out of my room,” I snapped back instinctively.

“Stop saying that automatically.”

Oops. Forgot to turn off my mental response bot.

“Hm...” Yume put her hand to her chin, trying to look smart. “I’ve got an idea.”

“I would like nothing more than to reject you outright, but lucky for you, I’m a rational person. I’ll hear you out.”

“You’re *so* annoying.” She rolled her eyes. “Anyway, now that we’re living together, we have to hide our true relationship and pretend to be siblings that actually get along, right?”

“Regrettably, yes.”

“We’ve been doing okay, but one day, one of us might slip up and say or do something that isn’t something that stepsiblings would say to each other, right? How about whoever slips up is the loser?”

“Hm, I see. And you’re okay with that?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“These rules make it clear that I’m gonna win.”

“You’re looking down on me!”

It might have sounded like that to her, but I was merely stating my logical theory based on the facts. “I’m fine with those rules. It’ll keep us on our toes and help us keep things under wraps. By the way, do the rules count when our parents aren’t around?”

“Of course. The rules even count right here, right now.”

“Uh-huh. So the one who doesn’t act like a stepsibling is the younger one, huh?”

“It’s an ongoing game where if you slip up, you lose, and the winner can decide how they want to be called until the next slipup,” Yume explained.

“Makes sense. It’s no fun if it’s just a onetime game of sudden death.” I nodded. “All right. I’m in.”

“Good, then our game starts now!” Yume said, clapping her hands together.

Not a moment later, Yume moved to my bookcase and nonchalantly began rummaging through it.

“H-Hey, what are you doing?!”

“Hm? Just sibling stuff. Nothing weird,” she said with a devilish smile. As I looked at her, it began to dawn on me what the true idea behind these rules was.

Even if one of us did something to get a rise out of the other, we couldn’t adversely react to anything that was deemed normal for siblings, because otherwise that person would be the one not acting like a stepsibling. These rules were just an excuse for harassment!

Th-This girl! She suggested these rules for this very reason! She’s rotten to her core! Whoever falls for a girl this ill-natured has to be just as twisted!

As I stared at the girl in front of me who was making various reactions at the books she randomly pulled off my shelf, I knew that I was in a bad position. I

could *sense* that I was in danger. As she went through my books, it felt like she was peering into my soul. It made me slightly uncomfortable, but fortunately, the slightly erotic light novels that would make me *really* uncomfortable weren't there.

The problem was my desk drawer next to the bookcase. It was the Pandora's box of my room. Hidden inside were a notebook with my original novel written in it, a certain something I bought at the drugstore with mixed feelings, and a present that I'd received from this very girl when we were still dating.

I could already picture how she'd react. *"Ew, you still have this? What? You still hung up on me or something? Huh?! You seriously need to give up, creep!"*

There's absolutely no way I can let her find it. Unfortunately, at this rate, Yume's attention would naturally move to the desk. I had to do something to draw her attention away from it *and* do so in a way that was normal for siblings!

I kicked my brain cells into overdrive to look for a way out of this situation. This might've been the hardest I've thought about anything since the entrance exam for high school. My desperate thoughts brought me to a part of the "sibling rules."

"Please, stop," I said in a feeble voice. This caught Yume's attention, and she spun around to face me, her black hair fluttering in the air.

I stood up from the bed and walked towards her. As I grew closer, she looked up at me, her face becoming increasingly filled with confusion.

"I don't want to fight anymore," I said.

"Huh?" Yume's eyes widened and reflected my meek expression.

"I'm sorry if I made you angry. I'll leave if you want. Just... Can we please just stop this?" I put my hands on her shoulders and spoke in a clear, serious tone.

Yume shifted her gaze but quickly looked back into my eyes one more time. Her large, doe-like eyes trembled slightly. As she gazed at my face, the confusion from her face slowly dissipated, and finally, she was firmly focused on my expression, and—

"Irido-kun..."

“Aaand you’re out,” I said.

“Huh?” Yume’s mouth was agape.

I smirked. “Siblings don’t call each other by their last name.”

Yume started out dumbfounded, but her face slowly grew redder and redder, like water after you put a teabag in it. Bringing up anything that might remind us of our past relationship was forbidden under the rules and therefore a surefire way to win, and it seemed that she’d finally realized this too.

“Wha— No, th-this can’t— You’re out too!” she stammered.

“How? Not wanting to fight is a very normal thing, isn’t it? We’re siblings, after all.”

“Agh! Waaah!” My little stepsister clutched her head out of vexation, blushing up to her ears while I watched from above, satisfied.

“All right, time for your end of the bargain. Ready to become my little sister?”

“Wh-What are you planning to do?!” she cried, shrinking away from me.

“Stay there and stop holding yourself. That’s not what little sisters do.”

Every last part of my being wanted to humiliate her, but I thought better of it and decided that I would save the cat-eared maid stepsister punishment for another time.

“Let’s keep it simple since this is the first time and everything. You’re going to change the way you address me.”

“H-How?”

“However you want.” Internally, I felt like a king. *Ha ha! Show me what you believe a little sister is. Ah, delightful. Wonderful!* My internal self downed a glass of red wine.

In response to my order, Yume averted her gaze and let out an extremely displeased groan while bringing her clenched fist to her chest. Before long, she looked up at me, her face as red as a baby’s from embarrassment, and in a small trembling voice, her words echoed in my ears.

“O-Onii-chan...”



I immediately looked away.

“O-Out! You’re out!” she shouted. “That reaction—a sibling wouldn’t be embarrassed from being called that!” she exclaimed.

“I’m not embarrassed...”

“You are! How much do you think I’ve looked at your face?!”

“How should *I* know?! You sure you weren’t looking at someone else? We only just met a few days ago.”

“That’s not fair! That’s so, so, *so* unfair!” She stomped her feet as if she were a tantrum-throwing child, but I couldn’t look at her. It had absolutely nothing to do with my face being flushed, my heart racing, or me wanting her to call me “onii-chan” again. I had my own reason not to look at her that was completely separate from those reasons.

Yume was still grumbling, but it seemed that we’d made too much noise.

“Yume? You’re being awfully noisy,” Yuni-san called out from the bottom of the stairs—the voice of salvation to my present self.

“Time’s up,” I said with a triumphant grin. Yume replied with a growl.

“Well, I hope you learned your lesson about messing with me. You might’ve had a misunderstanding from all those mysteries you read, but you and I are built differently.” I tapped my temple, emphasizing my point.

Whether it was out of anger or frustration, Yume became even redder, and tears began to well up in her eyes. “You never *used* to say anything so mean to me!”

Don’t cry. That’s cheap. I fiddled with my bangs. I was starting to get uncomfortable again. *Maybe I got a little carried away*, I thought. For people like us, going after someone’s reading preferences was one of the most hurtful things we could do. It was like how the media would tear apart a person’s book collection just so they could say baseless things about them. *Yeah, I guess I might’ve gone a little too far.*

I sighed, reluctantly stretching out my right hand and patted her on the head like one would a child.

“Yeah, I’m a jerk. I’m sorry, onee—nee-san.”

It felt so nostalgic. Back then, whenever something happened, I used to look at Ayai’s shy face just like this, but Yume wasn’t shy anymore. Her body was trembling like a volcano that was about to erupt.

“I...” Yume began, trailing off.

“You?”

“I really hate how you can just apologize like that! Shitty onii-chan!” She spat out her new phrase and ran out of my room, kicking my tower of books over in the process and leaving me completely dumbfounded. The reaction she had was definitely not something that I had ever seen when we were dating.

“Jeez...” *You’re not the only one. I really hated how you were so reserved yet so competitive, so mature yet so childish...and just when I’d finally forgotten about you, you showed me a face that I’d never seen before.*

◇

In the end...

“Good morning, Mizuto-kun.”

“Good morning, Yume-san.”

We didn’t change what we called each other. In the first place, the rules made it so that the loser could only become the younger sibling once per loss, otherwise it would draw suspicion as to why one person was suddenly being called “onii-chan” or “onee-chan” by the other. But, I guess if something *had* changed, it’d have to be...

“Mizuto-kun, could you pass me the soy sauce?”

“Oh, yeah. Here you go, Yume-san.”

Our eyes met for an instant as I passed her the soy sauce, and we came to a mutual understanding without even having to exchange words. Although, if we had, it would have sounded like this:

“I will never be your little sister.”

“What a coincidence. I have no intention of ever becoming your little brother.”

This girl and I will never see eye to eye. What had happened between us in middle school was a mistake. It was nothing more than a folly of youth. That had become even clearer thanks to the events of yesterday.

We exchanged low kicks under the table while our parents continued their happy conversation, neither of them showing even the slightest indication that they noticed our fight. The two of us were the only ones who knew our past.

I was living with my mortal enemy, the person I hated most in my world. But even so...

“Yume-san, can you pass the soy sauce?”

“Sure, Mizuto-kun.”

We’d only called each other by our last names when we were dating, but ever since we broke up, we’ve been using each other’s first names. I couldn’t help but think that fate really has a sick sense of humor.

The Ex-Couple House-Sit

“I live here, so what’s the problem?”

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called boyfriend during the eighth and ninth grade.

His face was nothing to write home about, he put no effort into what he wore, he had awful posture, and he never had anything interesting to say. He might have been on the smarter side, but overall, he was pretty much a completely unattractive loser devoid of any charm.

But in the eyes of my middle school self who was firmly in the midst of her adolescence and a plain girl of unparalleled proportions, his slight kindness and our slightly similar interests were slightly fun. Before I knew it, it all made me happier than anything.

It was a mistake. It was truly a folly of youth.

What really put the final nail in the coffin was the love letter that I had elatedly written in the middle of the night and gave to him in the heat of the moment. That was what set everything in motion and placed me on the fated train of my doomed middle school romance.

After all, our relationship was nothing like any of those transparently deceitful shojo manga. Eventually I just opened my eyes, saw the reality of everything, and broke it off as if nothing had ever happened. That was precisely how things ended between me and that guy.

And then our parents got married, we became stepsiblings, and began living in the same house. People might say that nothing in life ever goes the way we expect, but how could the worst possible situation just conveniently play out like this? There was no doubt that some prankster god had laid this trap for us —a trap called destiny.

Although I’ve already shoved the memories of my time together with that guy

into the garbage can of my mind, as much as I'd like to deny it, there's still a memory that I just can't get rid of no matter how hard I try.

It was the spring vacation between eighth and ninth grade, and that guy had called me over to his house.

"So, my dad's not home today," he said in a slightly embarrassed voice that made my foolish self at the time jump to conclusions.

It's finally time. Like any normal middle school girl, I was thinking that since we'd been on dates and kissed, the next step was...*you know what*. This thought process was perfectly natural for any middle school girl in this day and age, so it wasn't like I was especially dirty-minded or anything. *Seriously.*

From the conversations I'd overheard between the girls in my class, I could glean that this was a time where these kinds of conversations often came up. We were all beginning our battle with the abhorrent thing called menstruation too. We were in a completely different frame of mind compared to the bastards who would make a huge fuss over some pictures they saw on the internet.

I had steeled my resolve. I was finally about to experience the thing that I'd only read about in books. I was about three parts excited and seven parts worried when I marched into my boyfriend's room for the first time in my life.

"March" might have been a silly word to use—especially for me—but it appropriately reflected my readiness. It goes without saying that the night prior, I had gone on the internet, pored through tons of pages such as *Things to Know before Your First Time*, and I even perfectly mastered moaning tricks.

I knew that my preparations were flawless. As I entered that guy's room, I looked for a place that I could put myself. With his room as messy with books as it was, the only place I could really sit was the bed.

The bed? Is this really happening? While I was frozen with my rampant thoughts, that guy just casually said, "Go ahead. Sit down."

So with that, I ended up sitting on the bed, but I couldn't have expected what happened next. He sat next to me without even blinking an eye—like it was natural.

Huh?! H-He's more aggressive than I thought! He's usually so reserved!

I can't believe how single-minded my past self was. As much as my present self would like my past self to have been hit by a truck and disappear to another world, she unfortunately continued to cling to life like a stain and began talking with that guy.

I don't remember what we talked about. My head was filled with thoughts about when he was going to push me down onto the bed, if he would start off with a kiss, and if the underwear I was wearing was all right or not.

Him adjusting himself on the bed was enough to make me jump, and his pinky brushing against me was almost enough to make me squeal. This tragic time of me being an innocent maiden continued for ten minutes, then twenty, then thirty.

Huh? Not yet?

As soon as those thoughts crossed my mind, that guy opened his mouth and said, "Oh wow, it's already this late. I guess it's about time..."

It's happening. It's finally happening! Please don't hurt. Please don't be scary. Please let me do everything right!

"For you to go home."

Huh? E-Excuse me?

"I don't really want you to go, but it's getting late, and I'm sure your mom is going to be worried," he explained. "I'll walk you back."

And with that, we left his house, and he took me back to my apartment.

Is he going to make a pass at me now? Is this the part where he lets himself in?!

Right to the very last second, I thought that something would happen, but after actually using my brain, I realized that my apartment wasn't empty. Mom was home. If he was really going to make a move, the best place would have been at his house.

We reached the entrance of my apartment, and that guy waved his hand at me and said, "I had fun today. See you later."

I just stood there, dumbfounded, as I watched him walk away. That's when I realized that he hadn't asked me over to his house for the purpose I thought he had. He really just wanted me to come to his room because he wanted to hang out.

I was the only one who wanted to climb the steps of adulthood?!

"Yume? Why are you so red? Did you catch a cold?" my mom asked in a worried tone as I walked inside.

But I couldn't even properly answer her. I just walked to my room and fell onto my bed and lay there in agony over my humiliation.

By the time we ended things approximately one year later, that guy and I had never ended up engaging in any of *those* kinds of activities.

◇

"Dad and Yuni-san wanted me to let you know that they're gonna be home late today," my stepbrother, or rather, my younger brother suddenly reported to me from my doorway.

I'd finally finished unpacking and organizing my things from the move and was currently elegantly enjoying a mystery novel.

"Oh, okay. And?"

"Really?!" My stepbrother, Mizuto Irido, shot me a sour look.

Hm? I see. So even having to talk to me because he was told to is painful for him. Interesting.

"What's for dinner?" he asked.

"Are you trying to say that dinner's *my* responsibility? I'm not your mom."

"I know. I was just asking *you* as a person who sits at the same dining table as me to weigh in on the decision. God, talking to you is a waste of time."

You make me sound like I'm indecisive, but I'm better now. Better than when we first met.

My thin-as-a-beanpole stepbrother began tapping his toes on the floor out of irritation. The look in his eyes, which has always been on the menacing side, got

even worse.

Truth be told, he had a picturesque face, but it was ruined by his unkempt hair and baggy clothing. His crappy attitude would usually piss me off, but because of that face, it didn't. This, in turn, just got on my nerves even more.

"Fine, I'll make dinner," Mizuto said with a scowl. "You'll just have to eat whatever I make. Got it?"

"You can cook?"

"A little. After all, it's just been me and dad all this time. What about you—Ah." Mizuto stopped himself while letting out a short laugh, a smile creeping up on his face.

This guy knew that I couldn't cook. In the past, he finished an entire lunch I'd made for him that was pretty much on the level of industrial trash, and then he lied through his teeth, telling me, "*It was so delicious.*"

"Well, we're family now, so it behooves me to throw you a bone here. Be thankful as you slop up the food I make like the pig you are."

I internally swore that I would kill this guy one day, but for now, I quelled the murderous intent welling up inside me and tried to force the biggest smile that I could.

"Oh, that's quite all right, Mizuto-kun. I couldn't *possibly* let you do all the work by yourself. Allow me to help."

"Don't need it. I don't want to deal with the pain of having to bandage up your hands like a mummy."

"I'm saying that I don't want to accept your one-sided charity, you cold-blooded guy."

"Sheesh, I don't wanna hear that from a cold-blooded girl like yourself." Mizuto let out a haughty sigh in response as if it was his last breath, and I secretly hoped that it was, with the way he was acting all high and mighty.

"Fine, then let's go," he said.

"Go where?" I asked, tilting my head.

“To go buy groceries for dinner. Did you expect food to just pop out of thin air or something?”

What the heck is going on? Why was I with my ex at the supermarket not even a month after we broke up? We looked like we were newlyweds who were living together!

“Hm... Oh, this is cheap,” my ex-boyfriend said as he stood next to me while tossing various products into the cart.

Does this guy feel nothing from being in this situation? Just how dense is he? Or maybe he doesn’t even see me as a girl? Well, I guess we’re not “boy and girl” to each other but “little brother and big sister.”

I tried to calm myself, realizing that at this rate I was going to end up repeating the past where I’d get too worked up over something that he wasn’t even thinking about in the first place. I needed to stay calm.

“It just looks like you’re grabbing whatever you can get your hands on. Do you know what you’re making?” I asked.

“Hm? No idea.”

“What do you mean you have no idea?”

“I’m buying whatever’s cheap and seeing what we can make. If we buy everything according to a recipe, there’d be some things that we’d have to buy no matter how expensive they were, right?”

“I guess...” I begrudgingly agreed with his reasoning.

Is this what people call common sense? I never thought his wisdom stat was so high. What’s wrong with him? Why is it so high?

“In the worst case, if we can’t think of anything, we can just throw everything into a pot, add some curry roux, and have curry, albeit a scuffed version. I hope you now understand the difference between ‘making food’ and ‘making a meal,’ my little sister.”

“I’m not your little sister. I’m your *older* sister.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The more he explained himself, the more pathetic I felt for giving him that horribly made lunch way back when.

“Well, poorly made food can be kind of cute every now and then, but having it every day would be a little overkill. So just keep that in mind.” These words fell out of his mouth without even the slightest hint of difficulty, but both my body and mind froze.

C-Cute? This guy is just talking out of his ass again. Wait, no, he didn’t seem to be putting too much thought behind what he said, so maybe he truly meant it?

“What’s wrong? You coming?” he called out.

I didn’t even realize that I was just standing still in the middle of the aisle. I hurriedly ran to catch up to Mizuto, shaking my head in an effort to clear my unnecessary intrusive thoughts.

This really was just like back then, when I’d get the wrong impression while this guy would just remain aloof. It was the epitome of unfairness.

I’ll make him self-conscious. I’m going to take that unpleasant face of his and make it redder than a tomato. I’ll make him call me “onee-chan.”

After shopping, we came back home, reluctantly stood next to each other as we cooked, and then ate our curry. It was overall uneventful, aside from Mizuto freaking out while watching me use a kitchen knife and saying things like “*Stop, you’re scaring me! Put your fingers like this!*” and then thoughtlessly touching my hands without my permission.

Our parents weren’t home, so we didn’t have to pretend like we were getting along. If anything, it was easier for us this way.

“Bath’s ready. What do you want to do?” he asked.

“I’ll take mine first.”

“Thought as much,” he said, unsurprised.

“I don’t want to get in the same water that you bathed in.”

“Oh, so you’re okay with me getting in the same water that *you* bathed in?”

“Never mind. You first!” I quickly shouted.

I never really gave it too much thought when our parents were around, but now that I thought about it, I’d been sharing a bath with this guy every day.

Wait, doesn’t this mean... Isn’t it kinda like we— Okay, I need to calm down.

It was the perfect time to cool my head since Mizuto was in the bath right now. I needed to have a level head so I could launch my counterattack on him.

In order to get my thoughts together, I played the closed-room-murder game in my head—a game I had come up with where Mizuto was killed in a closed room, and I needed to think of all the possible tricks that could have been used to kill him.

But not even ten minutes passed before Mizuto came back, his hair still wet.

“I’m done,” he said.

“Uh...”

“What?”

Almost anyone who saw him with his hair wet—like it was right now—would no doubt think he was good-looking. In other words, that was a perfectly normal reaction. There wasn’t any meaning behind it. None at all.

“That was fast. Did you even wash yourself? You didn’t, did you?” I asked.

“At least wait for me to answer before deciding that I didn’t wash myself, because I *did*. Staying in the bath for too long just felt like a waste of time.”

I hated how he was always in a rush to move on to the next thing. He used to slow down for me when we first started dating, though...

But either way, I knew that the time had come to put my plan in motion. After mentally cleaning up Mizuto’s corpse in the imaginary closed room that I’d made, I stood up and said, “Okay, I’m going to take a bath now. I’ll kill you if you peep.”

“You wouldn’t even have to kill me. My eyes would rot and kill me first,” he retorted. Internally, I knew that this was his last chance to get smart with me.

Just in case, I kept glancing at the door of the bathroom while I got undressed.

I never really gave it a second thought when our parents were around, but it dawned on me that I was getting naked in the same house that he was in. If that guy barged in on me taking a bath right now, no one would be around to help me.

But of course, that kind of aggression was beyond what that string bean was capable of. If he *did* barge in, I'd just bite off various parts of him.

After thoroughly cleaning and warming my body, I got out of the bath, wrapped my body in a dry towel, and dried my hair with a blow dryer.

And so it begins. I tightly gripped the towel tied around me with determination. There was no turning back now—I hadn't brought a change of clothes to the bathroom with me. I had burned my figurative bridge of retreat all in order to back myself into a corner. I was definitely going to break his cool and calm demeanor.

I didn't have a change of clothes, so there was only a single option—walk out like this in front of him!

As I looked at myself in the mirror, I could tell that my body had become more womanly since the two of us had dated, especially in my chest area. I had changed a lot in the past year—so much that even my mom and classmates were jealous.

Because I'd just gotten out of the bath, my exposed cleavage was slightly flushed, which was quite alluring, if I do say so myself.

A-And now I'm supposed to show all of this off to him?! I severely regretted not having at least brought a pair of underwear to change into, but I was sure that if I hadn't gone this far, there was no way I would make that blockhead even flinch.

"All right," I said, steeling my will. I left the bathroom and walked barefooted into the living room. "I-I'm done with my bath."

"Fdsajfdsaj?!" Mizuto spewed out the tea he was drinking as soon as he saw me and began coughing. His reaction was even better than I had hoped!

I turned away so that he couldn't see my relaxed expression.

“T-Towel? Why?!” he stammered.

“I live here, so what’s the problem?” I said, completely unfazed as I sat down diagonally from Mizuto on our L-shaped couch. Mizuto was looking off so far into the distance that he could probably see two days into the future. Even so, he was still stealing peeks at me.

“Yeah, but I’m here, you know?” he said. It was obvious that he had no idea how to react.

“So what? We’re siblings. Or maybe...” Taking this opportunity, I shot him a flirtatious glance as a smile crept across my face. “Or maybe you’re a bad boy who looks at their stepsibling with naughty eyes?”

“Geh.”

Aha ha ha! He’s getting so red! He’s blushing so hard! Serves you right!

Mizuto turned his back to me in order to escape my gaze, but he was still looking. I could feel his gaze on me. He couldn’t help but look at my cleavage or my thighs that were barely covered by my towel.

Heh heh, maybe this was too much stimulation for you? After all, you only knew me when I was still underdeveloped! Oh, you poor thing. You’ve only dated a girl who had the body of a child, and aren’t used to being around someone like me, someone who has the body of a woman. Wait, that girl was me. Maybe I should try crossing my legs again.

“Hnn!”

Oh, you saw that, didn’t you? You’re so obvious! You always try to play it cool, but look at you now. That facade is in pieces! Ha ha ha! This is so much fun!

I pretended to reach for the remote, using it as an excuse to put my cleavage on full display.

“Mngh!”

He’s looking. He’s looking so, so much. He’s smitten. He might be trying to keep a straight face, but it’s taking all that he has to do so. It felt as if I’d gotten my revenge on him, not just for today, but for that mess a year ago too. He’d never look at me at all back then, and now he couldn’t take his eyes off of me.



Is this what one would call a woman's pride? At the very least, I was pretty sure it was pride welling up inside me.

That being said, though, I was starting to grow embarrassed. He was looking at me a lot more than I expected, and if I crossed my legs the wrong way or my towel slipped, he would instantly see parts of me that he shouldn't.

Actually, what the heck am I even doing? Isn't this just plain seduction? If that's the case, could I even complain if this guy came over and pushed me down?

Suddenly, a cold clarity washed over me. I was holding the towel up so that it would only show my cleavage, but I had to be careful or the towel wouldn't cover enough of my lower half. One wrong move and I'd be stuck with a mistake that I could never take back. All I could do now was sit still. *I-I may have gone too far. Why do I get so full of myself sometimes?!*

Mizuto let out a heavy sigh, stood up suddenly, then walked over to me.

N-No way. Is this really happening? I gripped the towel tighter, my body frozen solid, as Mizuto took off the jacket he was wearing. My heart skipped a beat. *Huh? I-Is he really? Is he really planning on taking this further?!*

I inadvertently closed my eyelids as he approached. I felt a sensation on my shoulders. It was the light texture of a jacket being laid on me. *Huh?*

"Let me guess," he asked. "You were trying to get a rise out of me, but dug yourself into a hole too deep to get out of, right? Dumbass."

I cautiously opened my eyes and saw Mizuto's jacket around my shoulders. Then, there was Mizuto. He was standing in front of me, looking down at me with an annoyed expression.

"You're usually so reserved, but sometimes you get so carried away that you end up doing something crazy. You should really fix that habit of yours. I can't cover for you anymore."

His words were blunt, to the point, and had a hint of displeasure. Even so, it had the same tone of those he'd utter back in middle school during the countless occasions I was saved by him.

I pulled his jacket closer to my chest, the warmth from his body still lingering. His words and this warmth made me think back to a year ago without even realizing it.

“Last year...” I began.

“Hm?”

“When you invited me over to your house... Why didn’t you try anything?”

Things had started getting bad between us right after that—after we’d entered the ninth grade. That’s why, back then, I thought that maybe it was my fault that our relationship got messed up. I thought that maybe I did something that made him become disillusioned with me. In the end, that was just my own misunderstanding, and the reason we broke up was because of something completely different.

“Wh-Why are you bringing this up now?!” he stammered.

Huh? Mizuto’s expression was not what I expected. It was as if I’d dragged up an embarrassing memory. His face was painted with shyness and sulkiness.

“What? You wanna laugh at me? Then laugh!” Mizuto suddenly switched to being on the offensive. “Laugh at the guy who called his girlfriend over to his house after going through so many painstaking preparations, and then in the end couldn’t even make a move because he was too scared. Laugh at me! Laugh at the loser!”

My mind stopped functioning for approximately five seconds after hearing that.

“Huh?!” My mind jump-started itself and I let out a yell as I shot to my feet. “P-Preparations?! Too scared?! Wh-What is that supposed to mean?! I-I prepared myself for that day, but nothing happened, so I always thought I completely misinterpreted your intentions!”

“Huh? W-Well, you became really rigid and guarded, so I kinda lost my nerve...” he said, trailing off.

“I. Was. NERVOUS!”

“Huh?!” Mizuto yelled, his eyes widened. “You’re kidding me! You were

totally down and ready to do it too?!”

“Totally down and ready! I was completely prepared to make a memory that I would remember for the rest of my life in your room!”

“S-Seriously? Then why did I spend all those days in my room overwhelmed with regret?” he asked, dumbfounded.

“That’s what I want to know too! Give me back all the time I spent worrying that I wasn’t attractive!”

“That’s not my problem! It’s your fault for freezing up like that!” he snapped.

“No, it’s all your fault, you wuss!”

“Say that again!”

“Maybe I will!”

After that, our conversation turned into an indescribable back-and-forth competition of insults. After some time, we stopped insulting each other and started violently brawling it out over the couch.

After we had exhausted both our words and our stamina, we leered at each other while trying to catch our breaths. Mizuto had me pinned down on the couch and our ragged breaths collided against one another.

I really hated this. We both liked books, but our preferences were like different corner pieces of the same puzzle, or parallel lines that never intersected with one another. The cherry on top was that we were siblings now.

Suddenly, I felt like crying. *Why can’t things ever go right for me? If I hadn’t been so nervous on that day, or even right now...*

“Crying while we’re fighting isn’t allowed,” Mizuto said.

“Shut up! I know!” I wiped the tears away with my arm.

I was done relying on this guy like I had last year. I wasn’t the same weak girl that I had been back then. Even if my growth as a person was what started the deterioration of our relationship, I don’t regret it. *That’s why I knew it wasn’t my fault that we broke up. It was this guy’s fault! It was all his fault!*

“Hey, Ayai...”

My heart skipped a beat. He called me Ayai. It was my old last name—what he called me when we were in middle school.

I rubbed my thighs against one another. The jacket that had been around my shoulders had fallen off somewhere during our fight. Right now, the only thing on me was a towel, which was already roughed up and seemingly about to fall off. I was basically naked.

As he continued holding me down on the couch, Irido-kun reached out to me with one of his surprisingly slim, smooth hands and swept my bangs to the side. This was a sort of ritual we had before we did a certain thing.

When I still lacked confidence and was shy, I had long bangs, and he would sweep them to the side so he could see all of my face. He would always do this before he did the thing that came next.

He could probably tell that I'd stopped fighting back as he peered into my eyes. It felt like he could see right through me. I tried covering my face, but Irido-kun gently gripped my wrist and held it down next to my face. It was as if he was telling me that I couldn't run away from his gaze. All I could do was use my mouth to let out a weak and flimsy excuse.

"W-We can't. The rules..."

The *certain thing* in question was, without a doubt, a game-losing action. Stepsiblings definitely did not do *this*, but even so, I couldn't believe how feeble my words were. They weren't enough to stop him. This much, I knew from experience.

"I'm okay with losing today," Irido-kun said in a low voice that echoed inside me.

Our eyes met. My face being red right now wasn't just because I was tired from the fight we'd just had. His eyes were drawing me in. His warmth, his breath, his pulse—I could feel every last part of him. At a certain point, I'd closed my eyes.

Oh, we haven't kissed in so long...

"We're hooome!"

“Mizuto? Yume-chan? Are you two in the living room?”

We both jumped as soon as we heard the voices of our parents ring out from the entrance.

They’re home?! Already?!

“Gah! It’s already this late?!” Mizuto jumped up in a panic and looked at the clock.

Oh god, how long were we fighting?!

“Hurry, put on some clothes! Don’t you know how this looks?!” he hissed.

How it looked was me, basically naked, and him, his clothes ruffled up, intertwined on the couch. While we might have been pretending to be siblings that got along for our parents’ sake, there was a limit to *how* well we should be getting along. If they saw us getting along *this* well, that would open a whole different can of worms!

“B-But I don’t have any clothes.”

“Oh, right, if you go out to get your clothes now, you’ll run right into them. Dammit! Then...hide! Um, uh... I got it! Hide here!”

I let out a squeal as Mizuto rolled me off the couch and lifted the couch cushions to reveal its storage area.

“Hurry, get in!”

“Hey, you don’t have to push! I’ll get in myself— Ow! Did you just kick me?! You totally did!”

“Not a word. Got it?!” Mizuto dropped the cushions over me after stuffing me into the storage space, and then everything around me turned dark.

“Oh, Mizuto, you’re by yourself?”

“I could’ve sworn I heard Yume.”

“Welcome back, dad, Yuni-san. If you’re looking for Yume-san, she’s already gone to bed.”

Hearing Mizuto trying to talk our way out of this made me remember what had just happened.

If our parents hadn't come home when they did, would we have... What was I doing*?!* I wanted to scream. *This is messed up! This is all so messed up! We aren't together anymore. I hate him. He's just my disgusting little stepbrother that gets on my nerves. He's not my boyfriend!* But even so, I couldn't stop my heart from pounding so hard.

Why can't things ever go right for me? Everything should have been over. Everything should have been easy now. We just *had* to become siblings and I just *had* to seduce him—and *now* I find out that we both had the same intentions back then?!

"Urgh, gosh!"

I really hate that about you!

◇

The next day, I exerted my power as the victor.

"You said you were okay with losing, right, Mizuto-kun?"

"Yeah, sure, I *said* that, but I feel like I was kinda forced to say it in that situation—"

"Anyway, my dearest little brother, heed your older sister's command. Get out of your room for a second."

After dragging Mizuto out of his room, I began searching through it. Yesterday, Mizuto confessed that he went through "so many painstaking preparations" a year ago when he invited me over. I was certain that meant that he must have bought a certain *something*. It wouldn't be the end of the world if I couldn't find it, but if he did have it, it needed to be taken care of.

I was prepared to go through his bed, his bookcase, and turn them all inside out in my pursuit for the item I was looking for, but reality is often disappointing. Luckily, I immediately found what I was looking for in the place that I decided to search first: his desk. Though, I guess it was on-brand for him to not hide things in a complex or difficult way.

After finding what I was looking for, I carried it out of his room, and what was waiting for me in the hallway was Mizuto giving me a look with the eyes of a

rotting dead fish.

“What were you looking for?” he asked.

“Ahem. *Onee-chan.*”

“Nee-san...”

“I was looking for something that is unnecessary for a normal stepsibling relationship.” I held the small box of a dozen *certain items* that I’d retrieved from his room behind my back while feigning a look of innocence.

He bought twelve *of them? He must have been much more excited than I thought. But then again, maybe I’m reading too much into this.* After all, there weren’t any rules that said that you had to use up an entire box per encounter, right? *Yeah, probably.*

I headed down the stairs, passing by Mizuto, making sure not to make eye contact.

“Hey, nee-san,” he rudely barked.

“Whatever is the matter, my dearest little brother, Mizuto-kun?” I turned my head back in his direction.

“Can stepsiblings...” He trailed off before saying anything more, then shifted his eyes as if he had thought better of what he was going to ask. “Never mind.”

I lightly chuckled and walked down the stairs towards the entrance, where the trash bag was. I threw the small box inside the bag and tied it tightly shut. The only thing left to do was throw it out on trash day, and it would be gone for good. With this, there was no way that we could make a mistake by doing something inappropriate for siblings to do.

I took a breath, looked at the entrance, and then turned around towards the top of the stairs. Even though I knew that he couldn’t hear me, I responded to what he was trying to say earlier.

“Yeah, even I know that much.”

But this useless knowledge didn’t help me in the slightest. After all, why would it? Just thinking about it was pointless. Just knowing about it was unproductive. That’s why I wouldn’t say it, because there was no point.

That’s why he didn’t say it.

That’s why *I* didn’t say it.

After all, whether or not stepsiblings could get married was useless knowledge.

The Ex-Couple Start School

“Miss me?”

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called girlfriend during eighth and ninth grade. It’s said that everyone has a past, and even for a cynical but objective guy like me who nihilistically talks about his past, there was a time when I was an innocent kid who didn’t know anything about the world.

Take the first day of my second semester of eighth grade for example. I’d overslept for the first time in years and sluggishly got out of bed. My fatigue came from a lack of sleep caused by an event that my present self deeply regrets and my past self was extremely embarrassed about. If I really got into the nitty gritty of it, the entire situation was the result of something that had happened the day before.

Yume Ayai had confessed to me. I read the love letter that she’d handed me and gave her my answer on the spot. Maybe it’d be better to say that I *regrettably* gave her my answer on the spot instead, but either way, from that day onward, I officially had a girlfriend—my first girlfriend ever.

Therefore, one could say that my resulting reaction that night was perfectly natural. No matter how elated I was, how excited I was, or how much I wriggled around on my bed for no particular reason until the sun came up, it was all *perfectly natural*. I *definitely* hadn’t spent all that time daydreaming and ended up forgetting to actually go to sleep and dream for real.

No, I simply lost precious sleep due to perfectly natural, physiological reasons. *Damn you, Ayai.*

Anyway. It was the first morning of my life that I woke up having a girlfriend. It was also the one and only first day of my second semester of eighth grade. I hurriedly got my things together and left the house. I didn’t rush out of worry for being late to the commencement ceremony, but because I was meeting up

with someone.

There, waiting on the street to school that would eventually become the location of our first kiss, was a long-haired girl with a small frame holding her school bag in front of her knees. It was Yume Ayai, my girlfriend.

“S-Sorry, I overslept!” I stammered.

“I-It’s okay. We still have time.”

Back then, Ayai wasn’t good at expressing herself. Even when she talked to me, her words were shaky at best. Just thinking about how she went from *that* to her current foulmouthed self vexes me to no end, but let’s leave it at that and move on for now.

“Did you...have trouble sleeping last night?” Ayai glanced up at my face with a gentle, sheepish smile.

“Yeah, well...kinda...”

“Oh, I see...” Ayai twirled her long bangs with her finger, her cheeks tinged a faint pink, as she averted her gaze. Then, in a voice so quiet that the wind could have blown it away, she said, “I-I couldn’t sleep at all last night, myself...”

My past self, being the fool that he was, could not handle those words. His heart beat out of his chest, his speech skills suddenly grew five times worse than Ayai’s, and his movements became as rigid as a robot that hadn’t been oiled.

We continued walking to school side by side while holding a “conversation” consisting of *umm*s and *uhh*s. We were only about half a step apart from one another—close enough that our hands were just barely not touching.

Is it okay to hold hands? We are *dating, but maybe it’s too early. We just got together yesterday.* Past me might have been considering it at the time, but holding hands would’ve been way too much for a dumbass virgin like him who, until literally one day before, deeply treasured the memory of when his fingers lightly brushed against Ayai’s.

Before we knew it, we were about fifty meters away from school and were starting to see more and more students. I knew that this meant our time

walking together was, regrettably, about to come to an end. While my past self might have been filled with disappointment, my present self could only laugh in delight. *Ha ha ha, I hope your life ends too!*

“Um, l-let’s stop here... I-It’s too embarrassing to go to the classroom together...” Ayai said, trailing off.

“Huh?”

My luck ran out when past me made the mistake of thinking that her embarrassment was cute. It was right then that we decided not to divulge our relationship to anyone. If we’d boldly walked into the classroom together—if we’d made a big deal about us dating—maybe I wouldn’t have become so possessive over her, and maybe Ayai wouldn’t have lodged those ridiculous accusations at me. Maybe we wouldn’t have ever even broken up, but hindsight is twenty-twenty.

Ayai was not a girl who could leap through time like Kazuko Yoshiyama, nor was I a guy who could go back and redo events from zero like Subaru Natsuki. The best we could do was play a game of what-ifs where we fantasized about how things could’ve played out differently.

Actually, let’s play that game. What if, on that day, Ayai and I *had* walked all the way to the classroom together? Even for a cynical but objective guy like myself, I never thought that the day would come where that exact situation would play out.

◇

The curtain was finally closing on the spring break before tenth grade—the most annoying period of my life I’ve ever had to endure. I wanted to jump for joy in celebration, but the curtain rose on a massive, brand-new problem that stood in my way.

“...”

“...”

I ran into my little stepsister as she was leaving the bathroom, leading to an instant silent glaring contest between the two of us, the subject of which was the uniforms we were wearing. The navy-blue blazer was of a plain design and

gave off an impression of seriousness. The necktie (or bow for other students) was red, the color for first-year students. In short, we were both wearing the same high school uniform.

Some god of tragedy out there must have had a hand in creating this trap, which was second only to the trap that had made the two of us siblings.

The relationship between the two of us had become completely messed up by the time we began seriously studying for high school entrance exams last fall. Of course, we'd never even asked each other about what school we planned on attending. If anything, I wanted to try avoiding going to the same school as her, so I put a private prep school that nobody from our middle school had ever gotten into as my first choice.

It'd be difficult for my dad to pay for this school as a single parent, but as long as I scored high enough on the special admissions test, I could get a scholarship, and it wouldn't be a problem.

After hearing that Yume was also living with a single parent, I figured that she'd be in the same boat as me. With the test being as hard as it was, though, I was convinced that even if she passed, she wouldn't get a high enough score to afford it. With that in mind, I studied my ass off and was spectacularly accepted as a scholarship student...and so was Yume.

This girl had the same exact idea as me. She devoted herself to studying so that she could get accepted to this school—a school that she was sure I wouldn't be able to get into. As a result, our middle school had not one, but two students who received one of the few special admission spots for this high school.

Wow, amazing.

We were both called to the staff room and told that we were the pride of the school. Though our achievements were celebrated, nobody could have guessed how depressing this news was to us. Truthfully, we were in more shock than if we hadn't been accepted—so much shock that all we could do was sit there and politely smile.

There must have been countless couples that studied so that they could go to the same school, but I would bet that we were the only couple that studied so

that we *wouldn't* go to the same school and then ended up at the same school anyway. What were the odds? Probably something like a billion to one. Whatever god set us up like this can go straight to hell!

But really, we only had ourselves to blame for being idiots and not trying to get more information before making our decisions. Now, thanks to such idiocy, we arrived at the present situation that we had strove so much to avoid where we were wearing the same high school uniform as each other.

"That uniform does *not* look good on you," Yume said in a cold voice, throwing me a dark look.

"Have you looked in a mirror? That pleated skirt looks especially bad on you," I replied in an even colder voice, throwing her an even darker look.

"Don't you know? Most school uniforms have a pleated skirt."

"Sorry, I misspoke. I meant you're not pulling off the high school girl look."

"Oh, is that right? Well, you're not pulling off the human look."

"You're not suited for *earth*!" I said angrily.

"Well, *you're* not suited for the *solar system*!" she quipped back.

"Oh yeah? Well, you're not suited for the Milky—"

We continued escalating our back-and-forth of "what we're not suited for" to the galaxy, the third dimension, and reality in general, but we were cut short when a woman called out from the living room, stopping us in our tracks.

"Oh, you two! You look so good in those uniforms!" It was my stepmother, Yuni-san. In her usual animated fashion, she forced the two of us who were secretly at each other's throats to stand next to each other while happily nodding her youthful face with approval. "Prep school uniforms really are different, huh? You two must have worked so hard to have gotten accepted into such a difficult school! But I guess it's nothing too surprising for my children!"

Though the two of us may have been trashing each other for how we looked in our uniforms, there was a line we wouldn't cross—we would never tell the other to go to a different school.

The reason for that was because our parents were extremely happy about our acceptance. Yume and I came from a similar family background, so we had an instinctual mutual understanding that our school situation was off-limits.

“Oh, I know! Let’s take a picture! Come on, you two, get closer together.”

You’re kidding me, right? As much as I wanted to say that out loud, who was *I*, a mere stepson, to stand in the way of the happiness of my stepmother who looked so giddy as she positioned her phone to take a picture? It seemed that her biological daughter, Yume, was also thinking the same thing.

We stood next to each other and froze our faces into smiles as she took our picture. Not to stroke my own ego, but I was getting very good at faking smiles. To paraphrase Dostoevsky, man truly was a creature that could get accustomed to anything. Just as I was thinking this, I was sucker punched by what Yuni-san said next.

“Heh heh, you two almost look like a couple.”

My heart felt like it was about to stop. *Oh no, am I keeping a straight face?*

“Oh, mom, you know we *just* met, don’t you?” Yume scoffed while kicking me in the shin.

Was I not keeping a straight face?!

“But think about it. You take after me, and Mizuto-kun takes after Mine-kun, right? We probably looked like you two when we were in high school.”

The “Mine-kun” she referred to was my father, whose full name was Mineaki Irido.

“Don’t use your children to brag about your love life. Also, I don’t think I really take after you at all, mom.”

“Heh heh, sorry. Do you two mind waiting in the car for a little? We’ll join you after we take care of a few things,” Yuni-san said before returning to the living room.

Today was the entrance ceremony—an event for freshmen and their guardians, which meant that dad and Yuni-san were coming to school with us. We both knew what this would mean for us.

Yume let out a sigh, and I quickly snapped at her. “Don’t sigh. You’re gonna make *me* sigh.”

“How can’t I? If we weren’t siblings, I could just pretend that we were strangers who were accepted to the same school. I’d be able to pretend to not know you.”

There was nobody at this high school who knew us, so it would’ve been easy to do that. But unfortunately, we were siblings with the same parents, we were being driven in the same car, and we were going to the same school together. There was no avoiding any of that. It’d be practically impossible to pretend that we didn’t know each other.

“All right, see you two later!”

“Mizuto, make some friends, okay?”

After going through the usual formalities like taking a picture at the school gate, Yume and I parted with our parents. We headed off to our classroom to meet our classmates and homeroom teacher.

We were notified of our class assignments ahead of time and, naturally, Yume and I ended up in the same class (1-7). Apparently, they separated students into classes depending on their grade on the entrance exam and didn’t really take family into account whatsoever. I couldn’t even sigh about this.

Now that our parents were gone, Yume stretched and then said, “You shitty bookworm.”

“You shitty mystery fangirl.”

“String bean.”

“Shrimp.”

“How?! I’m not that short anymore!” Yume protested.

“In my mind, you’ll always be a shrimp.”

We were finally free to release all the insults that had been building up inside of us. We had to, or else we would inevitably explode.

We entered the school and headed towards our classroom.

“So, what do we do?” I asked.

“About?”

“Do we walk into the classroom together?”

“They’re gonna find out we’re related when they see our last names. Let’s just get it over with,” she proposed.

“I can’t believe you’re the same person who used to be so embarrassed about people seeing us together,” I said, surprised.

“Did you say something?”

“Nope.”

She had a point. Trying to dance around the truth would most likely backfire on us. That’s why, when we arrived at the entrance to our classroom, we boldly entered together, catching the attention of the twenty or so students already in the classroom who seemed eager to determine their friends.

According to the paper taped to the blackboard, my seat was in the front, next to the window. Of course, since Yume and I are siblings, our seats were right by each other, with her sitting behind me because alphabetically, “Mizuto” came before “Yume.” I had a bad feeling about her seat being behind mine, but for the time being, I sat down.

Bang.

“Ow!”

My chair was kicked from behind me. *I expected as much, but seriously?!* I turned around to glare at the perpetrator who was now staring indifferently out the window. *This girl...*

It’d probably be at least another month until our seats were changed, so until then, I’d need to constantly watch my back while in class. I was at a clear disadvantage. I needed to come up with a counter strategy, and fast.

Then, there were our classmates who were observing us from afar.

“Is this really the time to be kicking my chair?” I asked.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Yume said, playing dumb.

“You should be pulling out all the stops to make friends. Wouldn’t you agree, Ms. High School Glow Up?”

“‘High School Glow Up’?!”

She might have been plainer than yogurt when we graduated middle school, but you couldn’t tell that by looking at her now. She had grown both physically and mentally. Basically, she was completely different from the Yume Ayai who gave me that love letter at the end of summer break, and now she’d entered a high school where she didn’t know anyone but me. *If this isn’t the epitome of a glow up, I don’t know what is.*

“You needn’t worry yourself, Mizuto-kun,” Yume said with a devilish smile. “After all, I’ve come prepared with the perfect tool.”

“Which middle school did you go to, Irido-san?”

“It was just a local public school—nothing too noteworthy,” Yume replied.

“What do you do for fun?”

“Reading, I suppose. Sorry it’s nothing too interesting,” Yume apologized.

“You had the highest score on the entrance exam, right?! How much did you study?”

“As much as I’d like to say that I didn’t spend too much time studying, I spent every last waking hour and every spare minute studying. I still can’t shake this feeling of freedom after studying so hard for it.”

I heard the loud noise of laughter behind me. Day one of school: Yume Irido has ascended to the very top of the class hierarchy.

After the entrance ceremony ended, we returned to our classroom and had a simple homeroom. And once that was over, the classmates who had kept their distance until now swarmed around her like bees to honey.

Yume put her so-called “perfect tool” to use during the entrance ceremony. What was that “perfect tool,” one might ask? Well, this girl was the freshman representative. Another way of putting it was that she had absolute proof that

she was *the* top student of our freshman class.

In a prep school where grades were everything, that proof endowed her with a very powerful status. Yume Irido was not a peasant that had to put in the effort to make friends. All she had to do was wait for them to flock to her.

But her status didn't bother me one bit; her grades on the other hand... *Dammit! How did she score higher than me?! Goddammit!*

Her title as "freshman representative" was such a bright point that it completely overshadowed the fact that we had the same last name. That worked for me, though.

I got out of my seat after practically being forced out by the growing group surrounding her desk. Both the entrance ceremony and homeroom were over, so I no longer had any reason to stay at school. I decided to say hi to our parents and then hurry home. After all, it wasn't like I *had* to go home at the same time as this girl. We weren't dating or anything.

For a second, I thought I felt Yume glance at me, but it must have been my imagination.

Hmph. Looks like you'll be able to make a lot of friends. How nice.

◇

After getting home, I holed up in my room and read a book. Before I knew it, the sun had set and it was night. Feeling thirsty, I decided to go get something to drink, and just as I was walking down the stairs, the front door opened.

"I'm home." It was Yume. By herself.

Our parents had been home for a while after our commencement ceremony that had ended hours ago. According to them, Yume went out with some classmates to have a get-together.

It really did seem like her glow up was working out for her. It was hard to believe that this was the same girl that couldn't find a partner in gym class.

Yume walked through the hall without saying a word, but when she passed me, she shot me a smug look. "Miss me?" she asked, letting out an annoying giggle.

“Huh?” I furrowed my brow at her, not remotely amused.

“I’m *so* sorry. I just simply don’t have any time to give you attention anymore.”

“Whatever. Don’t change anything on my account. Have fun when your phone starts blowing up with LINE messages.”

“Why yes, I think I will,” she said shortly before walking up the stairs.

Dammit. Why did she have to brag about her win like this? Furthermore, there was no reason why I would miss her whatsoever. Why would she even ask that?

◇

The next morning came, and I still couldn’t accept the reality of the situation.

“Irido! What middle school did you go to?”

“Uh, just your run of the mill public school,” I replied.

“Got any interests? You play any games?”

“Games? Not really...”

“How was the entrance exam? I bet it was easy. You are *her* brother after all!”

“Yeah, I think I did all right on it...”

What the hell? Why am I the one being surrounded now? This was a paranormal phenomenon. I came to school normally, and suddenly, this. Also, word had spread that Yume and I were stepsiblings. *Did she tell everyone during the get-together or whatever she went to yesterday?!*

That being said, though... The last time I was surrounded by this many people was in the maternity room when my mom gave birth to me. There were even *more* guys around me right now than there had been maternity nurses or doctors around my mom back then.

My head was spinning from the torrent of questions that were flooding in one after another. How was that girl able to deal with this torturous interrogation without breaking a sweat? What was she, some kind of trained spy?

As I started crumbling to pieces, Yume, who had chosen to come to school at

a different time than me, walked in. She greeted the girls and raised an eyebrow after seeing the crowd around me.

She walked to her seat behind me, put her bag down, sat down, and then...

Bang!

She kicked my chair. *Why?!* This must have been what it meant to be kicked and shoved around.

Maybe it was because we were at a prep school, but our first day of classes was not easy whatsoever. While most classes would just use the first day for orientation, we had real classes too—six full periods worth of them. But honestly, this was heaven compared to the hellish bombardment of questions I'd had to endure. *I love classes!*

As soon as lunchtime came around, I slipped out of the classroom and ran away. It was only after class had started that I discovered that more than half of the people who had interrogated me were from different classes. If they wanted to swarm me, they wouldn't be able to do so immediately. I saw my window of opportunity and took it.

I shut myself in a bathroom stall so that I could wait until things had calmed down. The toilet was a clean Western-style toilet, and it was much more comfortable than I expected. *Private schools are amazing.*

But seriously, what had I done to become so popular all of a sudden? It's not like I was trending on Twitter or anything. Was there something about me that was making me popular? The only thing I could come up with was the fact that I was the stepbrother of Yume Irido.

"Hey, you going there to have lunch too?"

"Yeah! I wanna get closer to her!"

I heard these voices from outside the stall I was in. *Here I thought that only girls gossip in the bathroom. Color me surprised.*

"Oh yeah, that girl is so cute, *and* she's top of our grade. How perfect can someone be?"

“Yeah, seriously! It was love at first sight when I saw that picture that’s been going around on LINE.”

Wait...top of our grade? Are they talking about that *girl? They should get their eyes checked if they think she’s cute.*

“So that’s why you’ve been trying to get close to her little brother? Just *talk* to her!”

“Nah, that’ll just get on her nerves. But if I use her brother, it’ll be a lot smoother, don’t you think?”

Huh?

“There’s a lot of guys who’ve got the same idea, though.”

“Isn’t her little brother kinda gloomy? Doesn’t really strike me as a guy who’s easy to get along with.”

“Maybe *you’re* just a pain in the ass.”

“Ah, screw you too, man. Ha ha ha!”

Oh, mystery solved. Basically, I was just a stepping stone for them to get closer to Yume with their impure intentions. *Well, well, well.* I left the bathroom stall I was in.

“Wha—”

“Scared the crap out of me!”

I ignored the two of them and left the bathroom.

“Wait, wasn’t that...”

“Ah—”

As I walked through the hallway, a number of guys walked up to me, or rather, tried cozying up to me. They excitedly tried to talk to me, but I just responded uninterestedly without giving it too much thought. If they were all genuinely trying to be my friend, I wouldn’t mind trying to be a little serious with my responses, but since they weren’t, there was no point in running away and hiding anymore.

◇

Later that night after I finished dinner, I took my dishes to the sink to wash them. Yume had apparently finished eating as well and was standing next to me at the sink. For a while, the only sound between us was the running of the water, but eventually, Yume spoke in what was practically a whisper.

"Aren't you mad?"

"About what?"

"You know what." She furrowed her brow in annoyance.

"You mean about the swarm of people?"

"Yeah."

Word really travels fast among girls.

"They're taking you for a fool," she continued.

"Definitely."

"They don't have the courage to speak to me directly, so they're trying to use you since you don't seem threatening. But when things don't go their way, they just make stuff up about you. I don't like that at all."

"I don't really care how you feel. As long as you don't date them, it doesn't really matter what they do. It's a high-risk, low-return situation. You're smart enough to know that it's not worth the trouble."

"Don't you care what happens to you?! You're—" Yume started to get very heated, but she shut her mouth before saying any more. She'd completely stopped washing the dishes, as had I, but the water from the faucet continued to run.

"I'm what?" I asked quietly.

Yume froze in place for a moment, but after a while, she began scrubbing the dishes again with the sponge. "Forget it."

◇

It was now the morning of our third day as high schoolers. Yume and I had decided yesterday that we'd go to school at different times, but that decision didn't last a day.

“Let’s go to school together today, Mizuto-kun,” Yume said in a kind voice.

Gross. This thought reflexively popped in my head, but I couldn’t very well have said it out loud. Especially not with our parents both right in front of us, sitting here at the dining table.

“You two really are such good friends!”

“Ha ha ha, I hope she’s teaching you how to treat a girl well, Mizuto.”

Yume just smiled in response to their comments. Obviously, she had asked me because she knew full well that I couldn’t refuse in front of our parents. *What are you playing at?* I shot her a gaze of distrust, but it was promptly reflected by her perfectly constructed smile.

Just like that, we left the house together. As we walked to school, I kept glaring at her in an effort to figure out what her plan was, but her face was calm and collected and showed no traces of trickery. *What are you thinking?*

There were only fifty meters until the school gate. We were beginning to see more and more students, and I was still feeling very uncertain about this entire situation. Even back in the day, this was as far as we’d go before we would break off to go in separately.

I had no idea why she proposed that we go to school together, but there was no way that she did that with the intention of us walking all the way to the classroom buddy-buddy. *Right about now, she’ll—* But my thoughts soon came to a screeching halt. Why? I’d love to know the reason, myself. I’d love to know why this girl just smoothly wrapped her arms around one of mine!

“Wh-What are you doing?!”

“Shut up,” she said in a whisper while continuing to walk with me, holding on to my arm. The only option left to me was to be dragged along by her like this. I could feel people’s gazes. Duh. The freshman rep—the talk of the school—was walking, holding the arm of a guy first thing in the morning!

S-Seriously, what is this girl thinking?! I don’t remember you being this brazen when we were dating! As I feared, we continued walking like this through the school gate—right into the belly of the beast, where there were even more students. Any boy and girl walking to school with their arms linked would stand

out, not just us.

“Oh, what’s up, Mizuto-kun?!”

“Let’s hang— Huh?”

Just like yesterday, the guys who were trying to become my friend to get close to Yume began swarming around me, but they soon stopped in their tracks. I didn’t blame them. After all, the guy that they were trying to use as a stepping stone was, right now, literally the closest a person could be to the very girl they wanted to get close to.

Speaking of which, she was squeezing my arm very tightly, pulling her body even closer to mine. *Agh, my arm is touching* them*! Goddammit! They’re so soft, you idiot! You grew too much, you stupid shrimp!*



“I’m sorry,” Yume said with such a bright smile that I couldn’t help but be dazzled by it. The guys around us just stood there, stunned stiff. “As you can see, I am currently having a conversation with Mizuto, so would you be so kind as to not interrupt?”

The guys gaped at us, their fingers pointing back and forth between me and Yume.

“Irido-san?”

“D-Does this mean that...”

“You two are siblings, aren’t you?!”

“Yes.” In that moment, Yume’s smile was the epitome of fierce. “Sorry, I only have eyes for my brother—I’m a brother lover.”

I froze. The guys around us completely shut down. The rest of the gallery watching this scene was abuzz with commotion.

“Got it? Bye.” She left these pointed words as the last thing these frozen guys would hear before she walked away while pulling me along with her. I only unfroze when she let go of my arm once we entered the school building.

“Wh-What were you *thinking*?!”

“What? Now those guys’ll leave you alone.”

“Well, yeah, no freaking duh!” *You just told all those guys with a crush on you that you’re only interested in your stepbrother!*

“It’s okay, I’ll explain the situation to my friends.”

“That’s not the issue here! You were so popular with everyone—”

“You *are* my family, you know?” Yume whispered while averting her gaze. “I can’t stand seeing a member of my family being taken for a fool. It’s as simple as that. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Is she for real?! Agh, goddammit! Sheesh, I can’t just write this off as a joke if you speak from the heart like that. So that’s why, as reluctant as I was, I tried to put my honest feelings into words as best as I could.

“Thanks. I owe you one.”

Just from hearing those words, Yume's shoulders shook slightly. It wasn't the kind of response you'd expect from someone being thanked.

"What the hell? Here I am, thanking you from the bottom of my heart, and you're reacting like that?"

"I'm reacting normally!" Yume completely turned away from me and began walking towards the classroom by herself, but then she suddenly turned around and stared intently at my arm.

"So..."

"What?" I asked.

"J-Just erase whatever memory of what you might have felt pressing against your arm!"

"Oh..." Out of reflex, I touched the part of my arm that her breasts had been pressed against.

"Hngh!" Yume's face turned bright red and she covered her chest.

Huh? Wait, what?

"Y-You closet pervert!" Yume hurled a baseless insult at me before running off.

What's with her all of a sudden? While I was left dumbfounded, I found myself squeezing my arm for no apparent reason. *Oh.*

"Phantom boobs, huh?" There was no such thing.

◇

After a turbulent morning and the uneventful morning classes, it was lunchtime. A guy came up to me.

"Yo, how's it going, Mizuto Irido? Wanna eat together?"

I didn't expect that there would be any guy left standing after Yume's brother complex declaration. I looked up annoyedly at the person who was talking to me.

He had a frivolous impression to him. In this school that was so difficult to get into, he had bright hair and a light perm as if he was issuing some sort of

challenge. He was on the taller side and had a physique that made me think that he played basketball or something.

The meaningful smile that was plastered on his face annoyed me a little, but he gave off a feel of not being too serious and not too flirtatious yet also slightly flirtatious at the same time. In other words, I was sure that he was the popular type.

I couldn't remember if this guy was in the crowd of people thirsting after Yume yesterday or not, but he seemed familiar to me, so he was most likely a classmate. Either way, though, my answer to him would be the same no matter what.

"Sorry, but I have two answers to your question," I said.

"Sure, lay 'em on me."

"First, I already ate."

"Aw, dang."

"Second, there's no way I'm going to let a blatantly frivolous guy like you close to Yume."

After I firmly laid down my points of rejection, an unpleasant smile crept across his face. *What?*

"All right then, let me say two things in response. I'll let you in on a little secret."

"Hm?"

"First, even if I wanted to get close to Irido-san, I wouldn't start by talking to you."

"Huh?!"

"Second, I think she heard what you said." He pointed his finger to the side. Standing there was Yume, who had just gotten back from lunch.

Um... The words I'd just said to him kept replaying over and over in my head. *"There's no way I'm going to let a blatantly frivolous guy like you close to Yume?!" What am I, her boyfriend?!*

As much as I wanted to believe that her face was redder than usual just because of the lighting, I couldn't ignore how her eyes were unnaturally darting around.

She then began moving in a weird way. It was somewhat nostalgic seeing her like this. She moved her hands in a panic for some unknown reason before walking as unnaturally as a robot to her seat behind me. And then...

Bang! Bang! Bang!

She kicked my chair. *Three* times.

"Bwa ha ha!" The guy whose name I didn't even know suddenly burst out in laughter. I didn't understand what was so funny. Was it that entertaining seeing me being abused by my sibling?

"Oh god, ha ha ha! I knew I sniffed out something fun. My nose was right on the money!"

"Huh? Your nose?"

"Don't worry about it," he said, wiping tears from his eyes from laughing too much before stretching his hand out to me.

"My name's Kogure Kawanami. I'm the first guy here who really just wants to be your friend."

"Are you being serious? This sounds extremely fishy."

"Don't be like that, bro!"

"I don't remember becoming your 'bro.'"

"Huh? I thought you were good at becoming siblings with people you don't know."

"No, if anything I'd say it's *not* my strong suit."

"Oh, is that right? Then let's be friends!" The guy named Kogure Kawanami very pushily squeezed my hands.

It would seem that I've befriended a very annoying guy.

"Well then, my dear friend—" he started.

“You’re already calling me a dear friend?”

“How about I tell you something fun? Y’know, as a way to commemorate the day we became friends.”

“Something fun?” I asked.

“If you turn around right now, you’ll see something *real* nice,” Kawanami said with another unpleasant smile.

Behind me? I turned around.

“...”

Behind me was Yume. Pouting. Her lips were slightly bent downwards into a frown, and she was looking far out into the distance.

Excuse me? It only took my galaxy brain an instant to come up with the perfect phrase to say.

“Miss me, my dear brother-loving sister?”

Bang. My chair was kicked again. That was possibly the strongest kick yet.

The Ex-Girlfriend Gets Measured

“You smell like sweat...”

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called boyfriend during eighth and ninth grade.

I’d always thought he was like a great detective straight out of a mystery novel—calm, intelligent, kind, and handsome. But try as I might, I can’t forget my impression of him. *I’m sure that this was just a trick of misdirection that came from an unreliable narrator: my past self.*

The only thing he actually had in common with a great detective was the fact that dandruff would fall from his head if he scratched it. If he fell down the Reichenbach Falls to his death, there’s no way he would miraculously come back to life.

Allow me to recount an episode that fully displays how hopeless he is. When we were dating, my past self—the complete and unequivocal loner Yume Ayai—dreaded the torture that would periodically occur several times a week. This specific torture was called gym class.

“All right everyone, pair up.”

Was there any command more evil than this? Just the words themselves sounded like the seventh trumpet of the apocalypse. I would miserably dart all around the gym in a panic like some kind of pariah, and in the end, I’d wind up with some unlucky person who failed to pair up with a buddy. This was the hell that I had to endure. Just thinking about it makes my blood boil.

In eighth grade, I was in the same class as that guy, but because boys and girls were more often than not separated into different activities, I never really paid attention to what he was doing in gym class until we started dating. I had been observing him for a while during other classes and during our break periods, though.

Wait, forget that.

A-Anyway. I got curious about what he'd be doing during the first gym class we had after we started dating. He was so smart, kind, and dependable (or at least, that's what I was tricked into thinking) that I couldn't help but wonder if he was just as talented physically. He was already such a flawless guy—there was *no way* he wasn't athletic as well.

I want to see. I wanted to see my boyfriend crushing it in sports. The day I decided to do that, the boys were playing soccer and were split into two teams—red and white. On the other hand, the girls were playing tennis, but there weren't enough courts for everyone to play at the same time. Using that as an excuse, a group of them went to watch the boys play soccer while they waited for courts to open up.

As they watched, they shouted their words of encouragement with the same energy as if they were the team manager. It was like they were imitating some kind of mating ritual.

"Go, go! You got this!"

Shut up. What exactly do those guys "got"? Why are they even trying so hard in gym class of all things? Stop fussing over guys who aren't even your boyfriends! What impudence!

But among those screeching girls, the most impudent of them all was me, the girl trying to hide her cheering. After all, I was secretly cheering for the guy that I was secretly dating, so in terms of impudence, I was a cut above them all.

I had a rampant fantasy where I'd run out and give him a clean towel. But it didn't stop there. It would progress to the point where he'd slam his arm against the wall of the back of the school, trapping me there with the smell of his sweat-drenched body filling my nose. What happened to the girl who hated those kinds of clichéd adolescent tales?

However, unfortunately—no, fortunately—there was no opportunity for that fantasy to play out whatsoever. That guy—my boyfriend—was not in the game even for a second. By the time the match ended, there was not even a single drop of sweat on his face, which was only natural since he just stood in the right corner of the field emitting an aura that screamed "don't come near me." It was

a revolutionary defensive formation that the soccer world had never seen before.

After the match, he calmly walked away from the circle of people as if nothing had happened and sat in the shade of a tree at the edge of the grounds.

I quietly approached him from behind and asked, “Are you not much of a sports person, Irido-kun?”

His shoulders twitched, and he slowly turned around to look at me.

“You were watching?”

“Should I not have?”

“No, it’s more like...” His eyes ran away from mine, and an expression of embarrassment filled his face. I couldn’t help but smile after seeing his reaction.

“Oh, so you’re not good at sports either, Irido-kun?”

“Why do you look so happy?”

“I’m not sure. I guess I’m just happy to have something in common with you.”

Despite the reality of things, I’d believed my boyfriend to be some kind of perfect superhuman. That image of him most likely came to me because he never showed any weaknesses in front of me, possibly out of some kind of manly pride.

“You’re really cute, Irido-kun.” The words just slipped out the moment I thought them.

He hung his head, hiding his face from me. “Personally, I’d rather be ‘cool’ than ‘cute.’”

Even though I was standing behind him, no matter how much he tried to hide his face, I could easily tell that he was embarrassed from his well-shaped ears that were now dyed red.

No matter how much this cold-blooded, expressionless guy tried to put on airs out of some kind of pointless pride, it didn’t change that he was just a normal guy. He wasn’t a hero like Sherlock Holmes. No, he had his own flaws just like I did. In the end, he was just a normal human being that had fallen in

love with me.

Knowing that made my past self happy for some reason. My present self thinks she'd be better off if she fixed her preferences so that she wasn't into unathletic string beans.

◇

"Hm... Eighty-one centimeters? Wow," the nurse said with surprise as she eyed the measuring tape that she'd wrapped around my chest. "I've measured a lot of high school girls in my time, but I think this is the first time I've been *this* jealous of someone's three sizes. What beautiful breasts! I wish I had them..."

"Um, can I go now?" I asked, exiting the curtains in an attempt to get away from the nurse who was, for some reason, praying to my breasts as if she were at a shrine.

I've never really liked having my body measurements taken. I'd had a complex about how short I was for so long that I still get depressed just being in the nurse's office.

I reflexively sighed while grabbing my gym tracksuit that I'd left in the corner of the room. This wasn't good. If I was stressed from something this mild, there was no way that I'd be able to handle the rest of the troublesome things waiting for me.

I froze as I was happily about to put my jacket over my gym shirt. There was a small-framed girl with a ponytail who was about ten centimeters shorter than me, intently staring at my breasts in very close proximity. She was examining them from various angles, her eyes as wide as plates. Kinda terrifying how she didn't even blink once.

I would have called the police if this was someone I didn't know, but for better or worse, I *did* know this girl.

"M-Minami-san? Is something the matter?" I asked, taking a step away from her and covering my chest.

She returned to her senses, took a step back from me, and nervously laughed while smiling brightly. "Oh man, I was *just* thinking about how dainty you are! But hey, at least you're *totally* packin'! Look at mine in contrast," she said,

patting her modest chest more times than she probably should have.

Her name was Akatsuki Minami, and she was one of the people I was closest with since school began. She was best described as a naturally happy person—cheerful, outgoing, and cute like an innocent little critter. Had we met in middle school, I doubt we'd have been able to maintain a friendship, because I would not have been able to handle her overwhelming kindness.

"Every year I think that it's gonna be my year, but I just haven't grown at all. Having my measurements taken always bums me out..." She sighed.

"Yeah, seriously. I completely understand. Up until last year, I didn't grow even a little bit."

"Huh? You had a shrimpy phase too, Irido-san?"

"I was probably about the same size as you last year."

"No way! You grew *this* much in one year?! B-By the way, could I possibly inquire as to what your bra size is?"

"I don't know why you're talking like that, but...I don't think it's *that* big."

I bent my knees slightly and whispered my answer into Minami-san's ears. As soon as she heard what I said, her eyes widened.

"A D cup?!"

"J-Just so you know, I'm simply wearing a slightly larger one than I need to."

"You are my beacon of hope, Irido-san!" She suddenly jumped onto me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

This made me flustered as I was not used to how intense her physical intimacy was. No matter how much I improved my personality, I could never be like her.

"Maybe if I keep sticking to you like this, your growth will rub off on me. 'He that touches pitch shall be defiled,' right?"

"I'm sorry to burst your bubble, but I don't think that means what you think it means. Can you let go now?" My face was starting to burn. I wished that she wouldn't rub against my face like some kind of friendly cat.

But still, I myself wondered why my growth spurt had come so suddenly. Perhaps it had something to do with hormones? It may not have been a coincidence that my growth spurt began around the time that I was secreting the most hormones I ever had in my life.

Though we hadn't planned it, the two of us ended up leaving the nurse's office together and headed back to the gymnasium while excitedly talking about our measurements. Next up on the list were the indoor and outdoor physical tests.

As we walked through the hall, Minami-san made sounds indicating that she was pondering something. She continued to observe my tracksuit-wearing body, her ponytail swaying from side to side.

"It's so easy to put on weight, but both your hips and legs are so slender! You must do so much to keep yourself in shape, Irido-san!"

"Y-Yeah..."

"So what do you do? Sports?"

"U-Uh, yeah..." I froze my face into a superficial smile.

I didn't really want to brag and say that for the last year, all the nutrition went to my height and breasts. I was sure she'd say that I was full of myself.

"I'm not a big fan of physical activity. I'm really not looking forward to the fitness test. You're so lucky! I bet you're really athletic," Minami-san said, envious.

"N-Not really..."

"I bet you are! Jeez, I can't believe that we still hafta do these stupid fitness tests in a prep school of all places! It's a tough world out here for the vertically challenged."

I just nodded in agreement without really thinking about it, but internally I was becoming more and more anxious. I had changed my personality. I had changed my appearance. I had shed the metaphorical skin of my past self and transformed into a much-improved version of myself in every aspect except...my athleticism.

My doubts were growing. Why couldn't they respect our privacy on the fitness test like they did with our measurements? Why were they forcing me to make a fool of myself with my horrible coordination in front of everyone? This was almost like public shaming for their own entertainment, putting ungainly people on display as if they were clowns. *What an unfair world. It deserves to perish.*

At some point, we'd arrived at the gymnasium. Maybe it was because I'd been too focused on repeating curses in my head, but I hadn't noticed at all.

"Oh, the guys are still here," Minami-san said, leaning inside.

The times for the fitness tests and body measurements were separated and scheduled by class year and gender. The first-year boys went before us, the first-year girls. It seemed that the guys who had finished the outdoor fitness tests were now doing the indoor ones.

In the midst of those guys, there was one that I knew very well. I saw him every day in the house I lived in, but right now, I pretended not to notice him.

"All right, Irido-san, let's get this over with quickly!"

"Yes, let's." *Before any other girls show up.*

I am Yume Irido. I am intelligent and beautiful—the perfect high school girl that everyone knows. I'd spent a lot of effort making this image for myself, and I wasn't about to let it get broken. To that end, I had secretly trained so that I could at least produce average results.

Of course, there was no way that my body with the athleticism of a potato could become some kind of exceptional athlete with just some last-minute training. It would, however, enable me to get through a few of the fitness tests without humiliating myself. Though I wouldn't be breaking any records, I was confident that I could at least perform at the level of an average high school girl.

All I could do after that was pray that there were other girls like me who were completely unathletic. This is why I felt incredibly lucky that I was with Minami-san, a fellow unathletic person...or so I thought.

"Whoa, check it out!"

“Is that Minami? Holy crap!”

“How is she so fast?!”

“She’s like a rabbit!”

“Did she really just do fifty-five side jumps?!”

“She did more than me!”

“Aw man,” Minami said, walking over to me without even breaking a sweat. “I thought for sure I coulda done a li’l better than that.”

Liar! What do you mean *you’re not good with physical activities?! How could you lie to me like that?! How could you show off your perfect athleticism in front of someone who is a bona fide unathletic klutz?!*

“Um, Minami-san, I could have sworn you said something about not being good at physical activities?”

“I said that I’m not a *fan* of ’em, but I didn’t say that I wasn’t *good* at ’em. It’s not fun when you’re a shrimp *and* a girl, but you’re more athletic than the guys. You get made fun of, y’know?”

This was another act of misdirection from an unreliable narrator. *What do you mean “y’know”?! No, I don’t know! Don’t talk to me about common sense that comes from a different world than mine!*

There was no mistake. This girl, Akatsuki Minami, was the type of person who would ask if I wanted to go run a marathon for fun! *Damn you! I should never have trusted a person who was born a social butterfly!*

“You’re up next, Irido-san. Break a leg!”

Was she hiding some kind of sinister plot underneath that bright, innocent-looking smile of hers? Did she already figure out that I’m not athletic? *Oh no... I’m so scared. Normies are so scary!*

As I stood over the middle line for the side jumps, I internally cowered in fear like a poor, helpless critter. As I did, I saw the figure of my little stepbrother (and the guy that I’ve been hanging out with a lot recently) doing sit-ups in front of the gymnasium stage.

“You ready, Irido? Ready, g—”

“Uncle,” he said.

“This isn’t that kind of sport!”

That guy really has no motivation at all. Of course, the students around him snickered, while the gym teacher glared at him. Even so, he just continued to lay there with the same indifferent expression.

The guy who was holding his feet for him (I believe his name was Kawanami-kun) began pulling on his arms, forcing him to sit up. While one could technically call this a “sit-up,” it was definitely not *him* doing it. Like this, the only thing that could be measured here was Kawanami-kun’s stamina.

I won’t be like that. I swore to myself that I wouldn’t. That’s what all my training these past few weeks had been for. I’d tried my best at training my muscles even though I wasn’t used to it, and I’d even thoroughly read through a sports science book. I had spent all of last night reviewing everything until morning, so truth be told, my head was a little dizzy from sleep deprivation and fatigue.

It’s go time!

I psyched myself up by using the pathetic display from my little stepbrother as fuel. In the end, I did pretty decently on the side jumps, the seated forward bend, and the sit-ups. I didn’t do so well on the grip strength test, but that was a problem with my muscle strength, so there wasn’t really much I could do about it.

“Irido-san, you did so well!” Minami-san showered me with such genuine praise that I felt ashamed for having doubted her.

“Y-Yeah, well, you know...” It took everything I had to even make an awkward smile.

I-I’m so tired... I felt especially fatigued right now. Maybe it was because I had used up too much stamina despite being sleep-deprived. I was getting worried about whether or not I would be able to hold up in the outdoor fitness tests.

I just needed to persevere a little longer and then, after everything was over, I

could go home and sleep. As I exited the gymnasium, a little unsteady on my feet, I thought I caught a glimpse of my little stepbrother, who had finished redoing his sit-ups, looking at me.

Standing long jump, shot put, and then the fifty-meter dash—these were the subjects of the outdoor fitness test. One tortuous subject in particular—the PACER fitness test—was not on today's menu, but instead scheduled for a later date. Just thinking about the ruthless electronic bell that signals you to run to the other side makes me so sick I want to throw up. My strategy was to give up as soon as possible.

I did my best to make sure I didn't fall flat on my butt in the standing long jump, used centrifugal force to my advantage for the shot put, and ended up not doing too bad. In contrast, Minami-san's results were high enough to embarrass even the guys. *I wonder what it's like to have people cheer for you during the fitness test. I can't even imagine.*

My exhaustion was finally nearing its boiling point as I walked around under the rays of the spring sun. I just wanted to jump into bed and pass out. I tried to suppress that feeling by hydrating with some cold water, because it was finally time for the main event: the fifty-meter dash.

"See you soon." Minami-san seemed like she was still full of energy with the way she was standing in front of me at the start line. She even had the perfect posture for a crouch start. As soon as the signal was given, she zoomed off before anyone else even could move, and easily crossed the finish line first.

"S-Seven point three seconds!" shouted the girl doing timekeeping. Everyone watching went wild. Minami-san casually got the fastest time.

Seriously, what about exercise did she not like? Girls can't be trusted.

As Minami-san was being surrounded by upperclassmen who looked like they were on the track-and-field team, I took my position at the starting line.

I tried to regulate my breathing. As long as I remembered everything I studied and practiced, I'd be fine. I just had to get through this, and then I'd be done. This was all that was standing in the way of my well-deserved rest.

“On your mark, get set... Go!”

I kicked the ground. My form, my arm movement, every step I took—I was conscious of everything I was doing and recreating my ideal running form. I could feel my body moving at a speed that I couldn’t have even comprehended a year ago. *I really* can *do it if I try!* Even if all my preparations were just temporary solutions, I was different from that guy who wouldn’t even put in the effort to try.

I was no longer the same as him—I was *better* than him now. The people I was running with faded from my view, and the goal grew closer and closer to me. *Ten meters left.* I leaned forward and kicked the ground even harder. *Just a little more. Just a little more. Just a little!*

I crossed the finish line. My legs, which were already past their limits, crumpled underneath me. I was completely out of breath and couldn’t even say a single word. All I could do was gasp for air while looking at the timekeeper.

“Eight point five seconds!”

It was the fastest time in my life. As much as I wanted to get excited about it, there was something more pressing and overwhelming...

“It’s finally over...”

Suddenly, I couldn’t tell which way was up and which way was down.

Huh? No way. This is bad. I’m so dizzy. Where is the ground?

“Whoa, there.”

When my sense of direction recovered, I could tell that my body was being supported by somebody’s arm without even a little bit of muscle. The arm that was stretched across my back, supporting me by holding my shoulder, was very thin, but even so, it was doing so without even the slightest hint of strain. It was a strong arm.

“Good job,” a familiar voice whispered in my ear. “But don’t push yourself like this again.”

I opened my eyelids slightly to glance at the voice and I was greeted with a familiar sulky face near mine, but it also looked like there was some anger

there. At that moment, I could only nuzzle my face into his shoulder.

He lightly patted my back as one would a child to comfort them. It was almost like he was saying “you really tried hard,” and it became even harder for me to show him my face. My body felt like it was on fire. *You smell like sweat.*

“Irido-san! You good?!”

It was Minami-san. Suddenly, I felt my body being violently thrown to her—a complete one-eighty to how I was being treated before she arrived.

“Agh!”

It seemed that my unsteady body was now being supported by Minami-san.

The guy who had so carelessly tossed me just said, “Thanks for taking over,” before turning his back and quickly leaving the schoolyard. Neither myself, Minami-san, nor the other students who had finished the fitness test and gathered around could do anything but watchMizuto Irido’s back, dumbfounded, as he walked away.

“Didn’t Irido-kun already finish the outdoor fitness test?” Minami-san whispered after Mizuto had completely disappeared from my vision.

She was absolutely right. The guys had started the fitness test earlier than us and had begun with the outdoor portion, so there shouldn’t have been any boys outside while we were. But if that was the case, then why was he here?

Mizuto Irido was by no means a hero. He could not come back from the dead, and he would never save a complete stranger. I repeated this over and over in my head as if it was a chant. There was absolutely no way that Mizuto Irido could be a hero...for anyone else but me.

◇

Minami-san brought me to the nurse’s office. Everyone else had already had their measurements taken, so no one was there except the two of us. I told her I was just a little dizzy, but she insisted that I rest, saying, “Being even a little dizzy means you’re not okay!” So she dragged me over without me being able to put even one word of protest in.

I lay down on the pure-white bed and shut my eyes, I could feel all my fatigue

dissolve from my body. I must have been much more tired than I'd realized. *Mom remarried, we moved to a new house, I gained new family members, and I became a high school student... I guess my environment's really changed quite a bit.*

"Sorry, Irido-san, I didn't notice how tired you were at all."

"No, don't worry about it. It was my fault for trying to put on airs when I had no place doing so."

"'Put on airs'?"

Perhaps it was because I saw that guy just being himself, but I came clean to Minami-san and told her the truth about how unathletic I was, and how I'd trained for the fitness test so people wouldn't find out.

I didn't get the feeling that Minami-san was the type of person who would stop being my friend after hearing this. She may have lost a little respect for me, but there was no way around that. I might have completely changed from who I was last year, but there were still one or two parts of me that I couldn't change. *At least I* did *change, unlike that guy who hasn't changed one bit.*

Minami-san chuckled. I had expected her to be disappointed, but there wasn't even a shadow of that in her face. She instead met my confession with a bright smile. "I feel like I've gotten a lot closer to you now."

"Huh? Why?"

"To be honest, you're not an easy person to approach. You're beautiful, smart—you just seem so far outta reach. But now I get it. You're actually a total klutz and were just putting on airs."

"Are you trying to pick a fight? Is this the part where I get mad?"

"Sure. I wanna see you mad too!"

"Okay then. Ahem. Q-Quiet, you!" I reached over the side of the bed to where Minami-san was and lightly chopped her on her forehead. I really wasn't used to getting mad at people.

"Bah ha ha ha! 'Quiet, you'?! You're so cute!"

"S-Stop laughing... I was already embarrassed halfway through saying it," I

said, sliding deeper into the sheets to hide my face. I really was lacking in experience with a whole slew of things.

"Hey, Irido-san!" I could see Minami-san's shadow through the thin sheets of the bed. "Can I call you 'Yume-chan'?" she asked while trying to make eye contact with me.

M-My first name?! This is the first time I've had a friend call me by my first name... This might actually be the first time that anyone *outside my family has* ever *called me by my first name. Oh my god, this is kind of unnerving.*

"Um, earth to Yume-chan. Yume-chan? So, can I call ya Yume-chan or not?"

I wriggled around under the sheets before peering out just slightly to meet Minami-san's curious face.

"F-Fine. Go ahead. P-Please do..." I said, doing my best to keep my voice steady.

Then a new thought crossed my mind. If she was calling me by my first name, shouldn't I call her by hers? *Okay. Okay, okay, okay! I'm gonna do it! I'm gonna say it! This is just another step for my personal growth!*

"A...ka..."

O-Oh god, calling a friend by their first name is somehow so *embarrassing! It's like we're best friends or something! I feel so guilty... We only just met last week!*

I kept trying to say her name, but it ultimately came out as if my PTSD was triggered and I was remembering some kind of traumatic event, and all I could do was say "a" and "ka." Aka—Minami-san was smiling with amusement at me for some reason.

"Hey, it's okay! Just take your time getting used to saying it." She put her hand on my head and stroked my hair as a mother would do for her child.

Is she making fun of me?!

"I look forward to our continued friendship, Minami-san."

"Aw man, you're not gonna call me by my first name?! Also, why are you speaking so formally?!"

We looked at each other and then began laughing, our shoulders shaking as we did so. *Wow, I... I made a friend.*

◇

I felt a lot better after resting in bed for a while, and I was confident that I could at least change and go home, so I left the nurse's office with Minami-san. Since we were still wearing our gym clothes, we headed past the school entrance to the changing room. As we did, we saw a guy in a blazer walking down the stairs.

"Ah."

"..."

It was Mizuto Irido. He obviously made no effort to hide his crooked necktie and stared at me in silence. *He saved me earlier, didn't he?* He shouldn't have had any reason to be outside with us. In all likelihood, he'd noticed that I wasn't feeling well and followed me from the gym.

I should at least say thank you. It's only good manners—you know, common sense. Yeah, that's right. It was obvious that I should thank him. *All right.* I steeled my will and opened my mouth.

"So, earlier—"

"Your eyes." He spoke before I could and pointed at my eyes. "You've got bags under them."

"H-Huh?! You've gotta be kidding me!" I frantically pulled out my phone in place of a pocket mirror, but then...

"Yep." He shot me a teasing smirk and walked away towards the shoe lockers.

Huh?! Excuse me?! What is his problem*?! I thought he was being nice for once, and then he just lies to me for no reason?!* I groaned in annoyance, but then I remembered that he was just that kind of guy. He loved seeing me in distress more than anything else. He was the scum of the earth.

He probably—no, *definitely* only came out of the gymnasium to watch and laugh as I failed at putting on airs of being athletic. *What an evil guy! I am* so *glad we broke up!*

As I angrily gazed at my little stepbrother walking away, Minami-san leaned in.

“Irido-kun is so nice to you, Yume-chan,” she whispered.

“Huh? How?!”

“Hm, how indeed?” Minami-san said in a singsong voice as she waltzed down the hall. I could only tilt my head in confusion as she went on her way, her ponytail bobbing after her.

The Ex-Boyfriend Nurses Back to Health

“You got it.”

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called girlfriend during eighth and ninth grade. Every time I reflect on this part of my life, I can’t help but think that no matter how wonderful the human mind is at forgetting things, it has a huge flaw that can’t be ignored.

Despite wanted knowledge easily slipping through the cracks, unwanted knowledge remains firmly in one’s mind. This has to be some kind of defect. If abnormalities in a living being’s functions are called sicknesses, then humans are born filled with such maladies. I might’ve phrased that in a way that makes it sound like the musings of a philosopher from days long past, but the topic is relevant. After all, today’s story deals with sickness.

“Sickness” in this context does not refer to some kind of life-threatening disease from my childhood—that never happened to me. I’ll instead leave that kind of situation for some stereotypically beautiful-yet-frail girl who appears perfectly healthy at first glance. No, the afflicting “malady” I’m talking about was just a common cold, and the one afflicted hadn’t been me, but *that* girl, Yume Irido.

This had happened back in November of eighth grade. The cold of winter had silently crept up on us, making for a bone-chilling morning for Ayai and me to meet up before school at our usual spot. The only problem was that there was no sign of her at all.

I, being the extremely nice guy that I was back then, tried texting her out of concern. That’s when I found out that she was staying home because she’d caught a cold. I let her know that I hoped she felt better and walked to school by myself for the first time in what felt like forever.

Back then, our school was still stuck in the past, using god knows how much paper instead of just going paperless. I firmly believed that they should have

sent printouts through email so nobody'd ever lose them, but on that particular day, I was happy they were still passing out physical copies.

"Is there anyone who can deliver these printouts to Ayai?" our homeroom teacher asked as the school day ended.

Of course, no one spoke up. These kinds of menial tasks were typically left to the class representative, but this was anything *but* a "menial task" in my eyes. The fact that we were actively hiding our relationship might've bit me in the ass at that moment, but I was still my clever self.

That's why as soon as our homeroom teacher asked for a volunteer, I was able to come up with the perfect excuse that would make me the perfect candidate to take the printouts to her house.

"Um... Her house is on my way home."

Thinking back, it was just an average, run-of-the-mill excuse, but at least it gave me a legitimate reason to go see Ayai—everything was in place for the "sick visit" event.

When I arrived, I looked up at the number of the apartment I had arrived at per my homeroom teacher's directions. I was filled with anxiety. *What if nobody else is home? Should I just give her the printouts and leave? Nuh-uh. No way. Ayai only has her mom. She's probably home alone right now. I bet she's lonely.*

Whenever I'd catch a cold, I'd always be left by myself at home, so I really sympathized with how she must've been feeling. Part of me wanted to surprise her by ringing the doorbell, but I knew better than to surprise a sick person. Instead, I pulled out my phone and messaged her.

Yume: What?! I-Irido-kun? Y-You're here?! In front of my door?!

Oops, guess I surprised her anyway. I was happy she had the energy to be surprised, though. It was a good sign. I thought she'd open the door for me right then and there, but...

Yume: J-Just give me a minute—no, a second!

Me: Are you getting changed?

Yume: O-Of course I am!

Me: You have a fever, so don't worry about how you look. It doesn't matter to me.

If one were to put what I'd said into MizutoTranslate, it'd come out as: "I want to see you in your pajamas."

Die in your adolescence, past me.

But convincing her not to change had been worth it, because the next moment, there was Ayai standing in the doorway, outfitted in her pastel-pink pajamas. She was so goddamn cute—*ahem*—I mean, yeah, she looked pretty normal. There was nothing at all special about her pajamas, but they did suit her well.

Of course, I didn't just give her the printouts and leave. No, I was very eager to do a lot of things for her while she rested in bed. My definition of "a lot of things" in this situation basically amounted to peeling an apple and helping her sip a sports drink. I would like to take this moment to strongly insist that I did *not* wipe down her body or anything like that! I'm serious—nothing like that happened at all!

There wasn't really much left for me to do after all that, so I spent most of my time sitting by her bed. Just as I was thinking that I should leave soon since Ayai's mom would probably be coming home early, Ayai peered at me from under the covers, her face still red from the fever.

"Irido-kun?"

"Oh, is there something else I can do for you?"

"Um, well..."

For a while, it looked like she was squirming around under the covers, but soon enough she popped out her hand and said, "I-It might make me happy if you held my hand..."

Of course, her request didn't even come close to making my heart beat a hundred times faster (it was beating at a perfectly normal rate!), but I understood where she was coming from. When people get sick, especially when they're home alone, they become a little more vulnerable than usual and yearn for another human's warmth.

“You got it.” I squeezed Ayai’s hand. It was small and hot—almost like the hand of a baby.

“Heh heh.” Ayai let out a sheepish but happy laugh and slowly began nodding off. Eventually, my ears were caressed by the gentle sound of her breathing as she slept. I won’t lie or make any kind of excuse—all my past self wanted to do right then, right there was hold her hand like that forever.

Unfortunately, there was a very real problem I was already aware of. If I had indeed continued sitting there, holding Ayai’s hand like that forever, I would inevitably run into her mom. It would spell trouble if she came home only to find that a guy had snuck into the apartment where her only daughter lay.

After listening to her sleep for about half an hour, I very regrettably let go of her hand and left the Ayai household. Thinking back on it, I think I left at the perfect time because I’m almost certain that, on my way home, I passed by Yuni-san. I really cut it close, but it all worked out.

◇

“Huh? Now that I think about it, where’s Irido-san?” asked Kogure Kawanami, surveying the classroom while waltzing right up to me as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

I figured that he’d ask me something like this, though, so I already had an answer prepared.

“Her? She’s sick at home, sleeping.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. Well, her environment’s changed a lot. I’m sure the fatigue’s caught up to her,” I explained.

She had a new home and a new last name; the cherry on top was that she had to share both of those with me. With all that in mind, it was no wonder that she was out of commission. I was perfectly fine, though.

“Really?! Yume-chan’s not gonna be here today?” A loud voice accosted my ears from behind. I was about to ignore it reflexively, but before that could happen, the figure of a small-framed girl entered my vision, her ponytail

bobbing up and down.

She was approximately the same size as Yume had been in eighth grade, but she was somehow much more animated and noticeable. Maybe it was due to those standout qualities or the fact that she was with Yume a lot, but I actually knew her name. It was Akatsuki Minami.

She was one of the girls that Yume Irido surrounded herself with and was always, without fail, the very first person to greet Yume when she arrived at school.

“Is her cold okay? How high’s her temperature?!” Minami-san asked, grabbing the sides of my desk and leaning in too close for comfort.

“I-I heard that it was about thirty-eight degrees celsius.”

“*Thirty-eight?!* She’s dying!”

“Calm down, Minami. You’re freaking Irido out,” Kawanami said. He grabbed Minami-san by the collar of her shirt and lifted her up.

Thanks to that, I had breathing room again. *Thank you, Kawanami. I’m not good with people who can’t respect personal space.*

“What’s your problem, Kawanami?! Don’t treat me like a cat!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Minami-san hissed at Kawanami, prompting him to let go of her. She landed gracefully on her feet. She really *was* like a cat. But more importantly, I noticed that he was interacting with her as if they were friends.

“Do you two know each other?” I asked, looking up at Kawanami.

“Hm? Nah, I mean, I *guess* we’re acquaintances. We went to the same cram school in middle school.”

“Uh-huh. Never in my wildest dreams did I think *he’d* get into this school!”

“Funny, that’s what I thought about you,” Kawanami quipped back at Minami-san.

Ah, now I get it. Middle schoolers who wanted to get into this kind of prep school went to the same kind of cram school. That was in stark contrast to

Yume and I who had studied completely on our own. Still though, I can't picture either of these two seriously going to cram school at all.

"More importantly," Minami-san said, jumping up as if she had springs for legs. "Is Yume home all by herself right now?!"

"Y-Yeah, I guess. My dad and Yuni-san—I mean, our parents are at work, and it's not like I could just take the day off."

I had absolutely no desire whatsoever to skip school just to spend all day taking care of her.

"What?! That's so sad! She's gotta be so lonely!"

A certain scene suddenly flashed in the back of my head: the face of a girl who looked like Yume Irido, but wasn't *exactly* her, asking me to hold her hand.

"Okey dokey!" Minami-san suddenly slammed her hand on the desk. "I'm gonna visit her after school. That's okay, isn't it, Irido-kun?!"

"Sure..."

"Oh come on, it's not gonna be *that* annoying! It's written all over your face!"

"Oho, this sounds like fun. Count me in too—"

"Count yourself *out*, Kawanami."

"Why?!"

This could be a good thing. I was in charge of taking care of Yume until our parents got back, so having Minami-san over would absolve me of that responsibility.

With that in mind, I took Minami-san to our home when school let out—leaving Kawanami behind.

◇

"Wow, your house is pretty big! You've been livin' here since you were born, right?" Minami-san said cheerfully.

"It's not as new as it looks, though," I said, getting out my keys. "My dad's lived here since he was a kid."

“Oh, cool. Thanks for having me over!”

As soon as I unlocked the front door, Minami-san burst into the house. *Is there a timid bone in her body?*

“Is she upstairs?”

“Yeah, her room’s the one furthest down the hall, but could you keep it down? She’ll probably freak out if you just burst into her room, no matter how composed she usually is.”

“Aw man, but I *wanted* to freak her out!”

“Sick people don’t need to be freaked out.”

“You’re not wrong.” Minami-san was surprisingly more reasonable than I thought.

I brought her up the stairs to the second floor and knocked on Yume’s door. Knocking on each other’s doors and waiting for a response before entering was one of the rules that we’d agreed on, but there was no answer. She might’ve been asleep.

“I’m coming in,” I called out before opening the door.

The mountain of cardboard boxes from the move were gone, and in their place was a sea of books, but unlike my room, the floor was actually visible. It was plain for anyone to see that this was not a stereotypically “girly” room. The only items in her room that could fall under the “girl” category were some vintage character pillows strewn across her floor and some kind of lotion bottles or something lined up on her desk. At the very least, one couldn’t say that her room *completely* lacked things that were typical for a girl her age.

The girl in question, Yume, was lying on her bed. She might have been hoping to feel better during the day, but obviously, that hadn’t happened. Instead, she was sound asleep. Her body was wrapped in her thin polka-dot pajamas, her long black hair was tied into low pigtails, and her chest rose and fell in sync with her breathing. I usually couldn’t feel anything but hatred and annoyance for her, but...she was kinda cute like this.

“Is she sleepin’?” Minami-san asked.

“Looks like it.”

As we approached the bed, Yume’s eyelids twitched before slightly opening. It seemed that we’d woken her up, but that wasn’t too surprising, considering that she’s always been a light sleeper.

“Mm...” Yume looked up at me through half-open eyes in a daze and then smiled at me as if she was relieved. “Irido-kun...”

Gah! I almost let out a scream as soon as I heard her call me by that name. *What the heck is she thinking?!*

“H-Hey, how’re you feeling?”

Fortunately for me, she said it in such a soft voice that I could just pretend she hadn’t said anything at all. Even if Minami-san somehow heard it while standing behind me, she’d most likely just think that she misheard her. Probably, at least.

Yume let out another groan as if she was half asleep and then, out of nowhere, tugged on the hem of my clothes.

“Where were you? I was so lonely...”

OH MY GOD! Yume-san?! Where the hell is your mind at? A year or more ago?! I had to stay calm. I could still play this off. I couldn’t give up yet! At this point, I was sweating bullets, but I turned and pointed to Minami-san as if nothing had happened.

“L-Look, Yume. Minami-san came to visit you.”

“Mornin’ Yume-chan! You doin’ okay?” Minami-san must not have noticed the sweet tone of voice that Yume was just speaking in, because she addressed Yume in a normal, cheerful tone.

Maybe it was because of that hint of normalcy, but Yume seemed to snap back to her senses upon seeing Minami-san’s face.

“Oh...” Yume had apparently remembered the things she’d just said.

Her face suddenly turned as bright red as a boiled crab. Luckily for her, she had a convenient excuse—her cold. There was no doubt that Minami-san would just think that she was red from the fever. *Yeah... Please let her think that!*

Yume briefly shot me a death stare, but come on, none of this was my fault! In the next instant, she flashed her patented honor student smile.

“Thank you for coming out of your way to visit me, Minami-san. My fever’s already gone down quite a bit.”

“You don’t hafta push yourself to talk to me. Oh, right! There anything you want? You hungry? I bought some stuff at the store; I could make you something!” Minami-san began rummaging through the plastic bag of things that she’d gotten from the nearby supermarket—a bag that she’d made me hold all the way until our front door.

“I-I couldn’t ask you to do that...”

“It’s fine! Seriously! I’m gonna borrow your kitchen for a bit. Lend me a hand, Irido-kun!”

Just as I was thinking about leaving them to their own devices and retreating to my room, I felt Minami-san grab my arm.

“Huh? Me?!”

“Yume-chan told me that you’re not too bad in the kitchen!”

She really talked about me to her friend? Damn, this chick...

I shot Yume a glare, but she quickly turned to the wall, avoiding eye contact. She might have still been recovering from the half-asleep stunt she’d pulled.

“I guess if it’s just something like rice soup, then—”

“Perfect! Let’s go!” Minami-san said, pulling me out of Yume’s room.

I thought I felt Yume staring at my back as I left, but seriously, none of this was my fault...

“So, what’s your relationship with Yume-chan like?” Minami-san asked while we cut the vegetables.

Her question came so out of left field that my finger almost became an ingredient in the rice soup.

“R-Relationship? What do you mean?”

“As siblings, obviously.”

“O-Oh, yeah, obviously...”

Of course that’s what she meant! Calm down, Mizuto.

Minami-san started beating the eggs and asked her next question. “You two were complete strangers ’til last year, right? And now you’re siblings livin’ in the same house. I was just wondering how that’s possible for two strangers, especially for a guy and girl of the same age.”

It would’ve been great if we had been complete strangers. I’d probably be a lot less stressed out.

“Well, things just kinda work out, but I guess there are certain things we have to be careful about.”

“Like what?”

“For instance...” I began thinking. “The biggest thing would have to be baths.”

“Huh?! Do you run into each other while you’re changing?!”

“No, we’re both careful about that.”

“Oh, what? So neither of you have even caught a glimpse? Boring!”

If that happened, one of us would actually die.

“Hm, but this kind of environment makes it kinda hard, don’tcha think?”

“Makes what hard?”

“What happens when you get a girlfriend? How’re you s’posed to bring her over?”

“Huh?” I looked at the short-statured, sociable girl. “Do I *look* like the type of guy who wants a girlfriend?”

“You *had* one, though, didn’t you, Irido-kun?”

My heart stopped for a second. If she had said this in a less confident tone, I could’ve just ignored it as her making a random guess, but she said it as if she knew this to be the truth.

How does she know?! Does she know about us?!

“I’ve got a sixth sense for this kinda stuff. I mostly figured it out from how you interact with girls. It just became obvious that you’ve dated before.” She laughed confidently while showing off her pearly whites in a bright smile.

What do you mean “kinda”?! Are you some kind of psychic?!

“Doesn’t seem like you have one now, though. Right?”

“No comment.”

“Oh, so *that’s* how you’re gonna play it.” Minami-san threw the vegetables I’d cut into the pot and poured the eggs she’d beaten in as if she was drawing a circle. These were the movements of a pro. “Well, I’m not gonna tell anyone, but what happens if you *do* get another girlfriend?”

The rice soup was slowly coming to a boil.

“Not happening. I don’t want one.”

“But like, hypothetically, if you *did*, would you introduce her to Yume-chan?”

For some reason, I already had an answer to this hypothetical situation.

“Probably not. It’s not like I need her blessing or anything. More so, it just sounds like it’d be a pain in the ass.”

“Hm, I see. So Yume-chan would be in the dark if you got a girlfriend. She probably wouldn’t even know ’til you got married.”

“Guess so.”

Marriage was a completely different discussion altogether. It wasn’t a situation that I could easily imagine.

“I see, I see. Interesting...” She nodded.

“So, what’s with all the questions? You trying to get at something?”

“Oh no, of course not! We’re just shootin’ the shit.”

Makes sense. I’d completely been sucked into Minami-san’s pace and now, the rice soup was ready.

◇

“Open wide, Yume-chan. Here comes the airplane!” Minami-san picked up a

spoonful of the soup.

Yume pouted. “I-I can eat by myself.”

“No! You’re sick. Say ‘ah.’”

“Ah...” Yume shot me an embarrassed look as she took a bite, then sighed.

“Was that too hot? Want me to blow on it for you?”

Just what the heck am I being forced to watch here? I’d completely lost the timing to leave, but was it *really* necessary for me to be here in the first place? Was it so wrong for me to just let two high school girls have fun by themselves and retreat to my room?

Several minutes had passed since I’d been forced to watch the yuri-esque scene in front of me. Thinking about this logically, if Minami-san hadn’t come over, the person feeding Yume right now would have most likely been *me*. The mere thought of that made me so glad that she was here. If I had to feed Yume, both of us would reach new, unprecedented levels of humiliation.

“Phew, thank you for the food. It was delicious.” Yume perked up after eating.

“My pleasure! I’m glad you could eat it all!”

“Thank you...for everything.”

“Irido-kun made half of it. I just helped with the seasoning! All right...” Minami-san stacked the plate and utensils on top of the tray that she’d brought everything on. “I’ll go wash these. Stay with Yume-chan, okay, Irido-kun?” She stood up.

“Okay— Wait, what?!”

“Thanks!” She quickly left the room, not even leaving a chance for me to stop her. As a result, the only ones left in the room now were me and Yume.

Oh god... I should have just escaped when I had the chance. I decided to sit by the bed with one of my legs bent so that my knee pointed towards the ceiling. For some reason, Yume, who had gone back to laying down, was staring at me.

“What?” I asked curtly.

“Nothing.” She responded with the same curt tone, not even looking me in

the eye.

“You really are such a brat. For your information, what happened when you woke up was one hundred percent *your* fault. If anything, I saved your ass!”

“I-I know that! My head was just hazy...” Yume said, sulking. She turned away from me, pulling the covers up to her shoulders.

I was grateful that she did since it made things easier for me. Sick people should just sleep. Things were peaceful until she spoke again, her back still turned to me.

“Sounds like the two of you are really friendly now,” she mumbled.

“Excuse me? Friendly with whom?”

“Minami-san. You even made the soup together...”

I needed a minute to think. “To be clear, what you’re trying to say is ‘it’s unpleasant that a boorish guy like you is getting close with my precious friend,’ right?”

It seemed like Yume needed a minute to think too. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“Oh, okay. Then allow me to answer. The only reason it looks like we’re so chummy is because of her abnormally high social stats. Don’t you know that people like her—*real* social butterflies—can make it seem like they’re best friends with whomever they’re talking to?”

“You make it sound as if I’m a fake or something...”

“You *are*, Ms. High School Glow Up.”

“Don’t call me that...” she protested in a weak voice.

She may have recovered a lot of energy from eating, but she wasn’t even close to her peak.

“Just go back to sleep. You need to if you wanna feel better.”

“Are you planning on going out again?”

“Nah, I’m staying home today.”

“You’re lying... Last time, you left...” Yume sounded like she was half asleep.

Her words were soft and unsteady.

Is she about to pass out?

“Last time? When?”

“When you said you’d hold my hand... When I woke up, you were gone...”

Oh, I see. She was talking about that cold winter two years ago when I had gone to visit her when she was sick.

“When I woke up, it was pitch black... I was so lonely...”

Back then, I had no idea when Yuni-san would come back. I also completely thought that Yume had just wanted me to hold her hand until she fell asleep. I didn’t do anything wrong, but...if it really was Yuni-san who I passed by on my way home, Yume must have woken up as soon as I left. She must have woken up the moment my warmth had faded from her hand...

Jeez... Did her cold come with some kind of side effect that made her revert to her past self from years ago? What kind of fascinoma was this?!

“Here...” I extended my hand in front of Yume’s face. “I won’t go anywhere this time. I won’t let go of your hand...so go to sleep, already.”

“Okay...” A relieved smile appeared on Yume’s face—the same one she had when she’d woken up. She gently squeezed my hand with both of hers.

“Thanks, Irido-kun...” Then, she pulled my hand straight into her chest.

“Wha—”



“Hm...” Satisfied with my answer, Yume’s face softened as she drifted off to sleep.

Her chest dramatically rose and sank with each breath she took. Each time she did so, it felt like my arms were being sucked into a soft wonderland. If I had to put the stimulation into words it’d probably be something like “Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod!”

At this rate, I’d be accused of sexually harassing my sibling, and that was a reputation I’d prefer to avoid! *Damn you! Catching a virus wasn’t enough for you, huh?! You had to drag me into the gutter too?! Damn you!*

However, since I’d promised to hold her hand, I couldn’t just let go of it. I tried my best to move my hand out of the danger zone without waking her up. I somehow managed to get it into a safe position and let out a breath of relief. If Minami-san had seen us like this, I can’t even imagine what she’d... Wait. Where *was* she?

Minami-san came back just around the time that Yume fell asleep again.

“Ah, sorry about that. I was on the phone.”

Apparently, her family had called and said she needed to get back home soon, so I walked her to our front door. Of course, holding Yume’s hand while seeing Minami-san off was physically impossible, so I had to temporarily let go. I’m sure even Ayai from two years ago would have forgiven me for leaving her for this short of a period.

“Hey, Irido-kun, before I go home, could I ask you one more question?” Minami-san asked me out of the blue in her usual tone while standing outside the front door.

“Question?”

“You and Yume-chan *are* just siblings, right?”

Nothing could have prepared me for that surprise attack. Just those few words made me feel as if a lance had been thrust into my heart in that instant. But it wasn’t enough to knock me off my feet. I endured this attack and

responded.

“Yeah, we’re siblings. *Stepsiblings*, that is.”

Minami-san looked up at me and let out a sound of understanding. “Oh, okay. Stepsiblings! Not *just* siblings. Ah, I see, I see.” She took a few slow, meandering steps before finally walking out of my—our house. “Thanks for having me! Stay safe!” After bidding me a very normal farewell, she walked away from our house, her ponytail continuously bobbing as she disappeared from my sight.

◇

Later, both dad and Yuni-san let me know that they’d be back late, which meant that I was very regrettably stuck on Yume duty.

“I’m thirsty,” Yume demanded.

“Here. Don’t spill it.”

“Buy me ice cream.”

“What kind?”

“I want a book. Give me money.”

“Not happening!”

After waking up from her nap, Yume was all sorts of demanding, leaving poor me as her errand boy. She was sick, though, so there wasn’t much I could do about that. She was sick, so...

“Hold my hand again...”

“Yeah, yeah...”

Even if she asked me to hold her hand, I would cater to her whims because, unlike this demonic creature, I would never ignore the wishes of someone in need.

“Let me take your temperature real quick.”

“Huh?”

“You’ve been sleeping all day, so if it hasn’t gone down at all, it could be the sign of something worse than a cold, and we’d need to go to a hospit—”

“No, I-I’m fine! I swear, I’m fine!”

“That’s what the thermometer is for—to see if you’re fine or not! Come on, put it under your armpit.”

“No way!”

For some reason, she was really resisting me taking her temperature, so I had to kinda force it in there myself. After a few seconds, the thermometer beeped and showed her temperature. *You’ve got to be kidding me.*

“Thirty-six point five...” It was an utterly normal temperature.

My eyes flew towards Yume, but she immediately looked away.

“You... Since when have you been feeling better?”

“No comment.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve been fine since Minami-san went home... Don’t tell me that this entire time you’ve been acting sick and bossing me around even though you were already feeling better!”

“No comment!”

“Wait, wouldn’t that mean that when you asked me to hold your hand...”

“Nnhh!” Yume let out something that sounded like a yelp and holed up under her covers.

“Hey! Get out of there, Ms. Healthy!”

“N-No! No way! Let me sleep more just in case!”

“You’ve slept more than enough! How dare you take advantage of my kindness!”

“Agh!”

I pulled the blanket off of Yume, and out she spilled onto the floor. I looked down on her face that had absolutely no trace of a fever and asked, “Don’t you have something you want to say?”

“Um...”

“Or do I have to hold your hand again for you to say it?”

Yume's face turned as bright red as a stop sign, this time for reasons separate from having a fever.

"I-I'm sorry for pretending to be sick and taking advantage of you..."

"Good." I crouched down and helped Yume off the floor. Her back was fairly drenched in sweat. "Well, you definitely seem to be better now. I'll overlook your actions today. For now, just get changed, eat, and rest."

"It's kind of gross when you're nice."

"Thanks for the compliment. I know you can't sleep without it, so let me know when you're ready, and I'll hold your hand again."

"Nngh!" Yume dove onto her bed again and hid beneath her covers. "I can't hear you! No idea what you're talking about! I'm going to change now, so get out of here, you pervert of a little brother!"

"How convenient for you that your memories can just come, go, and disappear." *Jeez...* "Okay, I'm gonna make dinner now, so I'll listen to one last request from you."

Yume peeked out of her covers and said in such a low voice that I almost missed it, "Don't go off anywhere without me knowing."

By "request," I meant it in the "what food do you want," kind of way, but I figured this was fine.

"You got it."

After all, things were different than two years ago. This was my home too.

The Ex-Girlfriend Is Waiting in Dreams

“What was I just doing?!”

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called boyfriend during eighth and ninth grade.

The big question is: what possessed me to engage in such a crazy endeavor? I can only say that I was not in the right state of mind. Back then, I was not only a crybaby, but a socially awkward loner to boot—traits that could easily be traced back to my poor decision-making. After all, any normal girl in their right mind wouldn’t have thought that *that* guy was dreamy, but alas, I was not like other girls.

Allow me to recount a time when my past self’s social awkwardness was on full display.

We were in the second semester of eighth grade. Midterms were just around the corner, and much to the disdain of both of our present selves, the two of us were in the school library doing our best to study and flirt with each other.

After going through the hell that was studying for my current school’s entrance exam, I can say with absolute certainty that whatever we were doing was *not* real studying. What we were doing was courting under the guise of studying—we might as well have been singing mating calls to each other like birds.

We’d only been dating for about a month, and though I might not have been loudly singing like a bird, my rapidly beating heart was definitely making up for that. This had nothing to do with the location—that’s just how I was back then. Yes, I was firmly in my horny teenager phase. Maybe that’s why I’d made a certain mistake.

“Ah—”

My eraser fell to the floor from the edge of my notebook after I accidentally

bumped it with my arm. I couldn't help but think it was somehow programmed to get on my nerves with how much farther it bounced away than it should have. It had such an irregular trajectory that I didn't have any hope of catching it with my hand before it got away from me.

I looked under my desk, but didn't see it anywhere. My eraser was already much smaller than it used to be, meaning my hopes of finding it were slim.

Losing my eraser wasn't a huge deal, but I couldn't help but want to sigh for some reason. Right then, though, a hand reached out to me with disgustingly impeccable timing. In that hand was an eraser.

"Take it. I have a spare."

I, being the ultimate simpleton that I was, blushed and timidly accepted the eraser from his outstretched hand, believing that his words had a deep kindness to them that they didn't.

Now then, up until this point, I've recounted a story that is perfectly normal, and something that isn't weird for anyone to have in their memories. But this is where my socially awkward personality was about to rear its ugly head.

After I went home, I took the eraser I got from him and...saved it in a small lockbox!

That's right, the socially awkward girl I've been describing considered the eraser she got from her boyfriend to be the first present that she'd ever gotten from him!

Okay, past me, listen up and listen good! No matter how stupid he was, even *he* wasn't stupid enough to give his girlfriend an *eraser* of all things as a gift! It wasn't like getting a reward for doing your morning exercises. No, the eraser wasn't a present from your boyfriend; it was just a loan with no strings attached.

However, my past self lacked the common sense to get this through her thick skull. Night after night, she would beam from ear to ear while gazing upon the holy relic that was the eraser she'd received—a strange ritual that I repeated more times than I'd like to admit.

I'm sure that guy was not exactly thinking straight most of the time either, but

if he saw what my past self was doing, I'm sure he would've run for the hills. It wasn't even *close* to being normal. When people talk about red flags in relationships, my behavior was surely a great example of what that looks like.

What's worse is that even after that, every time I would get something from him, I would put it in that same small box. By doing that, it felt like I always had a part of him around me, even when we were apart.

If my past self heard that a year and a half later she'd be living one thin wall away from him, she'd probably pee herself from happiness (not fear) and die—that's just how crazy I was back then.

I sealed away that profane hoarding habit of mine along with the small box when I moved into this house, but there was something I hadn't realized. A seal is *just* a seal, and things sealed away have a habit of getting out. The socially awkward girl still lives, and she's waiting in my dreams.

◇

For the first time in my life, there I was, resigning myself to complete silence due to one of the most fearsome events I've ever experienced. However, with each tick of the clock, an indescribable sense of anxiety swelled within me, ready to overflow at any moment. It wasn't hard to imagine that it would soon reach critical mass. I write this account in an attempt to be subjective regarding the crazy events of that night and to rid me of this anxiety inside me.

There was a pair of underwear— Wait, don't imagine anything yet! They weren't mine. These were boxer shorts, the kind of underwear that guys wore. As I entered the changing room attached to the bathroom, I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. In the hamper, there was something poking out from underneath all the clothes like a tentacle—the hem of a pair of boxer shorts. Logically thinking and taking bathing order into account, these doubtlessly belonged to my little stepbrother, Mizuto Irido.

"And? So what?" I hear you say. "Nothing's wrong with somebody's clothes being in a hamper after they took a bath." Yep, good point. Was there any reason for me to be so cognizant of it? Nope.

I calmly walked inside, calmly headed to the sink, and calmly brushed my teeth—or at least, in my head, that's what I did.

But by that point, my mind had already sunk deep into madness. I subconsciously approached the hamper, pulled out the boxer shorts, and stared at the pattern on them.

“This is the underwear Irido-kun wore today...”

Suddenly I came back to my senses and gasped. *What was I just doing?! Why was I grasping my stepbrother’s boxer shorts with both my hands?!* I couldn’t remember. The last few seconds were gone from my memory. Oh god!

I was filled with a terrible fear that made me sick to my stomach. I tried to return the boxer shorts to the hamper because if someone—if *he* saw me do this, I’d...

“Hm?”

“Ah...” I could feel the blood leave my face.

There, popping in through the slightly open door, was Mizuto. I reflexively hid the boxer shorts behind me with an ungodly speed that I couldn’t even believe myself. *That was close!*

“Oh, you’re in here? I didn’t hear anyone.”

“R-Really? Maybe you need to get your ears checked.”

It seemed that my skill from my socially awkward phase had automatically activated, and I’d naturally gone into stealth mode. *Why?! If I* had *made a sound, he might not have even come in!*

Mizuto furrowed his brow, casting a suspicious look at me. “Why are you standing by the hamper?”

Crap!

He was right. I wasn’t even *close* to the sink. I needed to think of an excuse that made sense!

“M-My phone... Ah, right! I left my phone in my clothes when I changed!”

“Hm...”

I’m a genius! I’m a god!

It seemed like Mizuto couldn’t even find one shred of doubt in the face of my

flawless and logical explanation. He walked over to the sink and picked up his toothbrush.

I thought that I could use this opening to throw the abhorrent boxer shorts back into the hamper, but to my despair, the hamper was perfectly reflected in the mirror. Even worse, this guy was staring right at me through the mirror. *Why must I be tested like this?!*

“Wh-What are you looking at? Are you getting excited from seeing me in my pajamas?”

I would have panicked if he’d said yes, but fortunately, Mizuto answered in his usual brusque manner.

“Nope. You were staring holes into me, so I was wondering if you had some kind of fetish for watching people brush their teeth.”

The word “fetish” made my heart stop, especially when I remembered the abhorrent item I was hiding behind my back. I was fortunately narrowly able to stop myself from letting these emotions play out on my face, though.

“Even if I *was* into that, seeing you wouldn’t do anything for me.”

“Thank god for that.”

Mizuto began brushing his teeth, and though I wasn’t necessarily *aroused*, I certainly found it strange that seeing this guy in his night clothes brushing his teeth was just a daily occurrence for me in this house.

After Mizuto finished brushing his teeth, he turned to me. “So... Can’t find it? Need help?”

“Huh?! Uh, n-no, I’m fine! I’m really fine! I found it!” As Mizuto approached me, I pulled out my phone from my pocket with my free hand and showed him.

My life would be instantly over if he saw what was clenched in my other hand.

“Okay, then you should go to bed. C’mon.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right. You’re completely right! Lack of sleep is terrible for your skin.”

Dammit! I had no choice but to retreat for the time being. I shoved the abhorrent item into my pocket and left the bathroom with Mizuto before zipping to my room as if I was being chased by something, and shut myself inside.

What now? As I sat on my bed, I unfolded the grotesque yet inexplicably attractive boxer shorts. Looking at them had me unbelievably depressed.

No, all I had to do was put them right back into the hamper. As long as I could figure out when everyone would be asleep, I didn't have to worry about anyone catching me. *There's only one problem...* I looked at the wall that separated our rooms.

He had a tendency to stay up quite late. I couldn't believe that he had that kind of sleep schedule and had still managed to wake up every morning to walk with me to school back in the day. Maybe he'd tried a little harder when we were together.

At any rate, the problem was that I didn't know when my window of opportunity would open. It could have been at midnight, or one or two in the morning. *Argh, I just wanna sleep!*

Sleeping while holding the boxer shorts of my younger stepbrother definitely crossed the line of things that siblings do—maybe even what normal people do, honestly—by a lot. There was absolutely no way I could push this off until tomorrow.

I figured I'd just have to wait, so I opened up a book and sat against the wall, listening for any noises. Occasionally, I could hear him impatiently walking around his room. *I wonder why he's so restless?*

I couldn't be blamed for getting distracted. I was trying to be conscious of what was going on in *his* room, but I was also in a situation where I had his underwear in *my* room. There were too many things going on. My eyes fell on the abhorrent boxer shorts that were next to me.

This is my room. Nobody else is here. Whatever I do in here...stays in here...

It was like my heart was being grasped by the devil himself. I fell onto my bed

purely because I was tired. It was just a coincidence that his boxer shorts were right next to my face.

L-Look, it's not my fault if it gets close to my nose— Oh no, my heart feels like it's beating out of my chest! Am I having a heart attack?! There wasn't anything for me to be so worked up about, so the only reason my heart could've been beating so fast was because of some kind of physiological problem! Maybe all I needed to do was calm down. *I should try taking deep breaths.*

I began to sniff, but as soon as I filled my lungs with air, I snapped back to my senses.

Wh-What happened?! I can't remember anything! I don't even have the slightest clue what just happened!

"Nooo!" I dove into my bed and curled up in the fetal position, cradling my head.

I wanted to die. It was like I was some unpopular girl who couldn't get any! I was supposed to have put my socially awkward phase behind me! I was supposed to be the girl who stood alone at the top as the most popular girl in our year!

It was his fault! It was all because he had left his underwear out like that and awoke my dormant self from last year—my past self that would revere a stupid eraser like it was a holy relic as if she were in some kind of cult!

I-If he finds out about this... This was a *huge* violation of our sibling rules. There was no way I could talk myself out of this. It'd be an immediate guilty verdict. I would have to be *his* little sister and then...

"'Sup, my dear perverted little sister who steals her big brother's underwear. Speak. What do you want from me?"

"I-I'm not a perv—"

"Oh, really? So stealing underwear and saving my eraser in a lockbox aren't the actions of a total creep? Then, I guess *this* is normal too!"

"N-No! Irido-kun, I—"

"That's *onii-chan* to you, my dear perverted little sister!"

“O-Onii-chan!”

I threw off my covers as a fantasy began to play behind my eyelids where indescribable things happened.

I-I don’t think I can stay sane at this rate... If this kept up, I would end up dying a mysterious death, only leaving a strange note behind!

I couldn’t wait for him to sleep anymore. I needed to put that stupid thing back immediately! I firmly grasped the abhorrent boxer shorts in my hand and stood up from my bed. Right as I did, I heard a click from the door of the room next to mine.

“Huh?”

I placed my ear on my door and heard someone going down the stairs. I glanced at the clock and it showed that the day had changed. *What the heck is he doing this late at night? Is this my chance?*

If he was leaving the house to go to a convenience store or something, then there was no better opportunity than now. Either way, I needed to check and see what he was up to. I shoved the abhorrent boxer shorts into my pocket and quietly exited into the hallway.

I peeked down to the bottom of the stairs, but it was just an endless sea of darkness. I couldn’t make out anything at all. *Where’d he go?*

Step by step, I carefully made my way downstairs. Anxiety gripped my body as I descended deeper into the darkness, knowing that Mizuto could just pop up any minute. If I did run into him, I’d say that I just came out of the bathroom.

Just as I convinced myself that I could play it off, I reached the bottom of the staircase. No one was in the living room and the light in the bathroom was off, but I hadn’t heard the sound of the front door opening.

Uh oh... I heard a sound from the dressing room and darted into the living room in a panic. As I calmed my breathing, I saw Mizuto’s shadow emerge from the bathroom.

I leaned a little further out and saw Mizuto stealthily move towards the stairs.

For the record, our parents were newlyweds, so we tried not to make too

much noise. Either he was being quiet for that reason or...there was something else.

Mizuto slowly climbed the stairs and disappeared into the darkness. I had no clue what he'd been doing down here, but this was my chance. Right now, without a doubt, I could avoid detection from him.

I silently entered the changing room and turned on the light since it was pitch-black inside. As my eyes adjusted, I let out a sigh of relief seeing that it was unoccupied. I was nearly free. I walked towards the hamper and mentally swore that I'd never let my socially awkward self reemerge from the deepest recesses of my mind.

At that moment, I felt a chill down my spine—an ominous omen. Out of consideration for her adolescent daughter, my mother had prepared two hampers—one for the guys and one for the girls.

In the girls' hamper, there were clothes piled in a way that made it seem like an evil altar, and there was something I couldn't take my eyes off of. I wish I hadn't noticed that "something" purely to avoid the surprising and fearful implications that it had.

It was a bra. A bra that *had* to be mine, based on the size and design.

Whenever I put my clothes into the hamper, I always made a conscious effort to hide my underwear, for the simple reason that I didn't want *him* to see them.

He was definitely the same way. The thing I was holding had been buried under clothes when I found it. There was nobody in this house who would boldly leave their underwear on the top of all the clothes like this. In that case...why was my bra brazenly out on display like this?

I threw the boxer shorts into the guys' hamper without a word. It lightly fell atop the mountain of piled-up clothes.

I suddenly remembered something. I'd come to the dressing room earlier today just as he had just gotten out of the bath. He had already put on clothes, so there wasn't any problem there, but now that I think about it, when I showed up, he had jumped a little in surprise. Then, he'd moved his hands behind his back as if he was hiding something.

“...”

I left the changing room, walked to the stairs, climbed them, walked through the hall, and opened the door—not my door, though. Mizuto’s door.

“Huh? Wh-What?” Mizuto said, gawking at me. “Not even a knock at this time of night?” He was wearing a wool cardigan, which looked surprisingly good against his narrow shoulders. Right now, there were a million words in my chest that I wanted to break his bony body with.

“Nnngh! Nnnnngh!” But in the end, they didn’t make it past my throat.

There were just so many things I wanted to say to him, but I couldn’t speak. All I could do was let my face get redder and redder.

“Seriously, are you okay? It’s not normal for somebody to burst into someone else’s room in the middle of the night just to get all flustered for no reason. What do you—”

“Hamper.” That was the one word I was finally able to squeeze out. “Check the hamper. You’ll understand.”

“Huh?” The expression on his face made it seem as though it was the end of the world. It was very pleasing to watch him realize that his deeds had been uncovered, but I wasn’t in a place where I could just be happy with that.

I moved out of Mizuto’s way as he tottered out of his room and then down the stairs. Not even thirty seconds later, he came back running.

“Y-You...” Mizuto’s face was bright red as he tried to say something back, but whatever he was trying to say, he couldn’t find the words to say it.

I was right, wasn’t I? I had cooled off while I waited for him to come back, so very calmly, I said, “Let’s have a family meeting.”

◇

Since neither of us wanted to have this talk in our rooms, the venue for our late-night family meeting was the living room. Mizuto sat down in the middle of our L-shaped couch and I sat down about three cushions away from him. It would have been too hard for me to stay calm if I was sitting next to him or even facing him, so that was the only real option for me.

“Let’s decide the talking order,” I said in a low voice while staring into the TV.

We had no way of knowing whether our parents were asleep or awake in their bedroom down here, so we needed to keep it down. Taking that into consideration, the first rule that we had made for this meeting was to keep our voices down no matter what.

“Fine. How do we do that?”

“Let’s just do rock paper scissors for brevity’s sake.”

“So, the winner goes first?”

“The loser goes first. Isn’t that obvious?”

“Fair enough. All right then. Rock, paper...”

After three straight ties, I lost in the fourth round, meaning that I got to go first with my defense.

“I had no choice!”

“Keep it down, you dunce!”

Oops. We peeked into the hallway to see if there was any movement from our parents’ room, but it didn’t seem like there was any. With that out of the way, we returned to the couch, and I continued my excuses.

“I had no choice. That was something that a dormant personality did, not me. It’s not my fault.”

“Are you for real? What kind of pathetic excuse is that?”

“My past, socially awkward self just temporarily resurfaced, okay? If I was in my right mind, I wouldn’t have ever gone near your underwear, even if you paid me!”

“Your ‘past, socially awkward self’? You’re making it sound like stealing my boxers was perfectly on-brand for your eighth-grade self. Is there any reason you phrased it like that?”

“Oh...” *Uh-oh.* If I wasn’t careful, my embarrassing past that I’d kept locked away would be put out in the open.

“D-Do I have to say?”

“Yep. No secrets—both of us. Let’s lay every little embarrassing detail bare.”

I let out a groan. “P-Promise not to be weirded out?”

“I’m *already* weirded out. Can’t get any worse now.”

“Okay, well, you promised!”

I gave up and told him every last detail about the weird, almost ritualistic things I used to do. In other words, I told him how I had kept every last thing he’d given me, even if it was as insignificant as an eraser or coins, and stored it in a box as if it were treasure.

This was torture. I’d kept my embarrassing past under wraps for so long and now I had to tell every last detail to the one person I wanted to keep it from the most. Could some kind of evil god just pop up right now and bury everything in darkness?

“So, that hoarding instinct kicked in before I knew it. You understand now?”

I glanced to my side where Mizuto was sitting, but he looked away from me. He was covering his mouth with his hand, and I could see his shoulders slightly shaking.

This guy! “Y-You promised you wouldn’t be weirded out!”

“Y-Yeah, but...” He glanced at me briefly before quickly looking away.

Oh my god! How was I supposed to react? Should I have been hurt? Embarrassed? Angry?! With my emotions in a panicked whirlwind, I closed in on Mizuto.

“I-It’s all in the past! I’m not like that now!”

“I know, I know.”

“Say it to my face.”

“No.” He let out that one simple word of rejection in response.

Does he not want to look at me that *badly?! Oh, now I get it. I’m so sorry that I’m a disgusting, socially awkward girl!* But as I internally pouted, I noticed that Mizuto’s ears were getting slightly red. *Uh...*

“Are you...embarrassed?” I prodded.

“No...”

“Y-You’re happy about this? You’re happy that I saved the eraser you gave me—that I saved the change that you gave me?”

“Gross, of course not. What you did was super weird.”

“Then look me in the eyes!”

“No!” Mizuto stubbornly continued to look away from me.

Jeez! You’re making me blush now too! I fanned myself with my hand, trying to cool down. I needed to be careful not to give off the wrong impression. I didn’t want him to think that I still had feelings for him—not one bit.

“But still,” Mizuto continued, still facing away from me, “I can’t believe you just came out and confessed like that. I thought you’d just bullshit some excuse and then blame me for everything.”

“Ah.”

“Hm?” Mizuto shot me a dubious look. Now it was my turn to avert my gaze. “Let me guess, you just now realized that was an option.”

“N-No. I-I was just trying to be honest in the name of fairness.”

“Oh, so actually, you desperately wanted me to know everything? We’re being honest here, so why not just tell the truth? You wanted to show off how much of a pervert you are, didn’t you?”

“It’s your turn!”

How could he be so accurate with the wording that my fantasy version of him uses?! Does he have telepathic powers?!

Mizuto clicked his tongue while making a surly face. *That was close.* He was probably aiming to run out the clock so that we wouldn’t get to his turn. *Like hell am I gonna let you out of this!* I glared at him.

Mizuto responded by guiltily saying, “Yeah, I guess...” He shifted uncomfortably. “How do I put this...? Um... I don’t even know if you’ll believe me.”

“I already don’t believe most of the things you say. That’s not gonna change

now.”

“Your bra fell on the floor, and I picked it up.”

I stared at the side of his face as he spat out that transparent lie. “Unfair... That’s so unfair! Even as far as convenient excuses go, isn’t that a little *too* convenient?!”

“I’m not lying! It just fell out of the hamper! I was in the process of picking it up and putting it back in there, but then you came in.”

“Aren’t we supposed to ‘lay every little embarrassing detail bare’? Look. If you come clean, I’ll forgive you just this once. So fess up already! You got horny from seeing my bra!”

“Me?! I-I...” Mizuto turned away from me again.

Um... You’re supposed to deny that. If you don’t, then I don’t know what I’m supposed to do...

“N-No, it didn’t make me horny. I swear it didn’t. I just...kinda...”

“Kinda what?”

“Thought it was bigger than I remembered...”

“I-I...” I opened my mouth to quip back at him, but I was at a loss for words.

Argh! Why am I *the one getting embarrassed here?! Sure, my chest has grown since the two of us dated, and I’m sure it really surprised him— Wait!*

Why did he know my chest size? Why did he know that my bra size was bigger than it had been in middle school just by looking at it? Just how much was this guy looking at my chest?

“Y-You didn’t do anything weird with my bra, right?!”

“Weird? Like what?” he asked, peevish.

“L-Like...” Hearing his tone of voice suddenly made it hard for me to come up with words of my own.

“Don’t worry, the only thing that happened was it had a nice round trip between my room and the hamper where it came from.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“You didn’t poke the cups or anything?”

“...No.”

“Why did you hesitate?!”

“No...” Mizuto stopped and calmed his voice before it got too loud. He exhaled and then continued. “If you want to play twenty questions, then how about I ask you some too? Did you do anything weird with my boxers? You sniff ’em?”

“Nngh...”

I do not recall.

“Get it now? Neither of us is going to get the edge over the other in this case,” Mizuto concluded.

“Yes... I think it may be better that way.”

I never thought the day would come when I’d find myself in agreement with him, but here we were. Underwear really was the invention of the century. *Okay. Now that we’re done explaining ourselves, all that’s left is...*

“By the way, Mizuto-kun?”

“What is it, Yume-san?”

“How should I put this...? What happened tonight definitely broke the rules, right?”

“Oh right, the sibling rules. Yeah.”

Real siblings wouldn’t steal each other’s underwear...probably.

“With that said, it’s time for the winner to make their demands. What shall I receive from you, my dear little brother?”

“You shitty big sister. Don’t think that I’ll show you any mercy just because we both laid our souls bare to each other.”

Just like that, our orderly discussion devolved into chaos. In the end, we

ended our debate by deciding that we could each issue one order to the other as long as it didn't go against any public morals.

"Mm..." Each time I slipped out of my slumber, I felt like something was off with my pillow, so I'd turn my head around. How to describe it... It felt *thin* but strangely comfortable. The smell from it wasn't especially good, but it made my heart beat faster.

"Mmm..." I turned around again, half asleep, and pushed my face into the pillow. *Oh, right. This pillow has the same smell as those boxer shorts...* "Mmmm..."

Wait. The same smell as those boxer shorts? Suddenly, I snapped back to my senses, and everything became clear. I slowly opened my eyes, fearing what would be in front of them. As I did, I realized the situation that I was in.

I was sleeping on the couch...using Mizuto's lap as a pillow. His lap. As a *pillow*. As the gears in my head ground to a halt, the memories from earlier resurfaced. As I remembered it, we'd had a family meeting regarding underwear. But what had happened after that?

I had no memory of going back to my room. Could I have just conked out? I slowly raised my body off his lap and a wool cardigan slid off of me. *When did I put this on? I didn't. Mizuto was wearing this.* It might have been spring, but it got chilly at night. Had he put his cardigan on me after I'd fallen asleep?

Mizuto had nodded off too. He might not have been able to get up and leave since I'd fallen asleep on his lap. *He must be cold without his cardigan.* I needed to return the favor. I picked up the cardigan from the floor and wrapped his body in it. As I did, I heard him mumble something.

"Ayai..."

My heart skipped a beat. *Jeez, who are you dreaming of and from when? You're a little too hung up on her, don't you think? But, well, as long as you're just dreaming, I won't get on your case about it. Heh heh.*

"Morning." Mizuto's eyes suddenly flew open.

"Bwah?!" I was so surprised I froze in place.

In close proximity, Mizuto sneered at me in a teasing way and said, “Well, well, well, you seem to be in a good mood this morning. Were you happy that I mumbled your old last name in my sleep?”

This goddamn guy!

“Y-You just broke the rule! Siblings don’t call each other by their last name, right?!”

“All I did was say the name of a person from eighth grade. Or what, you trying to say there’s some kind of special meaning attached to that name?”

S-So this is how he’s gonna play it! Urgh!

“Aw, don’t get so red in the face. I’m not sure if you’re angry or embarrassed, but this is payback. You have no right to complain.”

“Payback?! What did I do to you?!”

“Dunno. Maybe you should record yourself while you sleep next time,” Mizuto said in an aloof voice while shaking his head. “C’mon, our parents are gonna wake up soon. Let’s put our best foot forward and be the best of siblings today too. Okay, little sis?”

“I’m your *older* sister! And I hate how you get hung up on stupid details like that!”

“Right back atcha.” But after trying to provoke me, he tilted his head and said, “Actually, I like how you’re straight up about hating things. It doesn’t leave any room for misinterpretation.”

“Misinterpretation...?”

“We’ve got our own lives now. Let’s just do as we like, so long as it doesn’t cause problems for the other person.”

You haven’t changed. Reading was the only thing ever in your head. Even when it came to dates, I was the one who usually invited you out. I hated that about you. But, I suppose I can admit that you have a point. The past is the past. Now is now. The girl who would get excited over receiving even the most trifling trinket like an eraser is my old self. The girl who was your girlfriend is also just my old self.

◇

With that, our relatively peaceful but also dreadful night ended. In the end, we were just stupid kids doing stupid things.

Now that my slightly exaggerated fantasies had ended, I was on my way out of school. My plan was to stop by the bookstore on the way home, so I turned onto Karasuma street. After walking a little, I found the building that the bookstore was in located right in front of the bus stop.

The bookstore was on the second floor of the building, whereas the first floor was a popular burger place. Both of these shops received decent traffic from our school, and I even saw some students wearing the same blazer as me.

I wondered if I'd ever been there with that guy. Yeah, I recalled, there was that one time when we'd been talking about the books we'd bought in the bookstore, and our classmates had almost found us...but I digress. These were the kinds of thoughts running through my head up to when I was about to take the escalator up to the second floor.

Right as I was about to, a hellish scene was shown right before my eyes. It was kind of hard to believe what I was seeing.

In the burger place on the first floor, in the midst of all the students, my little stepbrother was sitting with a girl with long, low pigtails—it was almost like looking at my past self.

Suddenly the words he'd said yesterday played in the back of my head on repeat: "Let's just do as we like, so long as it doesn't cause problems for the other person."

"Huh?!"

Is that what he meant by "do as we like"?!

The Ex-Couple Try [redacted]ing (Part 1 of 2)

“Please date me with the intention of marriage.”

Mizuto

This should go without saying, but just as there’s no way for me to know everything that happened to *her*, there’s no way for her to know everything that happened to me either. It *should* go without saying, but for a guy whose behavior patterns can be counted on one hand, I’ve been having trouble remembering that.

This goes double now that we’re living within close proximity of each other. My arrogance has evoked an illusion where I believe that I know absolutely everything about her. But just as I have my own life to live, she has her own life to live, and not even living in the same house or sharing the same last name will change that whatsoever.

Let’s go back a little in time to the day after my little stepsister, Yume Irido, had taken a day off from school after catching a cold. I was in the unpopular destination known as the school library, and a girl with black-framed glasses and hair tied into two low pigtails called out to me.

I’d never met her before, but this girl who was almost the spitting image of Yume Ayai came up to me and said, “Please date me with the intention of marriage.”

I was proposed to right next to the twilight-lit bookshelves.

Yume

I’ll admit that I was completely caught off guard.

Yesterday... Wow, it’s already been that long. On my way to the bookstore after school, I’d caught sight of my little stepbrother, Mizuto Irido, at the burger place below the bookstore, eating fries with *some girl* I’d never seen before!

Yeah, I might've run away without thinking, but what the heck *was* that? A date? Totally a date, right? After all, when we were dating, that was the same place where we... Agh!

Needless to say, I was incredibly bothered by this, so I indirectly began investigating at home.

"How are things at school? You got a g-girlfriend?"

"Huh? You're joking, right? I already learned my lesson thanks to a certain someone."

That's my *line! Thanks to a certain someone, I have absolutely no intention of trying to get a boyfriend no matter how popular I am now!* Either way, his reaction didn't tell me anything—he was perfectly calm. I didn't catch even a whiff of that girl being on his mind whatsoever. His poker face game was just as strong as always; I couldn't tell what he was thinking at all.

Who *was* that girl, though? It was almost like she was imitating my plain look from back then... But, uh, what? Is *that* what he's into? *Hm, I see. I'm* so *sorry that I changed my look against your preferences.*

Not that I cared. I had nothing to do with him romantically. We were family now, and as a *family* member—*just* a family member—I just wanted an idea of whom he was dating.

So that's why I casually brought up the topic to the school gossip, Minami-san, after classes had ended.

"A girl with black-framed glasses and low pigtails? Hm... Maybe it's 'cuz we're in a prep school, but there are lots of girls like that here."

How could this be? There were *that* many plain girls at our school? It must've been a paradise for plain girl lovers! While I shivered from the frightening implication, a wide, teasing smile spread across Minami-san's face.

"But wow, a date at a burger place, huh? Not too bad for someone as reserved-looking as Irido-kun! He may be quiet, but I guess he *is* nicer than he lets off. And if you really look at him, he's not too shabby in the looks department either. He'd steal the heart of any shy girl who simply laid eyes on him."

Yes, you're so right! Yeah, I'm sorry I'm such a simpleton! Now that I think about it, it was hard to describe just how easy of a girl my past self was. Actually, no, it's completely normal for socially awkward girls with no experience to fall in love with guys who're even a little nice to them! It's the law of nature!

Basically, since he has no chance with normal girls, he only sets his sights on easy targets. What a vile guy, to prey on these vulnerable girls! Now that it'd come to this, I could no longer remain silent. In order to save other girls from going through the same tragedy as me, I needed to make a move. There was still time!

"Oh, it's already this late?" Minami-san put her bag on her back after looking at her phone. "Sorry, Yume-chan, I gotta head to work."

"Oh, okay. I'll be fine. Have fun."

"'Kay, I'll see ya tomorrow!" Minami-san energetically waved her hand at me and rushed out of the classroom, leaving me by myself.

I didn't have any plans or obligations, nor was I in a club, so all that was left for me was to go home. *Perfect. I'll start thinking of a plan to save that poor girl from* his *clutches.*

When I got home, I found a pair of women's loafers in the entryway. I rubbed my eyes and looked again, but they were still there. A pair of women's loafers were right there inside my house.

Huh?! I stared at the shoes that were left lying next to Mizuto's sneakers. They weren't mine, and they definitely weren't mom's either; they were way smaller than ours. Whoever's shoes these were, they must have been a very small girl—yes, just like the girl that Mizuto met with the other day.

N-No way! It hadn't even been a month since school began and he was already bringing a girl to the house?! He hadn't even invited *me* over until we'd been together for half a year!

Then, suddenly, I remembered something. I remembered the reason he'd invited me over back then. I looked from the front entrance to his room

upstairs. There was no way...right? At this very moment, could they be...

Nope. Nuh-uh. There's no way! There was no absolutely no world where that loser of a guy would make a move that fast!

B-But...hypothetically speaking, what if he used his failure with me as a learning experience and ditched his slow and steady strategy in favor of a blitzkrieg approach?

What if, as soon as I passed his room, the indecent voices from inside would stop almost as if on-cue and then be replaced with the sounds of them hurriedly moving around the room trying to cover up whatever they'd been doing?

N-No! Just no, plain and simple! I can't stand the mere idea of that! For now, I needed to investigate. I didn't want to deal with the camera shutter sound, so I started by taking a quick video of the loafers with my phone.

After I finished, I slowly made my way inside the house, hid myself in the bathroom dressing room, and then called Mizuto.

He picked up after a few rings. "Yeah?"

"Hi."

"What do you want?"

"Where are you right now?"

"Huh? I'm home."

I tried to focus to hear any background noises that might have been coming from his phone, but there was nothing suspicious. "I just remembered that there's an errand I need to run, but I'm a little busy right now. Could you do it for me?"

"Really?" I didn't even have to guess how much he didn't want to help. His tone said it all. W-Was it because he had his girlfriend over or because he just didn't want to have the errand forced onto him?

"Okay, fine. I'll do it..."

"Please do."

“‘Please’?” I heard a laugh from his side of the phone. “When was the last time you ever said ‘please’ to me?”

“Shut up. Just do it, okay?”

“Seeing as I’m doing you a favor, I’d like it if you changed your tune a little.”

What a rotten-to-the-core guy. Whoever wanted to date him must have been just as rotten and twisted.

“So...what do you need me to do?”

“What indeed...”

“Uh, ‘what indeed’?”

Whoops! Didn’t mean to say that out loud.

“What I NEED is...somen! I need somen!”

“Somen? That’s summer food.”

“What’s wrong with craving somen in the spring?! Do you think somen companies only make them in the summer? No, it’s a year-round business!” *Probably.*

“Fine, I’ll get it. Anything else?”

After that I just listed off a few random everyday items and ended the call. After a little, I quieted my breathing. I heard someone head towards the entrance and then the sound of the front door opening then closing.

Good, good. He left. I listened carefully to make sure that Mizuto wasn’t coming back just yet before leaving the bathroom. *Okay, so the only one in his room right now is that girl. I gotta get in there and talk some sense into her.*

I wasn’t planning on intimidating and chastising her for having the nerve to seduce my little brother. No, my plan was to have a civilized chat with her where I’d gently explain that she should be more careful and not just go over to a guy’s house so thoughtlessly.

I walked up the stairs and put my hand on the door handle to Mizuto’s room, but before I could push it down, someone opened it from inside.

“Huh?”

“Hm?”

Standing there was a familiar face. It was such a shock to me that my head went blank. *Huh? Why? What’s going on?*

“Why...are you here?” Mizuto said, a confused expression on his face.

“I thought you needed me to go out because you were ‘a little busy.’ Why did you ask me if you were already home?”

“H-Hold on, I need to think...”

I repeatedly looked towards the stairs in utter confusion. *Wasn’t he the one who just left?* I was positive that he was the one who had left through the door just now and yet...here he was, looking at me disconcertedly. But if he was here...then who left?

“Ah!” I rushed down the stairs, running through the hallway to get back to the front door. *They’re gone. The shoes are gone! They were just here!*

“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” Mizuto approached me. “You could’ve died if you fell down the stairs as fast as you were going.”

“You let her escape, didn’t you?!” I grabbed his collar.

“Whoa! S-Seriously, what’s gotten into you?!”

“You did, didn’t you?! Just now, you let the girl you brought over slip out!”

“Wh-What? Girl?” Mizuto’s eyebrows folded, producing an expression of pure bewilderment.

He got me. He made it look like he was leaving, but really, he was letting the girl he’d brought home slip out! Did he know I was already home somehow?

“What are you talking about? I’ve been home alone this entire ti—”

“I saw! I saw her shoes with my own eyes! I have proof!” I shoved my phone into his face.

“Okay, I get that you saw something, but you went so far as to take a *video*?” He furrowed his brow and said this in a kind of grossed-out tone.

Stop being so grossed out!

“Did you take this today?” he asked.

“I did, and these shoes don’t even fit me, so you can’t lie and say they’re mine.”

“True enough.” Mizuto put on his shoes and turned the doorknob. “The front door’s unlocked...”

“That’s because of the girl you let run away! I know I locked—”

“Check your room,” Mizuto said with a serious face, looking straight into my eyes. “Check it now.”

Just as he asked, I went to my room and checked it. He was so serious that I was scared that the footsteps I’d heard were those of a burglar.

I walked down the stairs and reported my findings to Mizuto. “Everything looked normal.”

His face was filled with an intense confusion, but *I* should have been the one who was confused.

“Don’t scare me like that,” I said. “You made me think there was a burglar or something.”

“You’re serious? Your room didn’t look like it’d been cleaned? Were there more porn books on your shelves than usual?”

“Of course not! I don’t even have any!”

But...why porn? I had no clue what he was thinking. Mizuto lightly furrowed his brow and began rubbing the back of his neck. It was what he did when he was thinking about something.

“Can you just tell me what’s going on already?! Those shoes belonged to the girl you brought here, right?!”

“Hm? Oh, yeah,” he said nonchalantly. “I did. I brought a girl here.”

“Huh?! You’re just going to admit it that easily?”

Mizuto turned away from me and began trying to walk into the living room, scratching his head as if he was annoyed. I saw this and quickly slipped by him

and blocked his way.

“Huh? I’m beat. I need to replenish my fluids, if you know what I mean.”

H-He needs to WHAT?! In my mind, a scene began clearly playing out where the plain girl I saw back then and Mizuto were in a closed room, doing a certain something together that would tire them out.

“Y-You... Wh-What were you doing with her in your room?!”

“Huh?” Mizuto’s eyes closed to slits as he leered at me. “Why should I have to tell *you* anything, Yume-san?”

I was at a loss for words. All I could do was purse my lips. He was right. Even if Mizuto *had* brought a girl over, I had no right to get angry. He didn’t owe me any apology whatsoever. After all, we were just stepsiblings.

I know I shouldn’t care, so why do I?

“I’ll be more careful next time, so let’s just forget this ever happened. Later.” He waved at me and opened the door to the living room, leaving me behind in silence.

But just as he did, he froze in place. He stood still and stared at something, his mouth agape.

My eyes landed on the same thing that Mizuto was focused on. I understood what he was looking at, but still tilted my head in confusion.

Simply put, there were *five* chairs at the dining table.

“What’s his problem?!”

I had no clue what was going on and Mizuto didn’t help explain anything. Instead, he shut himself in his room without saying a word, all the while wearing the same surprised expression.

“Jeez...” I sighed before returning to my room for the time being.

There really wasn’t anything out of place. Everything looked just as I remembered it when I woke up this morning. Then why did he tell me to check my room? Was he just trying to deflect from the fact that he brought a girl

over? Or was there some other reason...? *Okay, I need to stop.*

I quickly changed out of my school uniform and into my loungewear before falling onto my bed in a daze. My long hair fell across my body, wrapping around it. I'd worked so hard to grow out my hair, but now it was kinda getting on my nerves.

"Am I misinterpreting something again?"

That pair of shoes. That girl who was with him at the burger place. Maybe I *was* just making a mountain out of a molehill like I always do. I let out a sigh and as soon as I did, a lethargic wave washed over me, and I began to drift into a light sleep.

◇

So, you can be friendly with other girls, but you get mad when I *try to be friendly with other people?*

I remember the moment those words had fallen out of my mouth very clearly. It was the moment that his usual wall of composure had cracked, and he'd looked at me with an expression of complete bewilderment, like a lost child.

I immediately knew that I'd said something that I shouldn't have. He apologized to me. He tried to reconcile with me. He confessed his shameful possessiveness to me and uncharacteristically met me halfway.

But even so...the scene I'd seen in the school library just kept repeating in my head. That was the place *we'd* met. It was *our* special place and in that special place of our memories, he had been happily talking to a girl who wasn't me.

I know now that it had all been a huge misunderstanding. Even back in the day, I probably knew that—but I couldn't erase the impression that had been so deeply etched into my mind. The damage it had done would never go away.

The person I trusted did the one *thing I couldn't believe in our special place.*

That impression had already torn apart both my memories and my feelings. Even if he'd had a reason to do so from how I'd been acting, treating me coldly and being so harsh wasn't right.

I'd always been a quiet person who wasn't good with words. That being said,

it wasn't like that silence extended to my mind. If anything, there were more words inside me than others.

It was like a dam had broken, and all of the words I usually kept inside came rushing out. And yet...I wanted to make up with him. That's why, with summer break approaching, I'd tried coming up with various plans about what to tell Irido-kun, but it had all been for nothing. Our second summer break as a couple never came.

◇

I woke up from my nap and groggily sat up. I'd fallen asleep while laying face down, so I'd left a damp spot on the bed. *Is that drool, or...* I hadn't even yawned, but I rubbed my wet eyes with the back of my hand.

I looked out the window and was greeted by the dark of the night. It seemed that I'd slept a lot longer than I'd thought. Was it from all the anxiety? Either way, all of this—*everything*—was *his* fault.

I checked my hair in the mirror. There were no traces of drool. My eyes weren't red either. *Good.*

It was a little frustrating, but I couldn't let my guard down for a minute thanks to the guy my age living in the same house as me. I had to keep up my appearance. Although, I guess there wasn't any reason for me to care about my appearance around that guy at this point.

"Hey, Yume, are you awake? It's dinner time, so come on down!"

I responded to my mom in a still-weak voice, which was definitely just due to me being hungry. It had to be. I'd feel better after eating. Thinking that, I opened the door to the hall, and that's when someone firmly grabbed my wrist and yanked me over.

"Hyah!"

Losing my balance, my back slammed against the wall. *What the heck is your problem?!* As I steadied myself once more, I irritatedly looked up at the face of Mizuto Irido.

Huh? Mizuto continued to grip my wrist and stared into my eyes with a

nervous look. I couldn't sense any particular emotion from him, but I could tell he was serious about something. It was the same look I'd foolishly fallen for in eighth grade.

Before I realized it, I was overwhelmed by his gaze, but I was finally able to squeeze out, "Wh-What?"

"I'm invoking the penalty since you broke the rules."

It took me a minute to process what he'd said because it came out of nowhere. *What penalty? From when?* But then my mind finally dragged up the recent memory that he was talking about.

He was talking about the penalty from that abhorrent underwear incident. Based on the rules we had where whoever did something un-sibling-like, we decided that we could each issue each other one order as long as it was acceptable in the public eye.

If he was planning to exert that, I wondered, what exactly was he going to ask for? Maybe he'd ask me to not say a word about the girl he brought over. If that was his request, I had a whole arsenal of words that I had ready to give him a piece of my mind with.

I prepared myself for whatever he was about to say, but Mizuto's request was far beyond anything that I'd ever expected.

Mizuto

There were five chairs set at the dining table. One might wonder what about that scene shocked me so much. Well, the reason for my surprise stems from that very mystery.

The girl I'd been with at the burger place, the shoes that had suddenly appeared in our entryway, the reason why I'd asked Yume to check her room, even why I'd asked her about porn books... None of it probably made any sense to Yume, but it was all connected to the reason why there were five chairs set at our dining table. There was a very clear message being sent.

So, what did I ask Yume to do with the one order I was allowed to give as a penalty for her breaking our sibling rules? Before I reveal that, I'd like to explain

things in a way that'll help explain the significance behind the five chairs. To do that, I need to go back to when I was proposed to—when this all started.

"Please date me with the intention of marriage."

Just as there's no way for me to know everything that's happened to her, there's no way for her to know everything that's happened to me either. With that said, let me start from the beginning. I won't spare any details about the danger that was approaching Yume without her even knowing it.

It was the day after Yume had stayed home from school because she'd caught a cold. I was carefully digging through the bookshelves of the school library as if I were an archeologist excavating some kind of fossil.

The library was indispensable for me to fulfill my life as an avid reader despite being a penniless student. Our school library, which was filled with a diverse range of books from light novels to specialty books, was perfect for this. I became a regular here as soon as I started school.

That day, I unearthed a vintage light novel. The cover was so beaten up that it really made me feel its age. When I checked the insert that said who'd borrowed the book up until now, I could see that it stretched back to the twentieth century.

I was excited from the overflowing history in the book as I moved to my usual spot.

My style was to sit right next to the air conditioning unit by the window in the very corner diagonal to the entrance. It was like a sort of half-hidden room with how the bookcases blocked most of the view of this area. That's just how I rolled in the library.

I turned the pages of the book I was reading, the slightly tinged rays of sun against my back. I groaned about how the book used a lot of unconventional phrases that weren't very gentle on the mind, but then suddenly I heard someone standing next to me.

I looked up from my book to see a girl with thick, black-rimmed glasses, two low pigtails resting on her chest, and big, doe-like eyes looking in my direction.

“Hm?” I looked around, but there was nothing but me and walls.

I couldn’t figure out what she was looking at. There was no way that it was me, right?

“You’re Mizuto Irido-kun...right?” Despite being barely audible, she never broke eye contact.

So she WAS staring at me this whole time? Weird...

“Um... Sorry, do I know you?”

“I, um... I have something to tell you.” She began fidgeting with her fingers in front of her stomach. Both her aura and attitude were giving me déjà vu. The unforgettable moment during summer vacation of the eighth grade where Yume Ayai gave me a love letter was just like the situation I was in right now.



Huh? No. No, there's no way. I don't even know you. There's no way you'd just —

The more I looked at the girl who was currently looking at the ground, the more I began to think that I'd seen her somewhere before. Just as I began thinking that...

"Pfft." She began laughing and covered her mouth with her hand. "Ha ha ha! Aw man, I guess you really couldn't figure it out. I had no clue when to stop 'cuz it didn't seem like you were picking up on it at all."

Her demeanor completely changed while her appearance remained the same. It was like she was saying that she was serious, but I could feel a liveliness from the way her voice bounced.

It was a strange feeling. It was like what happens when you meet a voice actor in real life and they don't match the character they voiced at all.

"Still don't know? Okay, then let me introduce myself again. Hold on a sec."

She looked down, took off her glasses, took off the hair ties and held her hair behind her head with her hand before looking back up at me.

"Heya! Know me now?"

"Oh."

Of course I knew who she was. I *just* saw her at our house yesterday. The ponytail was one thing, but now that I really looked, she had the same small frame and critter-like energy.

"Minami-san?"

"Ding ding! Whaddya think? I can really pull off the serious girl look, can't I?" she said with a laugh while quickly putting back on the glasses and retying her hair.

I had absolutely no clue. Just judging by appearances, she looked like a serious girl no matter what angle you looked at her from. I guess it's true what people say about appearances being ninety percent of a person.

"I didn't want to stand out so much, so I decided to change my looks! I

thought you'd be the perfect person to talk to like this."

"Is this some kind of joke? I thought you were about to confess to me. I was seriously surprised."

"Oh, then it's all good. Be surprised."

"Huh?"

"Irido-kun, please date me with the intention of marriage."

My comprehension skills must've been taking a break. It was like I was reading a book with a really bad translation.

"Excuse me?"

"Seriously? Okay, listen up and listen good." Minami-san took a few steps away from me, looked me straight in the eyes while wearing the black-rimmed glasses, and repeated what she'd said: "Irido-kun, please date me with the intention of marriage."

Huh? Oh, silly me. Did I somehow mishear her again*? Dating is one thing, but with the intention of marriage? There's no way she just said that, right?*

"Huh? Did that still not get through to you? Girlfriend. Couple. Future husband and wife. I'm saying that I want to do all of that with you, Irido-kun. Comprende?"

"I don't comprende."

Is it possible that I was just confessed to—*proposed* to—by one of my classmates not even a month into school?

All right, calm down. This had to be some kind of trap or a misunderstanding. I needed to stay levelheaded and get information, then make a clever decision.

"You want to marry me, Minami-san?"

"I do."

"Do you like me in that way, Minami-san?"

"I don't hate you, at the very least."

"Why do you want to marry me, Minami-san?"

“Well, that’s ’cuz...” As soon as she began to speak, her face lit up and a smile stretched from corner to corner. “If we get married, then Yume-chan will be my little sister!”

No comprende.

◇

“And then she just kept going on and on about the greatness of Irido-san... Kinda like she was trying to pitch a sale to you or something, huh?”

“Yeah...” It was now nighttime, and I was in my room talking to my friend Kogure Kawanami while letting out a very deep and very heavy sigh. “I seriously don’t get it. What’s going on? Has Minami-san always been that kind of person?”

“Yep, she sure has. Horrible, ain’t it? Ha ha!”

For some reason, Kawanami was in high spirits. It was almost like he was an otaku who’d gained a fellow brethren.

“You’re better off thinking that that’s who she really is,” he continued. “She must’ve acted like that at her previous middle school so she chose a high school where there wouldn’t be a lot of people who knew her.”

I never would’ve guessed that she was part of the high school glow up group. I thought it was just Yume, but there are a lot of people doing that, huh?

“So...who exactly is she? You kinda knew her before, right?”

“A person who is easily excitable and seemingly never cools off—that’s who Akatsuki Minami is,” Kawanami said in a tone of voice that was much more serious than his usual one. “Once something catches her attention, she single-mindedly chases it. Once she gets hot and bothered over something, she just keeps getting more and more fired up with no apparent end in sight. She’s like an out of control nuclear power plant with how she spews out toxic substances and just explodes in the end.”

Kawanami jokingly made a *whoosh* sound.

“Explode? What do you mean?”

“Lemme think. I guess I have something I heard from a buddy of mine. I don’t

wanna embarrass him, but Minami had a boyfriend in middle school."

"Huh?"

Minami-san had a boyfriend? I couldn't picture that at all. She looked like a kid.

"There are stupid guys out there, y'know? But of course, Minami is a far shot from normal herself. They'd spend time together, and she'd do all these things for him. I think that the guy was down with it at first. The girl he liked—that decently cute girl—was so intently looking after him. That's enough to make any guy happy."

For hearsay, this was really detailed.

"Can you guess what happened three months down the line, though?"

"She get knocked up or something?"

"The guy collapsed from stress and was hospitalized."

"Huh?"

Hold on. She was intently looking after him, wasn't she? He should've been the one who was taking it easy, so why was *he* the one that collapsed?

"That's just the terror that is Akatsuki Minami," Kawanami said in a nihilistic tone.

"You know how if you pet cats too much, they get stressed out? Akatsuki Minami is the petter in that situation. She gives way too much love and you might think it's cute at first—maybe even for a while—but you end up being killed by that cuteness."

I gulped. It was hard to believe, but after I thought about it, it started to make sense. If I were in her boyfriend's place where every last part of my life was being taken care of by that girl...I'd feel like she was denying me my dignity. It'd feel like I was being taken care of like a pet.

"When Minami was over at your place to visit Irido-san, she must have shown a glimpse of that side of her. Anything come to mind?"

Now that I thought about it...Minami-san *did* spoon-feed her, and she even

went out of her way to blow on it first. That was a little too intimate for people who had only been friends for barely a month. Maybe she was a little *too* into taking care of Yume.

“Sheesh. What an unprincipled chick. A guy didn’t work for her, so she’s trying out a girl now.”

“What was that?”

“Just talking to myself. Anyway, now that you know the deets, do you feel like marrying Minami at all?”

“Not one bit. I’m the type that wants to be left alone.”

“Then stop being ambivalent with her and keep rejecting her. She’s persistent, but don’t let that discourage you. Come back to me for advice if she starts doing anything that crosses a line. We’ll come up with a much more direct plan then.”

“What do you mean, ‘crosses a line’?”

“Hm... This is another rumor from middle school, but apparently it’s something that that psycho actually did— Ah, never mind. Forget it, I don’t want to freak you out. Sorry.”

“Do you get off on leaving things on cliffhangers or something?”

“You’d know if you tried. It’s fun as hell!” He laughed jovially, adding, “Call me if anything happens!” before hanging up.

I really wanted to ask him why he knew so much about Minami-san, but I never got the opportunity to.

◇

After that, Minami-san began sticking around me.

“Come on, let’s get married!”

“I’m a very devoted girl.”

“Hey, come on, do you hate me that much?”

“I can have lots of babies!”

It was just these kinds of phrases over and over with the focal point being marriage. She left no space for me to interrupt or reject any of it. Even though I was just focused on reading my book in the burger shop, she just kept staring at me and proposing.

And then, *that* situation happened.

“You let her escape, didn’t you?! You let the girl you brought over slip out just now!”

Two days had passed since the underwear incident, and Yume was suddenly yelling at me and lobbing accusations. From what I could discern, there had apparently been shoes at our front entrance that she didn’t recognize. But there was no way that could be true.

I figured that she was probably just seeing things, but then she showed me a video. I couldn’t just shrug this off as a joke anymore. The only kind of person who could wear shoes *that* small was someone who was Minami-san’s size.

The front door was unlocked, which meant that someone without a key to the house had just left. If that was the case, then how did they get in?

I had an idea of what had happened. When I came home, I went to my room, but had a feeling that I’d forgotten to lock the door. But when I went back downstairs to check, it was locked. Most likely, those shoes were already at our front door, and I just hadn’t noticed.

She got me. Minami-san usually stuck with me as I walked home, and today was no different. She followed me all the way home. If she stuck around, she probably could’ve figured out that I forgot to lock the door just by listening.

It was eccentric behavior to be sure, but that was the only explanation. The fact that she didn’t hide her shoes pointed to this being an impulsive crime—she’d lost herself in the heat of the moment.

Kawanami’s ominous words about what Akatsuki Minami had done in middle school played again in my head. I told Yume to check her room and used that time to call Kawanami.

Kawanami took no time to confirm my theory. “Just as you guessed, she broke into her boyfriend’s room once.” *I knew it...*

He continued on. “She did break in, but she didn’t take anything. She just cleaned, took a crap ton of pictures like it was some kinda crime scene, and for some reason, there were a lot more dirty pictures on his computer.”

“More? Not less?”

“Yeah. She’s the type to completely match her partner’s preferences.”

I don’t know why, but the fact that they had *increased* was scarier than if they had decreased.

“At any rate, there wasn’t any real damage done, right? Then—”

“No, there was. She swapped his pillow cover with a new one.”

“Oh...”

I suddenly remembered something that Yume had told me about her embarrassing past. Did these kinds of girls really like collecting this stuff so much? Either way, I had no idea how to break this to Yume.

Hey, your friend suddenly turned into a stalker. Like I could say that! That’d freak her the hell out. But how was I supposed to warn her?

I was so sure that Minami-san had been in Yume’s room, but then Yume came back and said, “Everything looked normal.”

That’s what she said, so Minami-san hadn’t entered Yume’s room after all. There was no disputing that fact. So then where had she gone? She’d gone so far as to break into our house, so what had she done?

And with that, we’re all caught up. Now I’m sure that it’s clear what the scene before me meant in my eyes. Akatsuki Minami’s objective was to become Yume Irido’s family. Marrying me was merely a means to that end. Until she lost interest, she wanted nothing more than to be Yume’s family.

Quick reminder that there are only four people in our household. With that said, let’s look at the scene before me once more.

There are five chairs set at our dining table.

◇

“She crossed a line,” Kawanami declared with a stern, reliable-sounding voice.

I’d returned to my room and was once again talking to Kawanami over the phone.

“Sounds like she hasn’t learned her lesson. All right, I guess that’s it. I don’t want to do this, but I guess I gotta step up to the plate. Heh heh.”

“You sound pretty excited, actually.”

Where did that reliable tone go? I’m kinda freaking out over here.

“What are you planning on doing? Do you have a plan?” I asked.

“Of course. She needs to give up on Irido-san, right? Then you have one hand you can play that’s worked throughout history.”

I had no clue what parts of history he was talking about, but I decided to listen to what he had to say.

“Mizuto Irido, go to Irido-san and tell her this,” Kawanami said sternly.

I severely regretted just obediently listening to him.

Yume

Mizuto’s request was far beyond anything that I’d ever thought he’d ask.

“Go on a date with me tomorrow.”

The Ex-Couple Try Dating (Part 2 of 2)

“You shitty bookworm.” “You shitty mystery fangirl.”

Mizuto

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called girlfriend during eighth and ninth grade. We may have been together for about a year and a half, but the ratio of dates to relationship length was depressingly low, which wasn’t too surprising given how our range of operation was even smaller than that of stray cats.

When determining our destination for the day, we would pretty much always decide between the same three options—the library, the bookstore, or the used bookstore.

Apparently, a typical date for normal couples consisted of karaoke, a movie, dinner, and/or a walk along the Kamo river, but Ayai and I weren’t really the “go outside” type; we much preferred staying at home. That’s why neither of us saw a point in forcing ourselves to go out to unfamiliar places just to conform to what was “normal.”

The fact that neither of us had experience in these normie dating spots was precisely why today’s date would be fully in unfamiliar territory.

It was Saturday morning, and I’d woken up much earlier than usual. I got dressed and left the house without seeing Yume.

We agreed to meet in front of the Kyoto Tower as per the instructions of the guy who had gotten me into this situation. According to him, it was more date-like if we met up there.

I got off the subway at Kyoto Station and left through the Hachijo West Side exit in order to get to my *first* destination, the Night Bus Lounge, which was not too far away. For those unfamiliar, these kinds of lounges were essentially relaxation areas (with fancy bathrooms) that one could only enter if they paid.

Fortunately, the price wasn't too outlandish and was pretty affordable for students.

As I entered the area, Kogure Kawanami turned his head towards me without getting up from his seat. He was wearing a casual dress shirt and capri shorts—a look that only suited slightly frivolous-looking guys like him.

"Yo, Irido. Jeez, what are you wearing? Where do you think you're going, a convenience store?!" He let out a sigh of disbelief as if he was lamenting something.

"Obviously not."

"Then put more effort into your appearance!"

I didn't know what he meant. What was wrong with what I was wearing? I had just done the same thing as always: I'd opened my drawers, pulled out whatever was on top, and put that on.

"Well, I can't say I'm too surprised. I had a feeling you'd be *that* kinda guy."

"What kinda guy?"

"The kinda guy who doesn't change anything up even for a date. Girls swipe left on guys like you."

How rude! I've never received any complaints about my outfit.

"So, that being said, there ain't much time, so we're gonna change you into an actual outfit right here."

"What I'm wearing is good enough."

"Do you have ears?! I'm telling you, it's *not*! Ugh, lemme remind you what the point of today is."

Kawanami pushed me into a fitting room and threw me some new clothes. He even had a pair of shoes for me in my size. Had he really prepared all of this just for me? How many books could I buy for the price of this outfit? Why was he so desperate? This wasn't even *his* date. Gross.

"You're shooting your best friend quite the ungrateful look, considering he's breaking his back to help both you *and* Irido-san."

“Sorry, I can’t lie to myself. I’m kinda grossed out.”

“Don’t reject me like I confessed to you! Whatever, I’ll forgive you anyway. After all, one man’s tastes are another man’s distastes.”

You’re forgiving me? Also, what’s that about “tastes”? Are you saying dressing me up is a taste of yours? Oh god, ew.

“Listen up, Irido. The purpose of your date today is to make that nutjob of a girl, Akatsuki Minami, give up on Irido-san. She’s a rare breed of cheerful extrovert, but a nutjob nonetheless.” He reconfirmed the mission overview for today in a way that backed me into a corner.

After I finished changing, Kawanami spread gel across my head to flatten the hairs that had been sticking up.

“We’re making Irido-san’s ‘brother lover’ declaration into a reality. If Minami knows that Irido-san’s only got eyes for you, any aspirations she had of becoming her family will be blown away. If we’re gonna pull this off, you gotta make Irido-san fall head over heels for you, get really lovey-dovey with you, and break Minami’s heart to bits and pieces.”

According to Kawanami, once Minami-san would catch wind of Yume and I going on a date, she’d definitely come to watch. I understood his logic, but...

“What’s the matter? You’re about to go out with the hottest girl of our freshman class. Why d’ya look so grim about it?”

“I can’t tell Yume why we’re going on this date because I don’t want to tell her the truth about Minami-san. That means that I actually have to try—and I really mean *try*—to make her fall for me. I can’t imagine anything more depressing.”

“I think it’s gonna be easier than ya think. Just my two cents,” he said, snickering.

It was obvious from both his laugh and his words that he was just talking out of his ass and had no intentions of taking responsibility for any of this whatsoever.

This entire plan was clearly crafted by Kawanami according to his own tastes,

so of course I had my reservations, but as much as I didn't want to admit it, I wasn't able to come up with anything better.

After the honeymoon period of being broken up, here I was, trying to make my ex fall in love with me again. God, I hated how I was basically like those loser guys who would go crawling back to their old girlfriends.

While I continued to lament my current situation, Kawanami finished his work on me. He looked over me, his subject, closely and then said in a low voice, "Oh my..."

"If all this crap looks so bad on me, then don't dress me up with it in the first place!"

Fashion was just a concept and not one that suited me in the first place. You can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig. In that same way, wearing more expensive clothes didn't change who I was inside—it just exemplified the stark contrast.

What a waste of time. Just as I went to mess up the hair that had been fixed into place like a wax doll, Kawanami frantically stopped me.

"W-Wait! What are you doing?!"

I don't think I've ever seen Kawanami with a more serious face than the one he had at that moment.

"Just go! Go like this! You'll understand."

Was he saying that I should go out and embarrass myself like this? What did he want from me? Did he want this date to succeed or fail?

I huffed and left the lounge. As I walked away, I thought I felt more eyes on me than usual.

Yume

Maybe a bit more to the right. Ah, too far. A little to the left. Got it! Wait... I repeatedly adjusted my bangs while using my phone in place of a hand mirror.

Currently, I was standing in front of the Kyoto Tower Sando shopping area with my back to the candle-like white tower while I waited for my little

stepbrother.

Under normal circumstances, I would have never agreed to go on a date with him, but since he'd enforced the rule-breaking penalty on me, I had no choice. But now that I thought about it, wasn't going on a date also breaking the rules?

"No, it's normal for close siblings to go out together on weekends, right? And they go out of their way to meet up at a place that's not near home... Yeah, that's totally a thing!"

This was just another facet of our lives as stepsiblings. This wasn't some kind of romantic venture between a boy and a girl, and it had absolutely nothing to do with our past relationship! One hundred percent unrelated!

I kept anxiously glancing at the clock while fidgeting with my bangs, trying to get them right. I could feel warmhearted gazes from people passing by.

Ever since I'd changed my looks, I'd gotten a little used to more people looking at me, but what was with these warm, doting looks? Even the guys who'd usually hit on any girl they saw were just shooting me encouraging glances.

What's their deal?! Is it so weird for me to be nervously fixing my bangs?! Or what? Is there something wrong with my outfit? Is it my fault for putting effort into coordinating an outfit for a date?! Ugh, this is so uncomfortable!

"I wonder who she's waiting for."

"With those looks? Definitely a hottie."

I could hear people whispering about me. My more sophisticated look was a double-edged sword. When I used to wait for him, nobody had even noticed me, but now, it was like people were getting *excited* for me.

This could mean bad news for me. After all, the guy coming to meet me here didn't even know the definition of "fashion." He was hopeless when it came to dressing himself up. I might be tooting my own horn here, but we were worlds apart when it came to style.

I was ready to get teased due to who I was waiting for, but just as I was steeling my will to shrug off the disappointment from the onlookers, a cool, low

voice called out to me.

“Sorry I’m late.”

Mizuto

“Sorry I’m late,” I called out to Yume who was leaning against the wall.

As soon as I did, Yume looked up at me and let out a weird squeal. Given that dumb of a reaction, she must’ve been really shocked by how I looked.

I knew it. I scowled. *This outfit doesn’t suit me at all!* In terms of looks, I stuck out like a sore thumb next to her, but Kawanami had been weirdly pushy that I went out like this, so I had.

I could feel the surprised stares of the heartless people around us. One *could* say that, in contrast to me, Yume was a *little* cute appearance-wise... But whatever, it didn’t change the fact that she was meeting up with a lame-looking lanky guy. I assumed their surprise came from that.

I don’t usually care what others think, but right then, I definitely felt uncomfortable. *I’m gonna get you for this, Kawanami!*

“Um...” Yume blinked multiple times and shakily pointed her finger at me. “You *are* Mizuto Irido, right? My little stepbrother.”

“I *am* Mizuto Irido, yeah. Your *big* stepbrother.”

Isn’t it obvious?

Yume’s gaze ran from my head to my feet and then from my feet to my head. She looked me up and down over and over until finally, her shoulders began to tremble.

She covered her mouth with both of her hands as she let out a, “S-So—”

Yume

COOL! I screamed this internally while checking out the guy before me. He wasn’t wearing anything especially standout, but the light-colored vest, shirt, and jeans combo he had on emphasized a clean look.

It was a safe, low-risk outfit that wouldn't embarrass any girl that he walked with. But despite how normal it was...it was *so good*.

His symmetrical facial features made for an intelligent look. Paired with his slightly troubled expression, the contrast was delicious. My maternal instincts began to kick in, and I kinda wanted to make him even more troubled.

But even so, between the collarbone that peeked out from his shirt collar and his wrists that protruded from his sleeves—together, they all produced a strange eroticism.

The cherry on top was his dark yet casual expression and posture. *Um, what's going on? Are you okay? Do you want to talk about it?* I really wanted to ask, but I couldn't get the words out.

Oh god. Who the heck is this intellectual yet imperfect-looking young man? Oh god, oh god. Did my fantasies materialize?! Oh god, oh god, oh god. I feel like I'm flying away from reality. Oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god!

"If you've got something to say, I wish you'd just come out and say it." Mizuto averted his eyes out of embarrassment while running his hands through his flowing bangs.

The people around us were suddenly set abuzz from that movement of his. I couldn't blame them, it was too hot. Of course he was catching their attention. It was like he'd jumped straight out of an otome game.

This was my ex and my little stepbrother. I wanted to scream it out from the rooftops with pride, but I held myself back.

I-I need to calm down. Don't be fooled by his looks. No matter how much I check him out, those are just his usual long legs that are being emphasized in those jeans. Ultimately, he's still the same guy. Even if his outward appearance is more ideal now, it doesn't mean he's better on the inside!

"I-It's nothing. More importantly, if we're going somewhere, let's get going. We're already late because of you." I folded my arms together and killed my bewilderment, somehow regaining my usual composure.

Phew, that was a close one. Good thing he hasn't really changed at all.

He wasn't a gentleman who would grab my hand and pull me away with fifty percent kindness and fifty percent forcefulness, so thank goodness for—

"You're right. Let's get going," he said, grabbing my hand and pulling me away with about eighty percent kindness and twenty percent forcefulness.

The girls around us squealed. I internally screamed, dying on the spot from my heart beating out of my chest.

Mizuto

Always walk on the side closest to the street. If it looks like she's about to bump into someone, just casually pull her away. Bring up some topics while at a red light. When something catches her interest, focus on that. One by one, I tried the tactics that Kawanami had ordered me to do.

Of course, I knew that this wasn't *really* me. Even on our date, I wouldn't be treating her like a delicate princess. Speaking of which, the princess in question was currently in a bad mood and keeping her mouth tightly shut. Maybe she could tell that I wasn't very good at this. People all around us wouldn't stop staring, so we obviously stood out quite a bit.

I wasn't gonna get her to fall for me like this. Maybe it was better for me just to act like I usually did. Every time I felt like I was ready to revert to my usual self, though, my phone would buzz, which was a signal from Kawanami telling me that things were going well. But...*were* they? I casually looked at Yume, whose lips were tightly pursed.

There was no way she'd be into my fake niceties. She had to be completely grossed out.

Yume

This is...great! What is going on *with him today?! He's seriously a gentleman! He's being so nice! Every last thing he's doing hits me just right! O-Oh no.* I pursed my lips.

If I started grinning like an idiot in public all of a sudden, in full view of other people, I'd look like a freak. I needed to hold it in. *Hold it in. Hold it in.*

“Wow, look at those two!”

“What a cute couple!”

A couple who passed by us said this pretty quietly, but I still heard them and could feel the corner of my mouth twitching.

This year, I’d worked so hard to change my class from plain girl to legitimately beautiful girl (is it wrong to call myself that?), and now with his sudden change, Mizuto had transformed into an intellectual young man. It made sense that we were the center of attention. We were worlds apart from the low-effort, frivolous couples around us. The two of us walking together made for a picturesque scene that exuded elegance.

Out of the countless people swarming around us, we were standing at the top. The same people who, just a year ago, were nowhere near the top—the rejects of the classroom—were standing at the top! Us!!!

It felt so good, I could hardly stand it. I even forgot to talk to Mizuto as we were walking. I just kept listening to the voices around us.

“Wow, they’re really close.”

“Hey, don’t stare so much!”

It’s okay! In fact, you should look more! We’re not actually that close, though!

Mizuto

“Wow, they’re really close.”

“Hey, don’t stare so much!”

It took everything I had to not turn around and glare at them. Instead, I glanced behind us, and in the midst of the pedestrians, I saw a couple walking together with a very noticeable height difference... Kogure Kawanami and Akatsuki Minami.

Minami-san must have caught Kawanami while tailing us, but now it seemed like they were walking together. This had to have been the strangest double date ever, but I guess it was much healthier than having two people individually tail us.

Minami-san's small stature was exponentially accentuated when standing next to Kawanami. No matter how short she was, though, her presence was anything but. She was wearing fake glasses and a hat as some sort of a disguise, but I could immediately tell it was her.

She also had on an oversized shirt with unfamiliar letters that she wore like a dress. Her bare legs were left exposed. Her outfit overall had a very boyish and free-willed impression to it, but on the flip side, she was emitting a dark aura that engulfed and stuck to her body.

Suddenly, I remembered something that Kawanami had told me before I'd left.

Listen, Irido. Whatever you do, don't forget to always *compliment a girl on her clothes. No matter what. Got it?*

Hm. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't done that yet. I'd been too worried about how I looked and had completely lost my chance. But right now, I knew exactly where my target was, and I knew she was being marked. It was a good time to let the first metaphorical punch fly into Minami-san's face.

I looked at Yume, who was walking beside me. Compared to the boyish Minami-san, Yume's outfit was much more girly—the exact opposite.

She was wearing a subdued, spring-colored blouse and a frilly, knee-length skirt. Her long legs were wrapped in elegant bluish tights. I wondered if she was embarrassed to show off her bare legs.

On her head, she wore a red-tinted beret that slightly swayed with her long, black hair in the wind. It was almost scary how much she resembled a refined lady at an artsy university. It didn't feel like she belonged with us mere peasants.

It just suddenly hit me: she must have put a lot of effort into her appearance. Her outfit gave me the impression that she had put in more effort than me, the person who had asked her out on a date (albeit on an order). Why? There was no way that she knew the reason I'd asked her out... Wait, maybe that's precisely why.

She actually believes that I asked her out on a date—a date after who knows

how many months! That's why she's all dressed up! Yume glanced up at me, fluttering her long eyelashes.

I looked away without even thinking. *Shit. She's throwing me off.* This was all because I was doing something out of my comfort zone. This was all Kawanami's fault.

Whatever you do, don't forget... His voice echoed in my head.

Argh. All right, already! I'll compliment her!

"So, you..."

"Hm?"

Yume shot me a dubious look, nearly making me lose my nerve, but I held strong and continued.

"You look really cute today," I managed to get out in a hoarse voice and an unintentionally sarcastic tone.

C-Crap! I messed up! I ended up saying this in my usual tone by accident. This was bad. I knew I needed to salvage this as quickly as I could, so I turned around to face her. Right then, I saw her bright red ears as she turned her head downwards to the ground, gazing down past her skirt.

Then, from behind the curtain of her black hair that hid her face, she said, in a voice even more hoarse than mine, "Th-Thanks..."

Wait, wait, wait! That was *not* the reaction of a girl who'd had a boyfriend before! It was like she was still in her first relationship as a middle schooler.

I let out a sigh. *Good grief!* This was exactly why I couldn't deal with her shy self. It made me feel embarrassed too. *You had your high school glow up, why don't you start acting like it? I guess I need to show you the ropes of how a real, sophisticated person handles themselves.*

"Y-Yeah." My voice cracked as I turned away from her.

Immediately after that, I felt my pocket buzz. *What the hell? Do you have a problem with what I did, Kawanami?! Is it that fun watching us embarrass ourselves, you bastard?!*

A weird silence fell between the two of us. *Jeez, I'm getting nervous about the rest of the date. We haven't even gotten to the main event yet.*

"B-By the way," Yume started, breaking the weird tension between us.

Good job. You have my praise...at least for now.

"Where are we going?"

Oh, right. I hadn't told her yet. We were heading to a place where we could show off how close we were to force Akatsuki Minami to give up. I couldn't come up with a place like that on my own, so I had Kawanami think of one for me...and he did, all the while looking very thoroughly entertained.

What it came down to was this: We probably wouldn't last through the waiting times at the amusement park, so that was out. The movie theater had the problem of us having potentially different tastes in movies, so that was out too. Therefore, the most appropriate place to go to that was popular, appropriately dark, and appropriately fun was...

"The aquarium."

Yume

We really look like a couple, I thought as I stood next to Mizuto, who was paying for our tickets.

The aquarium was a place that only couples and families went to. Why did this guy wanna go there? This wasn't a date—well, no, I guess this *was* a date. This was the most date-like date I'd ever been on. I don't remember going on any dates like this even when we *had* been together. Back then, there'd been the summer festival, the Christmas lights, and— Ahem!

Anyway, I needed to keep my head level and my guard up. He'd caught me by surprise with his compliment, but it had mostly left me confused. Maybe it was best to make my guardedness apparent.

"It's dark in here," Mizuto said. "Don't get separated from me."

"I know! I'm not a child!" I snapped at him.

"Yeah." Mizuto nodded shortly and began walking with me through the dimly

lit aquarium, making sure to match my pace.

Huh? I was pretty short with him there. Where's the snide remark? What about a sarcastic retort? Did you forget your usual annoying sneer? This was really throwing me off.

It would seem that this guy was firmly trying to be in boyfriend-mode for the day. But that wouldn't be enough to get my affection up. It was ridiculous that he might even *think* that.

Not to brag, but I was a very tough nut to crack. To get through to my heart, you'd have to go through layers upon layers of cold, hard ice. For a guy who'd been at odds with me for the better half of a year, my affection level was at absolute zero.

No matter what kind of boyfriend-like actions he performed now, there was no way that there'd be a hot enough blade to cut through to my heart. *But if you insist on trying to make my heart stir, then I'll take you on. Do your best. Just know that your best will always end in failure!*

"Whoa!" he said suddenly as he grabbed my shoulder.

"Sorry 'bout that." A person passing by bowed their head in apology before leaving.

"I didn't realize the aquarium was so popular. Did they bump into you at all?"

Shoulder! Right by my ear! Holding me! Whispering!!! His face is so close! He smells kinda nice! Oh my god, I need a warning before you do something like this!!! I need time to mentally prepare! You're so insensitive!!!

"You gonna let go of my shoulder any time soon?" I curtly asked him, focusing a lot of effort into making sure that my expression was utterly neutral. I then looked up and noticed his face was pretty close to my own.

Oh wow, he really does *have a nice face. He has long eyelashes, thin lips, nice skin... Actually, it's kinda scary how nice his skin is. Why can't this happen more often— Wait, no, I don't think my body could handle this on a more frequent basis.*

"O-Oh, sorry." Mizuto let go of my hand with a guilty look on his face and, to

my chagrin, took half a step away from me.

You didn't have to move that *far away from me.* I coolly pushed my hair off my shoulder. *He might have more game than I thought. I'll leave it at this for now.*

Mizuto

I was met with a fit of snorting laughter.

Strange. I seemed to remember calling Kawanami, not a pig.

"I'm sending you to a slaughterhouse."

"Yo, chill! You're freakin' me out—straight up! I was only tryin' to laugh like a creepy nerd."

"Hm, sounds like you're pretty prejudiced against nerds. Yeah, straight to the slaughterhouse for you."

Thirty minutes had passed since we'd entered the aquarium, and I was already relieving myself in a stall in the men's bathroom. But I didn't need physical relief; I needed *mental* relief. *Dates are hard.*

I wondered how the hell normal couples got through these S-rank missions. She'd glared at me when I saved her from being bumped into, she'd glared at me when we were looking at the fish, and she'd glared at me and gave me absentminded replies when I tried to talk to her. No matter what I did, she just kept glaring at me!

Truth be told, I wanted to die. Without a doubt, the most appropriate book to describe how I felt right now was *No Longer Human*. "I'm going somewhere where there aren't any women" is about right. No, scratch that. There's too much depth to that quote to really match what I was going through.

"Help me, Kawanami," I pleaded. "You don't want me to end up like Osamu Dazai, do you?"

"But you'd be immortalized as a literary master. Wouldn't that be nice?" Kawanami said through a laugh. Then he spoke again, but it was clearly meant for someone else. "Huh? Nothing. Just go look at the fish or something and

calm down, shrimp."

He was more than likely talking to Minami-san. So casually, at that. I found myself a bit taken aback by it.

"Be serious!" I chided. "The atmosphere is so bad that I'm gonna get an ulcer if this keeps up!"

"Huh? For real? You think it's that bad?"

"I don't *think* it is, I *know* it is!"

"True, it's hard to watch you two," he said, snorting again.

He's laughing at my misfortune when he's the one who put this all together?! What a douche!

"Anyway," Kawanami continued, "there's one last thing I can say: you're on your own out there, soldier."

"You're leaving me for dead! Do your damn job, commander!"

"Ah, gotta go. A certain someone's about to explode. Fight the good fight!"

Before I could protest, Commander Kawanami ended the call. If this were a war, his actions would result in his subordinates stabbing him in the back. *You're gonna pay for this!*

I let out a sigh, pocketed my phone, and left the bathroom angry. What was I even doing on this date, and what for? It felt like my only purpose in being here was for that bastard's entertainment.

In fact, why should *I* have to protect her at all? *She's* the one who made friends with that psycho, so *she's* the one that should be dealing with this. Why should I be trying so hard for someone who isn't even my girlfriend?!

No matter how this had all begun, it was a fact that I was the one who had asked her out today. Technically, she was using her weekend to be here, so I didn't want to just selfishly cut the date short. Even so, I was *not* happy. I wondered how I got this far without even taking a step back to think about everything.

Yume and I had decided to reconvene by the vending machines near the

bathrooms. I'd taken a decent amount of time to complain to Kawanami, so she'd more than likely be irritated that I'd kept her waiting for so long. As I arrived at our meeting place, I prepared myself to just grin and bear the biting remarks waiting for me, but there were none.

In fact, she wasn't even there. I looked all around, but there was nobody in front of the vending machines. I looked behind me at the women's bathroom and saw a line of people, but no Yume. There was no sign of her at all.

"Huh?"

Yume

I was wandering through a hallway where fish swam on either side of me when my phone rang. As much as I didn't want to, I slowly slid my finger across the screen to answer.

"Hello...?"

"Hey, where are you?"

My body stiffened as schools of fish I didn't recognize swam by me. As much as I didn't want to, I knew that I needed to come clean and tell him the truth.

"I...don't know."

"Oh..."

The women's bathroom had been too crowded. The line to get in was so long, it snaked around the corner. That's when I had the brilliant idea of going to a different bathroom. I thought that I'd be able to be back in a flash, but I'd miscalculated three things.

First, the other bathroom was much farther away than I'd anticipated. Second, the aquarium was much more confusing to navigate than I'd thought. Third, I was awful at reading maps. Actually, that last one is less of a miscalculation and more of a fact. I couldn't help but wonder how the hell I could read floor plans in mystery novels but not a simple aquarium map.

Either way, this was how I got...lost. *Argh, how could this happen to me?! Why'd I go off on my own when I don't even know my way around here in the*

first place?! Don't do things you just can't do, stupid! Why can't you ever learn your lesson? Why?!

"S-Sorry..." I said weakly, writhing in deep regret.

An unpleasant storm of personal attacks was brewing, and I could picture his face pelting me with them. I had no right to complain. All I could do was ride it out...but the storm never came.

"You don't need to apologize. It's my fault too. I should've been paying more attention." These words spilled out into my ear from the other side of the phone—these kind and gentle words.

This was completely different from the Mizuto Irido I knew—he was actually being considerate. My chest hurt, not necessarily because I was happy or even weirded out. It was like a sandstorm was raging inside me.

"All right, here's what we'll do: tell me what kind of fish you're by, and I'll come find—"

"No... This isn't right." I couldn't hold back any longer.

"Huh?"

I knew that these weren't the words I should've said, but they spilled out before I even realized. What was done was done. Just as there was no use crying over spilt milk, there was no use trying to take back what had already come out of my mouth. I knew that.

The resulting silence was so painful that it hit deep in my soul. After a mere three seconds, I couldn't take it anymore and hung up. I sat down on a nearby bench, stared at the palely lit ceiling, and let out a deep sigh.

Now I've done it. How can someone who's so bad at talking in the first place always end up saying all the wrong things? What's wrong with me? What do I want from him? If I wanted us to be good siblings, then there shouldn't have been a problem with him treating me kindly; it should have been exactly what I wanted. Truthfully, the way Mizuto was acting today was very, very...nice.

It was better than the unpleasant storm of personal attacks, better than the storm of sarcastic remarks, and a billion times better than the irritating,

troublesome quarrels we'd have.

But even so, what I said to him was essentially me seeking out one of those quarrels. What did I want? What do I want to become? Didn't I break up with him because I hated all the fighting?

Mizuto

I wandered aimlessly around the aquarium. I was fed up with the confusing, conflicting feelings that filled my chest. It'd been half a year since we'd broken up, and with each passing day, I'd grown to hate the girl known as Yume Ayai more and more until the point where every last thing she did and said pissed me off. That hurt more than anything.

These used to be things about her that I loved—that I treasured more than anything—but one after another, they had all, bar none, become detestable things that caused me great pain. That's why I had broken up with her.

The answer was as clear as day: even if I'd grown to hate her, it'd be okay as long as we weren't together.

"No... This isn't right," she'd said.

But you... *You* think that it'd be better if we continued that contentious relationship? You think it'd be better if we were in a relationship where we hated each other, detested each other, and hurt each other? Was I wrong for having suggested that we break up? Had it been a misplaced kindness?

Before I knew it, I froze in the middle of the hall while families and couples passed by. *Then why didn't you say that back then? Did you think you'd bother me by saying you didn't want to break up?*

"Bother..."

Now that I thought about it, this reminded me of a similar—no, the exact same situation in the past where she'd gotten lost and I had to go look for her. If I remembered right, it was when we hadn't officially begun dating yet, but to me, it was the first date of my life.

Yume

That was probably the first time I'd ever mustered up the courage to do something. Back when we were just friends talking in the school library every day, I invited him to my hometown's summer festival. Thinking back, it probably wasn't the best decision to ask a guy who hated crowds to a festival of all things, but since he was *actually* a considerate person back then, he just softly smiled and agreed to go.

When we arrived, there were even more people than I'd anticipated, and of course, I got lost after being separated from him.

It was the first date of my life, and yet I got lost. I was ashamed. Plus, every moment that I spent being lost was a moment of our precious time together wasted. Then, to add insult to injury, the straps of my geta sandals had begun hurting, essentially becoming foot torture devices. Add all of this up, and you get me—the girl who wanted to disappear more than anyone.

I was somehow able to break out of the sea of people and crouch between two booths. My phone started ringing again. It was Irido-kun. He was so worried about me, but all I could do was cry while sniffling and apologize.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," I sobbed. "I'm so sorry for bothering you."

But he just told me to wait where I was and hung up.

He must be so mad. With that thought in mind, I only grew more depressed. I was so helplessly pathetic. I was irredeemably clumsy, bad at everything, and couldn't make anything go right for me... I'd thought that maybe, just maybe...this time, things might've gone right for me, but look where that got me.

I've never really liked myself. I hated how I couldn't do anything that normal people could. I couldn't talk like a normal person or live like a normal person. And I...no longer had a father either.

I wanted to live my life without bothering anyone. At the very least, I wanted the person I liked to not think of me as a bother. But I was too greedy, too full of myself, and too reckless, and this was the result.

The sounds of the festival started growing more distant. It felt like the ground

was swallowing me up, but I wasn't bothered by it. How nice would it be if I could just disappear? The world would be better off without me.

My mind began drifting away from this world. I needed to keep myself behind tall, impenetrable walls like the Great Wall of China so that I could never be involved with anyone again, so that I would never bother anyone ever again, so that— *Huh?*

A canned drink was in front of my eyes. As I looked up, there stood Irido-kun looking down on me with a soft smile. He crouched down before me, his hand still outstretched with the can in it.

He looked straight into my eyes and said, "So, Ayai, I'll be honest. I'm beat from running through the crowd trying to find you. Not to mention, I'm also kinda mentally beat from hearing you cry over the phone."

I sniffled a little at those words.

"But, that's not enough for me to be disillusioned," he continued with a smile. "After all, I know you better than that."

I looked at the can in his hand. Now that I was actually looking at it, I saw that it was the kind of black tea that I'd mentioned liking once before.

"I know you're clumsy and not the best at a lot of things. Now I know that you get lost easily. Despite knowing all of that, here I am."

He pushed the can into my hands, and the smooth, cold material sank into me.

"I don't want you to be afraid of bothering me. You can bother me all you like."

I held the can in my hands and hung my head. Something inside me felt like it was about to explode. I couldn't look at his face or it'd all come pouring out, and I'd end up showing him an even more shameful sight than I already was.

I couldn't believe how hot my face was, so I tried to cool it down by taking a drink, but I couldn't pull the tab open.

"It won't open..."

"Let me try," Irido-kun said, gently smiling.

Just from this one event, the worst first date ever became an irreplaceable memory, and I knew that I wanted to go with him again next year no matter what. Next time, I wouldn't get lost, and we'd actually be able to enjoy the festival.

But there would be no next year for us.

Right before summer break in the following year, we got into a fight and weren't really in a "date" mood. During our one month or so summer break, we didn't make any plans whatsoever. Even so, if nothing else, I wanted to go to the festival.

I walked through the crowd by myself and crouched down at the same spot where he'd found me the year before. Then I just watched and watched as the crowd passed by and waited for someone who was never coming.

I began imagining what would have happened if we hadn't had that fight. Right now, we would've been together in that crowd... *I'm so weak. I'm such a weakling.* I kept clinging on to the past and what could have been instead of facing reality.

Besides, we hadn't even made plans to meet up, so there was no reason for me to hold on to that wonderful memory and expect him to just conveniently show up in front of me. I couldn't be like that.

If I wanted to make up with him, the simplest, most direct way would have been to call him or something and *tell him*. The fact that I couldn't even do that much meant that whatever I was hoping for would never come to fruition.

I should just go home... I'd grown bored of watching the couples and families in the aquarium. I might have been completely lost, but if I just followed the crowd, I was sure that I'd reach the exit eventually. Just as I thought that, I looked up, and there was a canned drink in front of my eyes.

"Huh?" I looked up. Standing there was Mizuto, looking down on me with a soft smile.

Aside from being all dressed up, he looked just like he did back then. One thing was *exactly* the same—the drink. It was the same black tea he'd brought

me before.

Then, in a voice that didn't have a single shred of kindness but was instead filled with sarcasm, he said, "Your escort has arrived, milady. Perhaps you might consider fixing your awful sense of direction?"

Mizuto

I said this in a tone that completely threw whatever affection I'd worked so hard to gain today out the window. In response to my teasing, snide comment, Yume's eyes opened wide with surprise.

During that summer festival back then, I'd run around looking for her even though I wasn't good with crowds. I was forced to hear her sobs over the phone. Then, at the end of it all, I had to open the can of black tea that I'd gotten for her.

On the flip side, though, she'd done absolutely nothing to raise *my* affection. Objectively, that date had been an absolute disaster. Had she done anything to make me happy? Nope. All she'd done was piss me off.

Even so, how come I couldn't stop thinking about how all I wanted to do was be by her side after that date? Was it just some kind of protective instinct? Or maybe I was envious of how easily she could show someone her vulnerability?

Either way, as soon as I lay my eyes on the girl sitting on the bench, I knew. This was Yume Irido. She was my new, detestable stepsister. A completely different person than Yume Ayai.



She was someone that I'd yet to make memories with.

Yume fixed her eyes on the condensation-coated can I held out in front of her, then accepted it with both hands. In a voice void of any weakness, coupled with a mischievous smile, she said, "Good work. But allow me to offer you a piece of advice: you'd do well to grow out of your bookworm phase."

"What did you just say?! Them's fightin' words! I challenge you to a book war!"

"Then I'll go first! Ango Sakaguchi, *The Non-serial Murder Incident*."

"My turn, I choose Ogai Mori's *The Dancing Girl*."

"Don't remind me of Toyotaro! He's the shittiest protagonist!"

"The entirety of *The Non-serial Murder Incident* was just one shitty character dying after another!"

"Yeah, well, pretty much all of them die in the end, so that's fine!"

After exchanging these light greetings, I sat next to Yume.

She stared down at her hands, the can still moist and its small tab still intact. She slowly hooked her thin finger in the tab and, after a little bit of a struggle, there was a hiss of air. She'd opened it all by herself without even breaking a sweat.

I opened my can too. After some time, we both took a sip. The families and couples continued to pass by us. I started wondering which category we fell into, or maybe we were something entirely different.

In the past, when I sat next to Yume Ayai, I'd be so nervous, my heart would beat out of control, my hands would sweat, and my whole body would feel like it was made of stone. But as I was sitting next to *this* girl, my heart didn't race one bit. Of course it didn't. I had no obligation to make her love me. I— No, *we* were freed from that obligation.

"Hey." Yume took the can away from her mouth. "Doesn't it look like there could be a corpse in that tank over there?"

I followed suit. "You need to be institutionalized, Ms. Mystery-novels-for-

brains. You sound like someone who barely survived a supernatural event and lost her mind."

"What? You don't think so? You can't look at that rock that looks like the antenna from the Yamahoko procession at the Gion Festival and *not* think that it'd be an interesting case if there was a corpse skewered through it."

"I would never even dream of anything so blasphemous or dangerous. If I were to fantasize about something, it'd at least be about a man-eating shark in the Kamo river that appears every now and then to eat unsuspecting couples."

"How is that any less dangerous than what I said?! Besides, there's no way that a shark could move around in a river that shallow!"

"Sharks have a lot of different abilities, so it all works out!"

"No, they don't! They're just fish!"

"Oh, all right then, how about we go confirm this? Luckily for us, we're in an aquarium. Once you see the unlimited power of sharks, you'll be on your knees, shaking in fear!"

"Where is this confidence coming from...? Your idea is much more arrogant than a killer who sends out a calling card while assuming the name of a legend."

We both stood up and threw our empty cans into a nearby recycling bin.

I was beginning to understand. We had no obligation to make the other person like us nor any reason to hate each other. We were just stepsiblings who used to date. Thinking about it like that really put it into perspective. It was better that we didn't get along while *not* in a relationship rather than while *in* a relationship.

"You shitty mystery fangirl."

"You shitty bookworm."

We hurled insults at each other without any context. It was painless.

Yume

“Eek!” I wailed. “It splashed me!”

“Hey, don’t hide behind me like it’s natural!”

“Shut up, meat shield! I can’t hear the dolphins!”

“So you’re saying that the trills of a dolphin are more important than the words coming out of my mouth? Screw you! How about you let *your* shirt get more wet— I sentence you to give a little show of your own!”

“Wha— No! Nuh-uh! Not in this outfit, you idiot!”

Mizuto and I were getting our money’s worth from the tickets we’d bought. We had our hearts warmed by watching the cute penguins, used each other as shields during the dolphin show, and had lunch at the aquarium café. Of course, we did all of this while bad-mouthing each other back and forth.

After we left, we stopped by the bookstore, did some shopping, and by the time we got home it was night.

“I’m home!” I called out, exhausted, but there was no response from the living room.

Apparently our parents had not come back yet.

“God, why am I so tired? I shouldn’t have gotten dressed up like that.” Mizuto walked in after me, taking off his shoes and rubbing his shoulder while rolling his neck.

Oh, right... This is the last time I’ll see those clothes on him. It’d be a lie if I said I wasn’t disappointed, especially given the fact that knowing him, he’d flat out refuse to put them on again even if I asked. But then again, that was fine. Truth be told, part of me was already tired of his outfit after being exposed to it for an entire day. I’m sure I’d gotten my fill. *I should change out of these clothes too.*

As I headed towards the stairs, I heard Mizuto say, “Ah crap, when did I get this many LINE messages from Kawanami?” Mizuto had begun heading to the bathroom, presumably to mess up his hair, when he’d stopped in his tracks after looking at his phone.

Then, while looking at the screen, he took a case out of his pocket, and pulled out black-framed glasses.

“Hnngh?!”

Glasses. Glasses! That’s right, this guy wore glasses with blue-light-filtering lenses whenever he used a computer or phone, and he was putting them on now. It was like my delusions had come to life. There, in front of me, was a guy who looked like a college tutor.

H-He’s wearing them! Spurred on by his intellectual look, something inside me burst.

“What’s got his panties in a bunch? Sheesh, whatever, I’m gonna fix my hair...”

“STOP!!!” I grabbed Mizuto’s shoulder with all my strength just as he reached for the bathroom door.

Mizuto jumped and looked behind him, the eyes behind the lenses widening like plates.

“Wh-What? Stop?”

“Y-Your hair... Mess up. Not yet. Don’t!”

My words might have been all over the place, but I think he got the gist. He looked at me through those black frames, furrowing his brow.

“Okay... Why not?”

“Because you look hot like this!” is what I wanted to say, but of course I couldn’t. I-I needed to think! This wasn’t the time to be slow on my feet! This was where I made my stand. This was where I proved that I wasn’t the same girl I was in middle school!

It was frightening how good the glasses looked on him. I needed a way to prolong my enjoyment of this young man who was the perfect amount of ennui and intellect. *Think, Yume, think!*

I began using all my brain cells, even ones that I’d never used before, turning my mind inside out in order to look for a solution. All that thinking led me to remember a certain something. *I got it!*

“Th-This is *your* penalty for the underwear incident! I need to document my little brother dressing up in his finest clothes. It’s my duty as an older sister!”

Mizuto

Due to the underwear incident, we'd decided that we could each issue one order to each other as long as it was acceptable in the public eye. I had been successful in using my penalty to take Yume on a date with me, but Yume had yet to use hers, which was something that I'd forgotten this entire time. *Welp, never thought she'd use it like this.*

"Sit on the couch. Yeah! Cross your legs... Perfect! Now open this book on your lap... Excellent! Oh, and rest your head in your hand... YES!"

The next moment, the room was filled with a flurry of shutter sounds coming from Yume's phone. She took a picture from in front of me, from each side of me, and from a slightly low angle, while I froze in place and did my best to resist scratching my face. The only reason I didn't was because, well, she just looked so happy.

"Eheh. Heh heh... Heh heh heh."

She looked even happier than when we'd kissed for the first time.

"Hey, your expression doesn't look like anything appropriate for an older sister to be looking at her little stepbrother with."

"Huh? Excuse me? Could you not get so full of yourself *just* because you look a little hot?!"

"O-Okay..."

"Your slender figure...your smooth, silky hair...your long fingers, and your slightly intimidating eyes... You may be the perfect representation of my ideal guy, but don't think that gives you the right to say whatever you want!"

"O-Okay..."

She seemed to really be into this, and I was apparently right in her strike zone. I'd thought she hated this look on me, but I guess my stylist, Kawanami, had done his job perfectly. I started to get a little embarrassed at this point, so I tried turning away and using my hand to cover my mouth.

But doing this seemed to just pull on her heartstrings even more, and the sound of the camera shutter became even faster and more frequent. I guess there was nothing I could do about this humiliation. In the end, it was good that I listened to Kawanami.

“Heh heh heh. There are so many shots of a hottie on my phone...” Yume said with a loose face as she looked at the pictures of me.

Suddenly, I was filled with a great and “noble” desire to further feed her desires. My lips curled into a teasing smile.

“You good with *just* photos?” Here was a guy who had gotten too full of himself. “You may never get a chance like this again. How about I honor one more request of yours, nee-san? Go on, ask me anything.”

“Huh? R-Really? Anything?!”

“As long as it’s within the realm of possibilities.”

“O-Okay! Then...” Her eyes lit up as she jumped back and landed on our L-shaped couch. “I’ll sit here, and I want you to stand behind me, hold me gently, and whisper something into my ear.”

“Uh... *What*?”

“I-It’s part of the penalty! This has absolutely nothing—*nothing*—to do with my fetishes! It’s a perfectly normal and obvious obligation for the younger brother to embrace his older sister and whisper into her ear as she sits on the couch!”

Like hell that kind of obligation exists! Still, though, the power of the penalty was in her hands. I had to obey. I *had* to.

I stood up and circled behind Yume. Even though I was standing behind her, I could tell just how hard her heart was beating, which in turn made me strangely nervous. *Uh, what should I whisper? Maybe something out of a shojo manga? Hm...*

I searched my memory for any lines that I’d heard before that sounded like they could’ve come out of a shojo manga and then finally something popped in my head. *Oh god, am I really gonna say this? Does a guy who says this actually*

exist? Argh! This is so embarrassing!!!

Yume

In the heat of the moment, I had ended up making an incredibly outlandish request, but I didn't care anymore. I was just curious and excited to hear what he'd say. My heart was beating, and I was fidgeting in anticipation for what seemed like forever. By the time I'd adjusted my posture a third time, I could tell that he'd prepared himself and was ready.

Finally. My heart was beating in my ears. *Oh my god, I'm so excited. My body's frozen stiff!* Right as I thought this, I felt his soft embrace envelop my body. Then he leaned in so close that I couldn't feel any space between my ear and his lips, and he whispered in a cool, manly, low voice:

"I'm not letting you go."

My mind went blank after that.

Mizuto

As soon as I whispered those words, I was filled by an intense regret that burst through my entire body. *What the hell did I say?! Go get eaten by a shark!*

Okay, but it really did happen. Those five words had left my mouth. Just as she'd asked, I whispered in her ear—super sweetly too! *All right then, burst out laughing or whatever! Go ahead! My body's ready.* But instead, her pale hands touched my arms that were wrapped around her shoulders.

Yume turned around to look at me with her moist eyes that shone like black diamonds. She got close to me and quietly, in a way that would make the entire world stop to stare, whispered, "I'm not going anywhere."

My mind went blank after that.

Yume

The curtain fell on the events of today's sudden aquarium date, ending with a tragic scene where two corpses had been discovered in the living room.

But with that being said, there were a lot of unsolved mysteries such as the loafers in our front entrance, the reason behind Mizuto inviting me on a date in the first place, and even his dressing up for it. Also, why had I died with Mizuto during the living room photo shoot? What had I done?

It was truly incomprehensible. If this were a mystery novel, I'd give it zero out of five stars. However, if there was something I was certain of, it was that my phone was filled with a splendid amount of hot guy pictures.

"Ah god, he's so hot..."

"Could you not get so infatuated with a picture when the real person is right in front of you?" The plain-looking guy with ruffled hair known as Mizuto had returned.

I looked back and forth between the hot tutor Mizuto (Fake Mizuto) and the real one, comparing them.

"Hey, do you think you could die and be reborn as this?"

"That *is* me. I don't have to die to do that!"

Um, no. Nuh-uh, no way! You're a completely different species altogether. From what I could glean from the conversation I'd overheard, Kawanami was the one who'd given him that look. One of these days, I needed to ask Kawanami to pass down his secrets to me. With them, I could refill this craving whenever I wanted. *I should print these pictures out and hang them above my bed. Eheh heh heh.*

"You really get out of control when something excites you, you know that?"

"Huh?! When have I ever gotten out of control?"

"There's a limit to how oblivious you can be about yourself."

"You're one to talk. You don't even know how good of a face you have!"

"How are you like *this* and still able to pull off your honor roll student act?!"

It’s true that I had a tendency to get a little lost in what I was doing sometimes, but I wasn’t so bad that some socially awkward super-loner with no friends needed to worry over me.

“Mornin’, Yume-chan!”

“Good morning, Minami-san.”

It was Monday at school, and I began conversing with Minami-san and the other friends that I’d made.

“You do anything over the weekend?”

“I was workin’ the entire time!”

“Seriously? I just slept.”

“So jelly!”

“What about you, Yume-chan?”

“I didn’t do anything too special. I just did some reading.”

“You’re such an intellectual! That really suits you, Irido-san.”

I couldn’t tell them that I’d gotten dressed up and went on a date at the aquarium with my little brother. With nobody to confide in, the life that I’d dreamt of in middle school continued.

Mizuto

There is no reward without a price. You have to sacrifice something to get the future that you want. The sad thing about dreams is that the cost to maintain them is never-ending. You have to keep sacrificing in order to continue and protect your dreams.

Yume Irido was happily chatting with her friends. As I stared upon this dreamlike scene, I knew that the goal of that ridiculous operation I’d carried out had succeeded. After that date, Minami-san had completely stopped interacting with me.

Kawanami, who had been observing her, assured me that with the way she

was acting, there was nothing for me to worry about anymore. She was completely out of commission. In his words, “Serves her right!” I’d received his seal of approval, meaning that I could finally rest easy knowing that the danger had been averted.

Even so, I needed to see this through to the very end. It seemed Minami-san had the same thought process as me, ’cause when lunchtime came around, she shot me a look.

I quickly finished my lunch and left the classroom for the school library—the place where she’d proposed to me. As I entered the library, I headed straight for my usual spot in the corner opposite the entrance. This space was almost like a private room thanks to the bookshelves that blocked views. Waiting there was Akatsuki Minami, who’d changed into her literary-girl-esque disguise.

“I’m sorry! I went too far by breaking into your house!” This was the first thing that came out of her mouth. She clapped her hands together and deeply bowed her head in apology. “I didn’t mean anything bad by it! I kinda just lost to temptation after seeing you carelessly leave your door unlocked.”

“Can we talk about why you were even close enough to tell whether or not the door was locked in the first place?!”

Her actions were of someone who had every intention of breaking in. Minami-san slowly looked up at me through her plain-looking black-rimmed glasses and said, “You’re gonna tell Yume-chan about me...aren’t you?”

Normally, that was *exactly* what I’d do. *She’s the very definition of a stalker and a criminal. Not only should I tell Yume, but I should tell the police too!*

“Nah, I won’t tell her as long as you keep yourself in check from now on.”

“Huh? Why not?”

I looked out the window and fidgeted with my bangs. “I don’t wanna make a big deal out of this.”

Images of her happily chatting with her friends flitted through my head. I knew Yume. I knew how much she’d sacrificed in order to happily chat with her friends in the classroom. If she could break down into tears just from getting lost, then...

“Hmm. I see.” Minami-san nodded as if she understood what I was getting at, then burst into a smile. “I’m not gonna thank ya!”

“You should. Thank me with tears in your eyes.”

“No. Freakin’. Way. I don’t wanna make a big deal out of this.” She turned her head from me, pouting.

I let out a sigh. What the hell was going on?

“By the way,” I added, “why did you put another chair at our dining table?”

“Hm? Chair? What are you talking about?”

“Huh?”

“Kidding! I’m just kidding! I guess you could say it was just me playing house. It’s embarrassing, so I was trying to play it off like some kinda horror scene. Don’t take it so seriously!” She clasped both of her cheeks with her hands in embarrassment.

I was about to have a goddamn heart attack!

“Seriously, I’m sorry,” she said, bowing. “I’ll behave from now on. Next time, I’ll proudly walk through the door of your house as her friend for a sleepover!”

“Um, I can see your face. It doesn’t look like you’ve taken even a single step towards reflecting on your actions and keeping your distance.”

“Oh, but that’s ’cuz we’re still gettin’ married one day.”

“You haven’t given up on that?!”

Kawanami, you bastard!

“After all,” Minami-san said, her pink lips beginning to curve into a smile, “the best way to crush your rival is to have them fall for someone else, right?” It was a declaration of war.

When school ended, I started an anti-Akatsuki Minami strategy session. Of course, the only participants were me and Kawanami.

“If I’m bein’ honest,” Kawanami said, shrugging, “if there’s no actual damage, then I’ve got nothin’. Just do your best!”

“You’re not getting out of this that easily, you voyeuristic piece of crap!”

“If you’re gonna call me something, at least call me a ROM expert.”

“A what?”

“A Read Only Member—an expert observationist.”

So he’s only ever watched people be in relationships and has never been in one himself? No wonder I’ve never seen any girls around him.

“Well, don’t worry. I’m still on Team Irido-san! I think we should give any girl that tries to get close to you a heart attack so that they turn tail and run!”

“Oh my god, you’re just as bad...”

“Well, jokes aside—”

“That didn’t sound like a joke.”

“The bad, bone-chilling joke of Mizuto Irido ships aside—”

“You’re *really* not even trying to play this off, are you?”

“If that girl does anything unsettling, contact me. When it comes to Akatsuki Minami, I think I can help you more than anyone else.”

I stared at the frivolous face of my reliable friend. *But what if... No, from what he said, there’s no doubt.*

“Hey, Kawanami, let me ask you something.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you ever been hospitalized?”

Kawanami froze for a bit before resting his head in his hand, giving a meaningful smile. That smile very closely resembled that of Akatsuki Minami’s.

“Yep. In middle school.”

I thought so. It seemed that he was a fellow victim that I could count on. After confirming this in my head, I grimaced at my friend.

“We both have it rough, huh?”

“Yeah, we sure do.”

This just reaffirmed my belief that people weren’t meant to have girlfriends.

The Couple Exchange Gifts

“Kill me now...”

“Oh, it’s a white Christmas.”

“Yeah... I doubt I’ll forget this scene for as long as I live.”

“Because you’ve got li’l ol’ me next to you?”

“Is *that* what you think?”

“I’ll be mad if that’s *not* what you think.”

“Guess you don’t have to be mad, then.”

“Dummy.”

The actors on the show we were watching exchanged some banter before sharing a kiss. Shockingly, we *did* own a TV. Technically. It barely saw any use aside from the times it was turned on for ambient sound during dinner, though.

Out of the four people who lived here, the only ones who ever really used it were our parents, since Yume and I generally had our noses buried in books.

“Watching this makes me kinda sad,” Yuni-san said through a sigh, as she watched the two actors share a deep kiss with a vigor unachievable by normal couples. “I used to get so excited around this time of year, but now it always gets so hellishly busy that just even thinking about Christmas Day bums me out.”

“Ha ha ha, no matter how much you try to stay young at heart, you can’t stay young forever. But at least for you two, your youth has only just started,” my dad added, looking at me and Yume.

The two of us jumped a little and froze with our chopsticks in hand.

“Don’t worry about us if either of you start dating someone, okay?” dad continued. “Well, I guess I can’t expect much from Mizuto, but I’m sure Yume-

chan's a real jaw-dropper!"

"Heh heh, she's done a lot to change her look. Not too long ago, she was plainer than plain, and—"

"*Mom!*" Yume lightly protested, flashing a glance at me.

You don't have to warn me. I won't say a word.

Yuni-san grinned and leaned on the table, resting her head in her hands. "I actually am excited, though. I wonder when you two will be out on the town for Christmas."

"Do you plan to live vicariously through us if that happens?" I asked Yuni-san.

"Heh heh, maybe. I'm looking forward to it! You two need to step it up!"

Neither of our parents knew the truth—that Yume and I had already gone out for Christmas before. We were the only ones who knew about what had happened on that cold day back in the eighth grade when Yume Ayai and I had spent our first and last Christmas together.

◇

"I'm home! I brought cake, Mizuto!"

My name's Mizuto Irido, an eighth grader with a girlfriend. Today, on Christmas Day, I stood supreme over all the girlfriendless peasants across the globe.

So why was it that I was still crowding around these small cake slices that dad had obviously bought from a nearby convenience store, just like the year before?

Christmas in Japan has evolved from the spirit of the original holiday into a day to spend with your significant other—an aberration akin to what was seen on the Galapagos Islands. Therefore, being with your *family* should have been the correct way to spend this day.

But despite that...I couldn't accept it. Having a girlfriend should've translated to something more special than this.

"How's the chocolate cake? Good?"

“It’s okay...”

“Let me have a bite. Here, you can try my shortcake.”

Shouldn’t I be having this kind of conversation with my girlfriend, Yume Ayai, instead? Then why aren’t I?! Well, I knew the answer to that. It was because we were just middle schoolers hiding our relationship from everyone. There was no way we could go out at night and meet up somewhere popular and romantic.

That’s why we had instead met up earlier in the day at a spot where bells had been jingling for at least a month—a place where loads of couples were. We’d done absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. All we did was meet up and then leave separately. It hadn’t really been any different than when we’d walk home together from school, and I knew the reason behind this as well.

Get ready to laugh it up. Seriously, laugh—this is really funny!

I had prepared a present just for today, but I, being the biggest chicken in history, hadn’t even had the balls to give it to her!

I’d even worked up the courage to get the present wrapped professionally, but now it was just a decoration sitting atop my desk.

Kill me now.

“What’s the matter, Mizuto? You seem pretty down. Oh, right, your present! I got you something! Here’s a library card.”

Kill me now.

◇

“Kill me now...”

I, Yume Ayai, was currently slumped on my desk while the strong desire to die gnawed at me. But actually, though I may have wanted to die, I had already done so. I was dead. Thanks for reading! Please look forward to my next series!

“Why am I like this...? No matter how much I mentally prepare myself, I can never actually go through with anything. I’m so sick of it!”

There was a wrapped box atop my desk. It was the Christmas present I’d prepared for Irido-kun. I’d tried to find a chance to give it to him during our

date earlier today, but here it was, still with me. Need I say more?

I had a lot of fun on our date. We'd gone to a lot of places that were normal for most couples but unfamiliar to us. It had made me remember that we really *were* dating, but maybe that's precisely why everything had turned out like this.

I'd been so worried that if I did something wrong, I'd ruin the good atmosphere we had going, and our amazing date would crumble apart. I'd focused so hard on making sure this didn't happen that I'd forgotten to give him the present.

I wanted to cry. *Why does this always happen? Why am I like this?!* Anytime I tried doing something, it almost always ended in failure. The only thing I'd really succeeded at was confessing to Irido-kun. *I wonder if he'll ever end up getting fed up with the way I am...*

"Yume, I'm gonna take a bath first, okay?"

Just as I felt the tears starting to well up in my eyes, I heard my mom call out to me. *Oh right, a bath.* It was part of my daily routine to call Irido-kun after taking a bath. All I had to do was tell him over the phone that I had a present for him!

"O-Okay!"

I needed to make haste, not waste. Just as I was about to tell mom that I wanted to take my bath first, I heard old music ringing out from my phone. This ringtone was the theme in a movie from the West that Irido-kun had suggested to me before we'd started dating, and it was also the signal that I was getting a call from him.

I grabbed my phone in a panic and carefully slid my finger to answer the call, trying not to hit the decline button by mistake.

"H-Hello?"

"Ayai..."

It was the voice I wanted to hear the most. Just hearing his voice made me happier than anything, but I wasn't expecting to hear what he said next.

"Can you come out to your balcony?"

◇

I, Mizuto Irido, looked up at my white breath dissolving into the cold of the night just as Ayai opened her window. She leaned over her balcony and noticed me standing in front of her apartment. Then she said into her phone, in a voice that sounded like a moan, “Wh-Why...”

“W-Well, you know, it’s Christmas and all, so...”

I was so embarrassed! I wanted to make up some kind of excuse and try and pull a fast one on her, but I knew I needed to bear it. There shouldn’t have been any need to put on airs or make any excuses. Not today. After all, it was Christmas.

I drew in a deep breath, attempting to repress the middle school boy pretending to be cool inside of me.

“I-I wanted to see you again.”

“Hnngh?!” Ayai made a muted sound.

A-Are you okay? Did something happen? You sound like you just saw one of the Great Old Ones. Sometime during my confusion, I heard the beep of her hanging up as she disappeared into her room, presumably to hide.

“Crap...”

I knew it. I’d freaked her out. Even if I was her boyfriend, it didn’t change the inherent creepiness of showing up out of the blue in the middle of the night. *God, kill me now. I’m so sorry for being born.*

“I-Irido-kun!”

Just as I felt like I was falling into the same despair that Osamu Dazai had, I saw the shadow of a small-framed girl running out of the apartment entrance. *Huh?*

“A-Ayai?”

White clouds of breath formed and disappeared as she dashed through the cold air. She stopped before me, bent over with her hands on her knees, and gazed up at me as she tried to steady her breathing. Then, with an embarrassed laugh, she said, “Aha ha ha... I’m here...”

◇

“Uh, I think that’s my line...” Irido-kun calmly quipped.

Even so, he remained frozen in place. Maybe he was incredibly surprised?

“Heh heh.” I was a little happy, because I was able to pay him back for how he’d surprised me earlier.

I’d been too impatient to wait for the elevator, so it took me some time to calm my breathing after having run down the stairs. When I was finally able to let go of my knees, I let out another embarrassed laugh.

“Heh heh, my mom just hopped into the bath, so I took that opportunity to slip out.”

“O-Oh, I see.”

“So, um... I think...we probably have about thirty minutes, maybe.”

“Thirty minutes...? I see.”

We were never very talkative people, but today we were especially bad. Even so, it made me happier than anything that we were having this conversation void of laughter and filled with awkward pauses.

I guess Irido-kun thinks today’s special too. He treasures the time he can spend with me. He was not usually one to wear his heart on his sleeve, so I was only further enthralled with him whenever I could see glimpses of his emotions.

He may have given off the impression that he only cared about himself, but he was actually a really kind person who was good at taking care of other people. He may have seemed like he was calm and collected, but he secretly had a short fuse. These were all parts of him that I was able to pick out and save to my memory while being with him. I knew the *real* him.

I would carefully place each of these memories into my internal album and look back on them time and time again. For someone like me whose sole source of entertainment was reading, he turned my world upside down. I loved the time I spent with him. That’s why I—

“Achoo!” I shivered. *Huh? Oh, right.* “I forgot to wear a coat...” It felt like the temperature dropped as soon as I noticed.

I shouldn't have rushed out here. Oh, no... Our precious time together... Why, oh why do I always mess up at the most important times?!

"How could you forget?" A wry smile spread across Irido-kun's face as he unbuttoned his coat. "Here," he said, wrapping it around my shoulders.

It's so warm... I pulled the coat around me. Its warmth enveloped my chest, making my head go blank. It was almost as if I was being embraced by Irido-kun, which was a little embarrassing. *You could just hug me, you know?* But thinking that just made me even more embarrassed. *Who do you think you are?! How dare you!*

My temperature rose for a variety of different reasons, but finally, I exhaled and asked, "Aren't you cold?"

"Nah, I'm okay," he said unfazed, but his trembling shoulders told a different story.

He was definitely holding back. It was kinda cute, but if he kept it up, he might catch a cold. *What should I do?*

As I racked my brain for ideas, something popped into the back of my head, but the hurdle to pull it off was extremely high. It was such a high hurdle that it probably would've been simpler to just crawl underneath it. *But, hm... Well, it* is *Christmas... Yes! It's Christmas!*

The overwhelming power that came from this one word pushed me forward, despite how much of a chicken I was. Thank you, Jesus. This was enough of a miracle to make me want to convert to Christianity.

"U-Um, so how about..." My face grew a bright red, but I gave my body to the power of Christmas and powered through to the end. "D-Do you want to share?"

◇

I was impressed by how easy it was for both of us to fit inside my coat. Our shoulders touched as we sat down next to each other with our backs against the plant bed behind us. I felt Ayai jump a little in surprise when our shoulders brushed against one another. After a little while, she leaned on me. I was surprised by how light she was, how warm she was, and how nice she smelled.

It was strange. I felt completely calm, but my heart was racing. I couldn't let this all go to waste by letting her know how much I was enjoying this. I did my best to look up at the night sky while trying to keep a straight face.

Suddenly, I heard a giggle.

"What?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking about how cute my boyfriend is."

Ugh, she saw right through me! She was in complete panic mode just a few minutes before, but now she'd gotten full of herself. I fell silent in an attempt to hide my embarrassment, but Ayai waved her hands in a panic.

"D-Did I make you mad? I-I'm sorry!"

"Nah, I'm not mad. Just a little embarrassed. You don't have to worry so much."

"O-Oh."

"After all..." I hesitated for a second, but I pushed past all the embarrassment in the name of Christmas. "There's nothing you could do to make me mad."

Being even a little assertive wasn't really my thing. I could feel that as I trailed off. That just made me even more embarrassed, so I turned away.

"Ehee hee... Ehee hee hee hee." But she seemed pretty happy, albeit a little embarrassed, and leaned into me even more.

I'm glad that she liked it. If she hadn't, I could see my next date being with a riverbed.

I sat there in silence, fully soaking in the comfortable sensation of her shoulder and weight against me while clouds of white repeatedly formed and then disappeared into the night.

"U-Um, Irido-kun?"

I looked down to see Ayai gazing up at me with an inquisitive look on her face.

"I-I have something I want to give you..."

My heart almost exploded. *Oh, she also brought a gift.*

“There’s nothing I could do to make you mad, right? So, um, you won’t mind accepting my present...right?” Each word sounded more unsure than the last.

Every time I saw Ayai act this way, I couldn’t help but think that she really didn’t have to act so reserved. She wasn’t anywhere near stupid, and she had good tastes... Plus, she was cute. You’d think she’d have a lot of friends, but because of her lack of confidence, she distanced herself from others.

“Ayai...”

“Huh?”

Without saying another word, I plunged my hand into my pocket and pulled out a wrapped box.

Her eyes lit up. “I-Is that...”

“It’s a Christmas present. I was too nervous to give it to you earlier today.”

“Huh?” She looked up at me, dumbfounded, before bursting into laughter, snorting and giggling.

I pouted. “You don’t have to laugh *that* much.”

“S-Sorry! B-But I wasn’t expecting you to have done the same thing I did.”

“You too, huh? I thought as much.”

“Yeah.” Ayai pulled out a wrapped box from her pocket and showed it to me.

I then realized I’d begun laughing as well. We just stood there, our shoulders joyfully shaking together. It was cold enough to pierce our cheeks and ears, but we didn’t care. When we finally stopped, Ayai wiped away the tears from her eyes and lifted her present, hiding her mouth behind it.

“Should we...exchange gifts?”

“Yeah, let’s.”

We exchanged our nicely wrapped gift boxes, and though it was honestly nothing special whatsoever, it felt like we were going through some kind of strict ritual. I gave my gift to Ayai and in return, she handed me hers.

I looked at the front of the gift, then the back of it, then the front again, but couldn’t wait any longer.

“Can I open it?”

“Huh? H-Here?” She blushed.

“You can open mine too.”

“Mm... Okay then...”

We undid the red ribbons on our gifts at the same time. Even though this may not have been the first time we’d given each other gifts, it was the first time we’d given each other a gift that didn’t have some kind of practical use—the kind you didn’t have to worry about being rejected. The gifts we had today were different. These gifts carried a certain sort of risk.

“Oh...” Ayai made a sound as she opened her gift. “Is this a pendant?”

Inside the box that she’d opened was a clear glass-drop pendant with a pink flower encased inside of it. This hadn’t been expensive at all. No, this had been bought with a middle schooler’s allowance.

Then, there was the fact that I had no knowledge whatsoever about accessories. I’d had to scour the internet with my lack of fashion sense to find something. I had no clue whether or not it was actually cute or pretty, but...

Ayai held the pendant in front of her eyes. “Wow... There’s a flower in the glass! What kind of flower is this?”

“Baby’s breath. I liked it because of its meaning.”

“Its meaning?”

As soon as she said this, she pulled out her phone and began looking it up, sending me into a panic.

“Wha— Stop! It’s too embarrassing!”

“Huh? What’s the big deal?” A teasing smile crept across Ayai’s face as she bent her back to guard her phone from me. “Let’s see...” she said as she began reading the search results. “‘Dreamlike state of mind,’ ‘pure heart,’ ‘beauty,’ ‘innocence.’”

“So, actually...” I tried to come clean, but Ayai continued.

“Baby’s breath is often used in bouquets for weddings.”

“Huh?”

I looked down at the pendant again and my face turned so red that it was easy to see even at this time of night. *D-Did I just propose?!* Realizing what I’d done, my face got even hotter. *I should’ve gone with something safer!*

As I wallowed in regret, Ayai took the pendant and unclasped the hook, tilting her neck while moving her hair out of the way. “Mm... Got it. What do you think?”

The pendant I’d bought and given to her was hanging from her neck. I wasn’t sure *what* I felt. Happy? Embarrassed? Either way, I felt a huge sense of accomplishment welling up inside of me.

“I’ve never really worn anything like this before, so I don’t know if it looks good on me or not.”

“No, it definitely looks good on you,” I said directly without even a moment to think. “It looks *really* good on you. Seriously, no joke. You look really cute...”

Ayai’s eyes darted away from mine in embarrassment. Her face, that had grown red from the cold, loosened slightly. The expression on her face made all the time I’d sunk into finding this gift completely worth it.

“I-I guess I should probably open mine now, huh?”

“O-Oh!” she said, visibly nervous. “Y-Yeah!”

I opened my present, letting out a gasp when I saw what was inside.

“Heh, I guess we really do think alike.”

It was a necklace. As I lifted it up, I could see an ornament hanging from it with a design that resembled a feather.

“I didn’t have as wonderful a reason as you did, but the feather kinda reminded me of a quill pen.”

“A quill pen...?”

“Um, well...” Her eyes swam a little in hesitation before she continued. “I like watching you write in your notebook, whether it’s for studying or anything else.”



After many seconds of silence, I finally understood. “People are into that?!”

“Agh! U-Uh, I-I wouldn’t say I’m *into* it, I-I just think it’s kinda nice...”

Um, pretty sure that means you’re into it.

“S-Sorry, I said something weird...” Ayai slumped a little and looked down.

“You shouldn’t apologize so quickly,” I said, putting on the necklace she gave me. “See?”

Ayai’s face instantly brightened, and every last shred of gloom disappeared as she saw me wear her present.

“Christmas presents are pretty amazing, huh?” I said.

“Yeah! They really are!” she said with a wide smile.

We both laughed at how awkward we were. *Maybe this will help Ayai be more confident*, I thought in the back of my mind.

After that, we sat under the winter sky for tens of minutes talking about random topics. There was nothing as grand as the Christmas lights in the city or anything romantic like snow falling here. The only lights around us as we sat down in front of her apartment building were the lonely streetlights and those of the surrounding houses. Even so, the brief time we’d spent together was firmly carved into my memory.

“Well, I guess...I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah... Later.”

We said our farewells in front of her apartment building, gently waving at each other. Our words were soft because neither of us wanted to actually say goodbye. As soon as I realized that, I grabbed Ayai’s wrist.

“Huh? Irido-ku—”

I closed in on Ayai and bent down a little, forcing both of us into utter silence.

As I stood up again, I could tell Ayai was blushing for reasons completely separate from the cold. She looked at me, her eyes wide with surprise.

“Well, you know...it *is* Christmas,” I said, trying to make an excuse.

“Hee hee, you’re right. It *is* Christmas.”

This time, Ayai stood up on her toes to reach me. When her heels touched the ground again, we looked at each other with faint smiles and finally let go of each other.

Nobody knew about our relationship, but I was sure that I’d tell my dad one day. My past self, however, didn’t expect that she’d be introduced to my family about half a year later.

I walked back to my house, the necklace I’d gotten swinging around with each step. Maybe next year, we could meet up without having to hide. Maybe we could get together at one of our houses and sit together at the same table. What present would I give her next?

“I should start thinking now...”

I had exactly three hundred sixty-five days, and I couldn’t wait.

◇

Well, three hundred sixty-five days later, we weren’t even talking anymore.

“All worldly things are impermanent...” I muttered.

I took the necklace out of my desk drawer after who knows how long and felt the divine providence of the world as a first-year in high school.

For a while, whenever we’d spot each other wearing the present that we’d gotten each other, we’d share a playful chuckle. We’d started hiding them under our scarves or shirt collars because it was harder to tell when we had them on. I dunno why we had so much fun doing that, though.

She probably wouldn’t even notice if I wore it now. I bet that she threw away the pendant I got her when she moved. I wouldn’t put it past her at all. “I guess I can try putting it on...”

I knew I’d prove myself right when she’d end up not noticing that I was wearing the necklace. But if she did notice, I’d at least get a fun reaction out of her. Filled with excitement, I fastened the necklace around my neck, hid the feather ornament underneath my shirt, and left my room.

I thought that I’d maybe run into her when she was heading to the bathroom,

but— “Ah.”

“Ah.” I ran into her as soon as I opened my bedroom door.

Yume Irido. She was taller and had longer hair than the year before. As soon as I saw her, I realized something. Something glinted out from underneath her black hair. It was a familiar pendant.

“Oho...”

“Hm...”

Those were the only words we exchanged with each other before we walked down the stairs one after the other to the living room. The TV show our parents were watching during dinner was over. Dad was sitting at the table while Yuni-san put dishes onto the drying rack.

Dad looked over to me. “Oh, Mizuto, are you about to take a bath?”

“I think the water should be about ready, so if you wanna go first, how about you do a quick round of rock paper scissors with him, Yume?” Yuni-san suggested.

It seemed that neither of them had noticed the slight changes that we’d gone through. We replied to our respective parents with noncommittal answers, sat on the couch—one space apart from each other—and opened our respective books.

“Heh heh.” Yume let out a laugh out of the blue.

“What?” I asked, my eyes moving from my book to her.

“We really don’t think alike.” Yume, of course, did not look up from her book.

“True...” I buried my nose back in my book.

I was reading *A Christmas Carol*, and Yume was reading *Hercule Poirot’s Christmas*.

Afterword

I want to thank my editor who reached out to me for my story about a girl and guy who just flirt with each other. I want to also thank TakayaKi for his brain-meltingly cute illustrations and all the readers who supported me when I was still publishing on the Kakuyomu website. Each and every one of you, thank you!

In the Kakuyomu Web version, there is an episode that features the bookworm, Mizuto, the mystery fangirl, Yume, and a new heroine, who is a light novel otaku. Please feel free to read it if you're interested. If you know anyone who likes reading or wants to see more of TakayaKi's art, please recommend this book to them through whatever social media platform you use. I'm sure that the editorial department of Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko will spring to action. Put the pressure of sales onto them!

With that, I'd like to end this novel. This has been Kyosuke Kamishiro, the author of *My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex: Why Can't We Move On?!* Let us meet again in the second volume!

Author Comments

Don’t Call Us an Ex-Couple (Original title: The Ex-Couple Shout at Each Other)

This was originally released on August 7, 2017. I thought that if this kind of situation happened in real life, it’d be hell. I’m sure that having to live together under the same roof would be met with firm rejection. Some day, somewhere, I’ll explain why Yume okayed living together and even decided to go through the effort to change her last name.

The Ex-Couple House-Sit (Original title: The Ex-Girlfriend Makes Him Notice)

This was originally released on August 10, 2017. I thought a lot about how to get the feel of “will they/won’t they,” but if it got too explicit, that’d put me in some trouble to say the least. Apparently, the chapter took first place on the Kakuyomu rankings two days after it was released.

The Ex-Couple Start School

This was originally released on August 19, 2017. Yume’s reputation as a popular girl is pretty much gone by the end of this chapter. Why is that? You guessed it. It was thanks to a certain ROM expert taking care of things behind the scenes.

The Ex-Girlfriend Gets Measured

This was not published on the internet. It’s Akatsuki Minami’s debut chapter. The chapter is a little irregular since there is barely any conversation between Yume and Mizuto, but I think the lack of conversation made for a fresh chapter.

The Ex-Boyfriend Nurses Back to Health

This was originally released on September 5, 2017. This was personally the most rewarding chapter to write. If Yume hadn't fallen ill, she wouldn't have been able to be honest about her feelings.

The Ex-Girlfriend Is Waiting in Dreams (Original title: The Ex-Girlfriend Awakens)

This was originally released on August 26, 2017. I thought it might be fun to write this silly story of Yume stealing Mizuto's underwear in a Lovecraftian style, but I changed my mind. At first, I thought I should write the entire chapter like that, but it got difficult to read, so I stopped at just writing part of it in that style.

The Ex-Couple Try [redacted]ing/The Ex-Couple Try Dating (Original title: The Ex-Girlfriend Gets Jealous/The Ex-Boyfriend Wants to Protect)

This was originally released on September 19 and October 31 in 2017. I thought it was about time to have them go on a date, but they didn't end up doing anything at all. How could they have dated before and not be used to dating? I thought it'd be fun if Mizuto came in as some kind of surprise hottie.

The Couple Exchange Gifts

This was originally released on December 24, 2017. I tried writing this to match Christmas in real time. I'm proud of how I wrote a kiss scene without actually explicitly using those words.

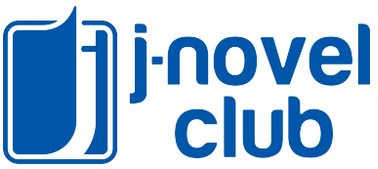


My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"Why Can't We Move On?!"


Mizuto Irido
"Bite me. I don't want to be buddy-buddy with you either."
Mizuto Irido
Yume's ex. He broke up with Yume when they graduated from middle school. Not too long after, the two were reunited as stepsiblings when their parents got married.
Akatsuki Minami
A classmate of Yume and Mizuto. Bright and cheerful like a little critter.
"Count yourself out, Kawanami."
Kogure Kawanami
A classmate of Yume and Mizuto. He can befriend just about anyone. He may be cheeky, but he can be very insightful.
"Oho, this sounds like fun. Count me in too!"
Yume Irido
"Why do I have to be on good terms with someone like you?"
Yume Irido
Mizuto's ex. She was a plain and shy girl in middle school, but she had a glow up in high school. Now she has both the smarts and the looks.


"W-We can't. The rules..."
The *certain thing* in question was, without a doubt, a game-losing action. Stepsiblings definitely did not do *this*, but even so, I couldn't believe how feeble my words were. They weren't enough to stop him. This much, I knew from experience.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

My Stepmom’s Daughter Is My Ex: Volume 1

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 2018 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

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: February 2022