My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"Time to Get Serious"

8



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It’s a Lot of Effort to Even Just Invite Him

Crossing Paths with a Black Cat

Mizuto Irido

When I came home after my usual routine of wasting time after school with Isana, a black cat was sleeping on my bed, which was strange, because I had absolutely no recollection of our house ever having a pet in it. Not only that, but even though this black cat had ears and a tail, it had a very seductive outfit on, which could be explained by the simple fact that this was a person in cosplay.

She was curled up, her long black hair spread across the sheets, as if she were trying to warm herself with the fading warmth of her master. For better or worse, though, I knew exactly who this was.

“What is she doing...?”

I let out a half confused and half exasperated sigh as I looked down at the face of my sleeping younger stepsister. She was wearing a miniskirt and a top that exposed both her cleavage and stomach—not much better than a swimsuit. If I were to change my angle, I could’ve easily gotten a full look of her cleavage or panties.



I deeply exhaled as I tried to shut out the sight of her porcelain thighs extending from her black skirt. I couldn't even begin to imagine the sequence of events that must've occurred for this situation to have unfolded. What did she want from me here?

Student Council Trip

Yume Irido

It was October 30th. Midterms were officially behind us, and I'd just figured out what I was gonna get Mizuto for his birthday. I was rather relaxed, actually, President Kurenai came up to me and asked a certain question.

"By the way, do you have any plans for the upcoming break next month, Yume-kun?"

"When specifically?"

"The three-day break from the 21st to the 23rd of November," she responded in her usual serene voice.

But there was something different about her. She was wearing very adorable cat ears...as was I. The moment I had entered the student council room, Aso-senpai ran over, put cat ears on me, yelled, "Halloween!" and refused to elaborate beyond that.

Maybe there hadn't been a need for her to, though. At first, I was clueless as to what was going through her head, but then I realized that today was the day before Halloween—a holiday that, in recent years, had cosplay added to its definition in Japan.

Apparently, Aso-senpai had a foot in the world of cosplay, and it was really showing. She was grinning ear to ear, having pulled out an outfit with a chest area large enough for Asuhain-san. President Kurenai and I let her be sacrificed for the sake of a brief reprieve. We could almost see her soul leaving her body as Aso-senpai did whatever she wanted.

"The 23rd... That's Labor Thanksgiving Day, right?" As long as it wasn't on November 3rd—which I had very important plans for—then I'd . "I don't think I

have anything planned. Is there something going on?”

“I’m actually planning a trip.”

“A...trip?” *For just a three-day break?*

“It aligns with our schedule very well since November is a slower time in terms of our responsibilities. I think it’ll be an opportunity to deepen our bonds as fellow student council members. It looks like I’ll be able to get us good lodging due to a relative’s connections.”

“Your relative’s connections?” *Just what kind of business are they in?*

“Oh, right, you don’t know, do you, Yumechi?” Aso-senpai said, as she put a swimsuit-esque type of outfit on Asuhain-san. “Suzurin’s family is *super-duper* loaded.”

“Oh...” *So not only is she cute, smart, and charismatic, but she’s also* rich*? There’s divine blessings and then there’s her.*

President Kurenai wryly smiled and calmly continued. “It’s a troublesome family filled with nothing but restrictions. In turn, I am able to do just a little more than the average student. For instance, I’m able to get us a reservation at the first-class Japanese hotel, Arima Hot Springs.”

“Wait, did you say ‘Arima Hot Springs’?!” *Don’t you have to book a room there months in advance?*

“Oh, what? Isn’t that in Kobe? Cool, so we’re keeping it local this time,” Aso-senpai said indifferently while trying to take off Asuhain-san’s blouse to great resistance.

“Yes,” President Kurenai continued, “it’s just a short one-hour train ride away—completely financially possible for students to make the trip without breaking the bank.”

Kobe’s in Hyogo prefecture, right? I guess it’s not that far from Kyoto, but...
“You said ‘this time.’” I turned to Aso-senpai. “This isn’t the first time you’ve all gone on a trip?”

“Yeah... Where did we go last time? Germany?”

“No, that was the trip the two of us took with our upperclassman in charge of

general affairs. The last trip we as a student council took was to Hokkaido.”

Did she just say ‘Germany’*?! They took an international trip as students? How connected* is *this girl?!*

“If you went on these trips as members of the student council, then.....” *Haba-senpai and Hoshibe-senpai must have been with them.* Despite that, neither President Kurenai nor Aso-senpai had anything to show for it.

The two of them immediately turned to look at me. “Something you want to say?” they asked in unison.

“Nope...” *S-Silly me.* Of course there hadn’t been any developments! It would’ve been one thing if it was a trip involving two people, but with multiple members there, it simply wasn’t possible! Their lack of results was completely normal and understandable. *Totally!* “A trip. Hm...”

Now that I think about it, I’ve never really been on one. Mom’s busy all the time, and I’ve always had my nose in a book. The only trip I could really remember were the school field trips in elementary and middle school. “To confirm, the trip will be from the 21st to the 23rd, right?” I asked.

“Indeed. We’ll depart on the 21st and stay for two nights, so three days in total.”

Since they invited me, maybe I should accept. If I do, then mom and Mineaki-ojisan will have alone time as a married couple. Wait... November 22nd? That’s Good Couple Day. I was getting the feeling that this might have been a sign.

I hadn’t been able to give them too many opportunities alone in the house, so if there was a chance for both Mizuto and me to be out of their hair for a few nights, then...

“Um, can I make a request?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Could my, uh, little brother come as well?” I knew how rude my request was, but I asked anyway.

If Mizuto could come with me, then we’d be able to give our parents alone time. But also, excluding the trip to his family’s hometown, this would be our

first trip. I wasn't confident that Mizuto would be allowed to come with us, though, since he wasn't on the student. Just as I braced myself for my request to be shot down, President Kurenai's lips widened into a smile.

"Oh, what a great idea!" To my surprise, she clapped her hands together, seemingly very impressed with the suggestion. "I was actually thinking that it was a little sad for the only boy on this trip to be Joe." President Kurenai then looked over at Aso-senpai. "You should invite Hoshibe-senpai, Aisa."

"H-Huh? Me?!"

"I don't know anyone else named Aisa here. I've no doubt that he has nothing but time on his hands since his college plans are already squared away. Yume-kun, be sure to get your brother's approval as well. He seems the type who wouldn't be interested in travel. Do all that you can to ensure his participation —that means utilizing any method of persuasion at your disposal...no matter how seductive."

"Seductive?" *Wh-What does she have in mind?*

I looked over at Aso-senpai and saw that she had the same troubled look on her face as me. There was no way that Mizuto would voluntarily join me to go on a trip with my student council member colleagues. How was I supposed to convince him to change his mind?

"Oh, look. Here's something perfect that you could use," President Kurenai said, pointing at the box that Aso-senpai had brought out. It was filled with a large variety of cosplays. "If you don't think you'll succeed by inviting him the normal way, then you'll just have to use less traditional methods, won't you?"

Honeytrap (Snap Decision)

I began to slowly wake up from my slumber. *Huh...I fell asleep?* As the haze started to clear, I began to vaguely remember what'd happened. Before I could open my eyes even half-way open, though, I sensed someone standing nearby. It was Mizuto, looking down at me.

I panicked and immediately shut my eyes again. Simultaneously, the memories of what'd happened flooded back into my head, clear as day. At the

end of October, I'd been ordered to bring Mizuto on our student council trip. The problem was that our birthday, a very important event, had been just around the corner, so I'd decided to put off asking him until a later date.

Fast forward to today. A week had since passed and President Kurenai had begun pushing me, saying that I should stop dragging my feet because she wanted to get a firm headcount soon. That's why, finally, I had no choice but to bust out the outfit that I'd had sealed away until now. It was a black cat cosplay that exposed the same amount of skin as a swimsuit.

I figured that the only one who'd see me in this would be Mizuto, President Kurenai, and Aso-senpai. Plus, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested in wearing something risqué since I'd had to wear a more conservative outfit during the cultural festival. Letting my upperclassmen know about those thoughts had been the end of the line for me. President Kurenai and Aso-senpai got all excited and forced one article of clothing after another on me.

"This is a loan, okay? Repay me with pics!" Aso-senpai had said.

"You're free to use it, but if you *don't*, then know you're a loser and I will never let you live it down," President Kurenai had said.

Their words had completely cut off any means of escape. The only way left was forward. I hadn't told either of them flat out that I had a thing for Mizuto, but...aside from Aso-senpai, who more than likely just wanted to see me in cosplay, I felt pretty confident that President Kurenai was completely aware of what she was trying to make me do. The question was *how* she'd caught on. Had she figured it out during the cultural festival? Perhaps Haba-senpai's strong powers of observation?

At any rate, since I lacked the courage to burst into his room like this, instead, I had decided to hit him with a surprise attack. He'd be so caught off guard that I'd be able to invoke the sibling rules and force him to come on the trip with me!

That had been the plan, at least. I had sat on his bed, waiting for the master of the room to return, but I began getting antsy as I looked at myself and what I was wearing. I began looking around his room for no particular reason, and then...I don't remember anything after that, because I fell asleep.

How could I have passed out at such a crucial time?! My carefully laid plan is in ruins! What's more is that since I'd reflexively pretended that I was still asleep, I couldn't suddenly wake up right now. I'd completely missed my chance. I kept my eyes closed, all while feeling nothing but Mizuto's intense gaze on me.

What do I do? What do I do?! Since I couldn't open my eyes, I couldn't tell what state my miniskirt was in. At the very least, I was sure that my boy shorts style panties weren't completely exposed, but it was completely possible that the hem of the skirt had flipped up a little.

B-But maybe it was okay. He *probably* couldn't see my panties. But also, I couldn't change the position of my legs if I kept pretending to be asleep like this! I couldn't get my mind off my defenseless cleavage and butt. It was completely possible that he was checking me out. The mere thought of that made me so restless and there was an indescribable stirring in my chest.

This was completely different from when I purposely showed off outfits like this to him. Being looked at and voluntarily showing someone were two entirely different experiences! Whenever I had shown him stuff like this, he'd usually become defensive and avert his gaze. But now, it was as if his desires were unleashed and I was being bathed in them.

No. Calm down! Don't give up! I'm not who I used to be. I've been reborn! It was true that the current situation happened because I'd dozed off. However, right from the start, my plan had been to go on the offense in these clothes! He didn't just happen to catch a glimpse—I *allowed* him to see. I was giving him a show!

Suddenly, Higashira-san, the natural succubus, popped up in my head. Despite being "just friends," she completely let her guard down around him and didn't seem to care about the way she dressed. She should have been more aware of her appearance around men, and yet she'd wear just about anything around Mizuto, including her nightwear! *I need to try to recreate that. I'll pretend my guard's down, seduce him, and...maybe he'll try to lay his hands on me! If he does, I'll grab that chance and make him go on the trip!* I was in awe of my own cleverness. This was only capable of the new and improved, Yume Irido! What a revolutionary breakthrough, up there with the likes of the Copernican

Revolution, the Gordian Knot, and Columbus's Egg.

I let out a soft moan as I rolled over from my side, showing that I was most definitely asleep. I learned how horrifically seductive this move was after seeing Higashira-san do it, but it wasn't until I tried it myself that I understood its true power

As I moved, I felt something jiggle. My boobs, that is. *He saw! He totally saw!* I'd *be looking if it was me! I* know *I'd watch Higashira-san's boobs jiggle!*

I'd chosen poorly, deciding to lay my arms above my head to accentuate the defenseless position I'd taken. I felt like I had his attention. Though being looked at didn't elicit any physical reaction, I hallucinated some kind of focused stare on the two, unguarded swellings on my chest pointing at the ceiling.

Also, the more I turned over, the more I had no clue what was going on with my skirt. Were my legs too spread out? Was the hem of the skirt okay? If I closed my legs together, it'd be obvious that I was awake. *Urgh! He might see my panties! The ones I'm wearing today aren't too lame or anything, right? Maybe it'll be okay if gets just a peek?*

As my mind went in circles, I felt a finger poke me in the thigh. *Huh? Wait, what?! H-He's touching me?!* Mizuto *is touching me?!* I didn't expect this. Knowing how he is, I thought I'd get through this unscathed. *Is it because he thinks I'm asleep? Is it because he pretends to be uninterested when I'm awake, but behind the scenes, he turns into an animal when he thinks nobody's looking?! Th-This isn't fair! You perv! Wuss!*

The springs in his bed creaked as he knelt next to me. I felt his hand as it pressed down next to my waist. *Huh? What are you doing? What are you thinking?!* I heard his soft breathing creep closer to my body. I felt it slowly move up my body, starting from my abdomen. Around when he passed my chest, I felt his hot breath on my exposed clavicle. He was slowly but surely getting closer to my face. *Wh-Wh-Wh-What?!* My mind was a mess. I was restless, distraught, and extremely flustered.

I had hit my limit and cried out, "I'm not ready yet!"

Before I realized it, I'd pushed back in the shoulders closing on me and shot up. *I need more time to prepare a lot of things! You might be my ex, but I think*

there's a certain order of events we need to follow first! I'm kinda scared of just giving into our carnal desires and—

"Oh, you're awake?"

"Huh?"

I opened my eyes not to Mizuto's voice—but that of a girl.

I stared agape. "Higashira-san..."

"Yes, salutations. Thank you for having me today!" Isana Higashira said, greeting me in her usual lackadaisical manner.

Terms for the Trip

Mizuto Irido

Though I'd said I'd come home after wasting time with Isana, nothing about that including us going separate ways. With the way things had turned out, she ended up coming over. As such, I wasn't the only one who witnessed a certain black cat sleeping on my bed—Isana Higashira did too.

She was the type who always let her curiosity get the better of her, so without any restraint, she went up to poke Yume in the thighs and closely examine her cleavage and face.

"Mm...the skin of a high school girl in cosplay is *so* sexy. I couldn't help myself!"

"Learn to hold back!" Yume cried out.

Isana'd moved so quickly and with such conviction to commit her crime that I'd barely had any time to react despite it all unfolding right in front of me. Every so often, such a situation would occur in mystery novels. The perpetrator would be so bold with their actions that nothing they did seemed out of the ordinary, and as such, no one would notice. I felt like I'd just gotten a real life demonstration of that.

"Explain." That being said, though a person who looks at someone up and down without reservation is someone lacking any common sense, so is a person

who'd dress up as a black cat and fall asleep on someone else's bed—no, maybe to a more extreme degree. "What're you doing sleeping in my bed, Ms. Black Cat?"

"Please don't call me that..." Yume tugged at the hem of her skirt as she sat on her knees on top of my bed.

Yume had unconsciously grabbed Isana's gaze. Isana wasn't showing it, but I could tell she was incredibly excited.

"I-I just had something I wanted to invite you to..." Yume muttered.

"Huh? What does that have to do with your outfit?"

"It just happened, okay?! President Kurenai made me do it!"

Oh. Her. Hadn't she been in cosplay when we did our class's presentation for the cultural festival? *Is she particularly into that or something?* If this had all been a plan proposed by our prodigy of an upperclassman, then I could somewhat accept what'd happened here...no matter how incomprehensible a situation it was.

"So? Be brief. What're you inviting me to?"

"W-Well..."

She was apparently under her boss's orders, so what could she have possibly been inviting me to? More to the point, why was she dressed in such a skimpy outfit? She hated stuff like that. I had absolutely no clue what she was cooking.

Yume glanced at me. "Do you...wanna go on a trip with me?"

"A trip?"

"President Kurenai is planning a trip on the three-day weekend starting on the 21st to Kobe! And you know how the 22nd is Good Couple Day, right?! I was thinking that we could take a trip, be out of the house, and give our parents some alone time..."

I took a moment to process what she had just spewed out.. She was right about Good Couple Day. It wasn't something that I really kept a mental note of, but now that she mentioned it...I figured it'd be nice for us, as their kids, to gift some alone time to them.

But...why did I need to go on a trip with her to accomplish that? Couldn't I have just crashed at Kawanami's place? If this was a trip that Kurenai-senpai had planned, it had to involve the student council members. Wouldn't I just be in the way if I went?

I could tell by the way she was looking up at me that she wanted an answer, but I didn't have one yet. Plenty of convenient excuses were floating in my mind that would explain why she had actually invited me.

"Oh, Kobe? What's there? Cows?" Isana said casually, tilting her head as I'd begun to feel strangely anxious.

Yume looked upwards as if she were trying to search her memories. "President Kurenai said that she'd be able to get a reservation at Arima Hot Springs."

"Arima hot springs?! I've heard of that!"

"Apparently you can see the Autumn leaves, and it's a perfect spot to enjoy the season."

"Oh, wow! By the way, where is Kobe exactly? Is it a prefecture far away?"

"Kobe's not a prefecture," I added.

"It's in Hyogo prefecture, Higashira-san..."

"Oh, it is?"

I can't stress this enough—the school we attended was academically prestigious. *Are they okay? How did they let a student like Isana get in?* Her lack of common sense was nothing new, but she needed to get it together. If she ever had to announce a work or something, she'd embarrass herself so badly with the details surrounding it.

"Oh, I see..." I mumbled.

"What's the matter?" Yume asked, looking at me.

I had no real interest in traveling to Kobe, but I had an idea. "I have one condition for going on this trip."

"Huh? What is it?"

I pointed at Isana. “If she can go too, I’ll go.”

“Huh?”

“Wha—”

Yume and Isana blinked in confusion at the same time.

Even If I Have to Discard the Femme Fatale Act

Aisa Aso

“Welcome home, Master!” I said, greeting Senpai while looking up at him cutely as he entered the student council room.



He looked down at me with a suspicious look on his face. At 187 centimeters tall, there was a significant height difference between the two of us. *What's the matter? You look like you're seeing something sketchy. It's okay, you can let yourself be charmed.*

I'd lent Yumechi the standard cat cosplay, so I decided to throw a curveball and combine a cheongsam and a maid outfit. The combination of the frilliness and Chinese style was very cute and one that I enjoyed. The design of the dress had an area for cleavage exposure, which may have made it a little hard to create a voluptuous look for some, but not for a master like myself.

As he continued to stand there in silence, eyebrows still furrowed, I proceeded to press the attack further.

"Please come in, Master. I'll pour you some tea."

"This won't end until I give you a comeback, will it?"

"Oh, Master." I blushed. "This talk about come and back... Night hasn't even fallen yet." I exaggeratedly wriggled.

He sighed and sat down on the couch. In the meantime, I made my way to the shelf and promptly began preparing his tea.

"Aso," he said, resting his head in his hand while watching me. "I know how this might sound coming from a guy who was anything but serious during his time as president, but you shouldn't be messing around like this in the student council room. You have an appearance to keep."

"Oh, but I'm not fooling around at all, Senpai. Aisa's *always* taking things extremely seriously!" I let my skirt flutter as I placed a cup of green tea in front of Senpai.

As I did, I was sure to lean forward, giving him a good look at my cleavage. But he was no pushover. After a year of subjecting him to this kind of behavior, he took the teacup without even looking at me. I sat next to him as he sipped it. He didn't even flinch when I lightly touched his lap. *He's such a tough customer. But I'm not gonna back down today that easily! After all, I'm on a mission to invite him to the Kobe trip!*

“By the way, Senpai, do you have anything fun going on in your life lately?”

“Huh? Nothing at all. Everyone’s studying for their entrance exams like crazy, so I’ve got nobody to hang out with. Can’t blame ’em, though. Still, feels like I’m the odd one out.”

“So that’s why you’re still hanging out around the student council? Aw, you’re lonely?”

“Shaddup. You’re the last person I wanna be gettin’ shit for this from, Aso.”

“Huh? What*ever* could you mean?” I asked in a really fake, cutesy voice.

“Barf...”

He snorted, and I giggled. Despite how annoyed he seemed, he didn’t try to leave. He continued to stay here and talk with me. I wasn’t sure when, but at a certain point this outwardly annoyed but innerly caring attitude of his had captured my heart.

It’s already November... Just four more months until he graduates. Technically, it’d be even less time until he stopped coming to school since there was a period where attendance wasn’t mandatory anymore for third years.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I was running out of time. With how good he was at looking after others, there was no doubt that he’d make a lot of friends in college, go to mixers, meet a beautiful college girl, and...forget all about his annoying, needy high school underclassman in an instant.

I don’t want that. I don’t really have a thing for him or anything, but I don’t want him to forget about me. Maybe Suzurin had made this opportunity for me. In fact, maybe she was pitying me, like your mom from the countryside who persistently bugs you about developments in your love life.

Perhaps she was telling me to make a move. Well, when put that way, it kinda pissed me off. Like, was she looking down on me? Well, either way, I couldn’t let him graduate without doing anything. It’d feel like he ran away with the win. But once...just once, I wanted him to look at me for real. For the first time, I wanted to make Senpai, who was the antithesis of serious, seriously look at me.

“I guess that means you’re not really hanging out with any of your friends.” I needed to stop playing around, stop teasing him, stop skirting around the issue, and be direct. “Um, so, Senpai—”

I’d intended to ask him if he wanted to go on a trip with me. I’d even quickly switched gears in my heart. But even so... *Argh! I can’t do this at the drop of a hat! All I’ve ever done is tease him! How am I supposed to act serious all of a sudden?!*

“Yeah? What?” he asked, a confused look on his face.

“W-Well... S-So, actually... I-I had a *huge* roll in gacha yesterday!”

“I know. You sent me a screenshot over Discord yesterday.”

“O-Oh... Right. W-Well... Oh, right! Apex’s patch notes came out! Do you wanna rank grind when the update drops?”

“Sure, but is that what you got all dressed up to ask me about?”

“Urk...” *Oh my god. What do I do? What do I do?!*

The more I thought about trying to skirt around the issue, the harder it was to bring up what I really wanted to talk about. It must’ve been obvious that my head was spinning, because Senpai gulped down the rest of his tea and sighed.

“This is about the trip, right?”

“Huh?” I looked up at him, surprised.

He put the teacup on the table. “I know how busy you guys’ve been with student council stuff. You haven’t had the chance for a break. Knowing Kurenai, I figured that a trip would be coming up around the corner. But honestly...” He moved his eyes sideways to look at me and cracked a smile. “The only time you get all flustered like this is when you have a favor to ask. I bet you wanted to be all sly and clever with your invitation, but there’s no point to doin’ that if you’re just gonna get in your own head and make things stupidly roundabout. You don’t got the skill to be that clever. Just come out and say it next time. Or maybe...” He made an even more teasing smile than I’d ever made as he looked down at me. “Are you *that* scared about inviting me on your trip? Weakling.”

“Wh-What?! I’m not a weakling! I’m not scared either!” *Of course I’m scared.*

You might be disappearing soon. I'm running out of time to fail. Of course I'm scared. But even so... "I'm...not scared."

That's why I put my weight into the hand I'd left on his lap and bent upwards. I looked right into his eyes from close proximity. This time I was serious.

"Senpai," *I'm not going to let myself be just one of your high school memories.* "I want you to come with me on our trip."

Making Sure He's Not Lonely

Yume Irido

"Huh? A trip to Kobe?" Akatsuki-san's eyes widened as she moved the red bean bun she was about to bite into away from her face.

"Yeah. The student council president invited me, so I won't be able to hang out during the three-day weekend. Sorry!" I brought my hands together in an apology.

"Aw..." Maki-san said, putting her elbows on her desk. "Not much we can do if you already got plans. Didn't know you were so tight with the student council."

"Goin' on a trip's pretty wild," Nasuka-san said, nonchalantly picking at her lunch. "Minami-chan's been worried sick 'cause you're such a shy girl."

"Huh? She has? Also, how did you guys know I'm shy?"

"It's pretty obvious," Maki-san said.

"Yep. Clear as day," Nasuka-san agreed.

Th-They knew? If my secret was already out, then what was the point of all that effort I put in to desperately protect my image of being sociable?

"Right, Akki?"

"Hm? O-Oh. Yeah! Totally!" Akatuski-san finally unfroze and bit down on her bread. Her chewing was reminiscent of a squirrel's. "But y'know, I had it in my head that the student council was all kinds of strict, but after the sports festival, I found out that they're a lot more chill than I thought. I'm even friends with them now!"

"That's 'cause you're the strongest of social butterflies," Maki-san quipped.

"Hold on, you're friends with *all* of them?" Nasuka-san asked.

"All the girls, at least."

Huh? I know that she met Aso-senpai and Asuhain-san, but is she counting

President Kurenai too? When did they become friends? The rate at which Akatsuki-san could make friends was beyond my comprehension.

“We even talk over LINE every now and then. Well, Asuhain-san pretty much never responds.”

The fact that she could declare that she’s friends with *all* of them despite that last bit proved just how strong of a social butterfly she was. Just as I was internally remarking on this, Akatsuki-san wolfed down the remainder of her bread.

“Bring us back something nice, Yume-chan!” Akatsuki-san said cheerfully. “I get the feeling that any trip that’s put together by this student council president is gonna be somethin’ else!”

“Okay. I’ll do my best to remember.”

Akatsuki-san looked as cheerful as usual, but I knew that despite being a person whose notifications bar was never empty, she was actually the loneliest one around. *Come to think of it, when was the last time we hung out?* As important as the student council was, Akatsuki-san should’ve been just as, if not more, important.

School had ended for the day and President Kurenai was standing in front of me and Aso-senpai. “It seems that the two of you have successfully completed your missions,” she said, looking at the two of us. “Granted, it took the two of you a good deal of time to do so, but fortunately, that was within my expectations. Also, Yume-kun, your request for an extra participant is approved. I’m sure your little brother will feel more comfortable if he has someone else he is familiar with.”

“Thank you very much.”

I was almost surprised by how easily Higashira-san’s participation was approved. But President Kurenai was wrong about one thing—I hadn’t invited her because I was worried about him feeling alienated without a familiar conversation partner.

Apparently, Higashira-san had recently begun taking her art seriously. She’d

started off copying illustrations and covers of light novels, which meant that the primary focus of her practice had been mostly drawing characters. Now, though, she'd become interested in drawing backgrounds too.

From what I heard, she'd been searching for all sorts of references on the internet, but at some point, she hit a wall. She found that whenever she tried to draw ambient scenes not based on local sights, she couldn't come up with any good images in her head. Higashira-san's family preferred to stay home over traveling, so she had never been on a trip before.

She had just told Mizuto about this the other day, and then pretty soon after, I invited him on this trip. Though our destination wasn't too far away, a hotspring very easily fit the criteria of a sight that wasn't local. In Mizuto's opinion, it'd be a perfect spot to spark her inspiration.

What are you, her editor? Whatever. This trip wasn't just for the two of us anyway. The problem, however, was that I could see him spending every waking second of the trip with her. *What do I do?*

"It sure sounds like you're tryin' to act superior, Suzurin," Aso-senpai hissed. "Did *you* wear cosplay to invite Joe-kun?!"

"No need. Wherever I go, he follows."

This is so unfair... Both Aso-senpai and I frowned. Ever the background character, Haba-senpai tapped away at his laptop, continuing to silently do student council work.

"At any rate, there will be eight people on this trip, so—" President Kurenai began.

"Huh? Wait a second," Asuhain-san called out, looking up from the laptop screen that she'd been focused on since she hadn't counted herself as part of the conversation. "When you say 'eight people'...are you including me?"

"Hm? Of course I am. Oh, do you already have plans?"

"W-Well, no. As wonderful and enticing as a trip with you sounds..." Asuhain-san mumbled and then glanced at the calm face of Haba-senpai. "It's just that...it's a little difficult for me to participate if guys are going too. I'm really sorry, but please don't mark me down—"

“No!” Aso-senpai tightly hugged Asuhain-san as if to stop any further words from coming out of her mouth. “You’re coming too! You *have* to! It won’t be fun otherwise!”

“Well, I’m flattered, but...”

“Let’s get in the hot springs together! Let’s wash each other! Let’s compare our boobs!”

“Don’t just blatantly scream out your desires!” Asuhain-san cried, flustered. “Haba-senpai’s *right* there!”

The majority of our student council consisted of girls, so there were times where topics would come up that guys would’ve had difficulty joining. That being said, Haba-senpai never appeared to feel awkward or uncomfortable. If anything, he seemed used to it.

“Suzurin’s picking up the tab for the entire trip! It’d be a waste not to take advantage of that!”

“B-But...didn’t you say that a boy I’m unused to will be attending too?”

“Don’t worry! It’s just Yumechi’s little brother, and he’s not, like, the flirty type, right?”

“He sure isn’t, and you can bet that I’ll put him in his place if he tries anything with you.”

So I said, but I’d seen how things were between him and Higashira-san, so I couldn’t say with absolute certainty that *nothing* would happen. Plus, Asuhain-san would likely see him as a rival, considering he was one of the people that she fought with for the upper echelon of our school rankings. It was completely possible that her androphobia would do a one-eighty and change into a competitive drive. *The more I think about it...the more this progression of events reminds me of how I fell for him, and it’s starting to freak me out!*

“See? Yumechi says you’ll be fine.”

“Yes, but...it doesn’t change the fact that he’s a guy! Going on a trip with one is—”

“You’ll get to be with Suzurin *all* day,” Aso-senpai whispered in Asuhain-san’s

ear. She was almost like the devil on her shoulder. “From sunrise to sunset—all twenty-four hours of the day—you’ll get to be with her. You’ll get to see her when she wakes up and watch her as she sleeps. It’s the opportunity of a lifetime!”

“I-I don’t look at her with such—”

“Don’t you wanna wash her back?”

Asuhain-san let out a groan as if a demon was being exorcised from her body. At this point even I knew how Asuhain-san’s admiration for President Kurenai had developed into a sort of religious-like devotion. She showed that the desire to be closer to the one you like didn’t have to be romantic.

“You’re gonna regret it. Do you really wanna be the only one of the group home alone for the long weekend? You’re gonna be wishing that you could get in the hot spring with Suzurin.”

“Ugh, fine! I get it! You made your point! Fine, I’ll go, okay?!”

“Yay!”

I couldn’t help but wonder how Aso-senpai had become so good at stoking the embers of desire within others.

“Excellent. Ran-kun will be among our numbers.” It wasn’t exactly clear if President Kurenai had heard what Aso-senpai had whispered into Asuhain-san’s ears, but she looked unperturbed. “Well, with this, we officially have eight people for this trip—five girls and three guys. However...” This caught the rest of us off guard. “I was able to book two rooms: one for six and one for four. So, if possible, I’d like another guy and a girl to fill the vacancies in each room.”

She wants another *girl and guy?* Whoever joined would have to be people we trusted a good amount. Preferably, they’d have to be people that President Kurenai was acquainted with. *They’d have to be people who wouldn’t be too awkward being around people they were meeting for the first time...* In the back of my mind, the faces of my best friend and her childhood friend appeared. Those two perfectly satisfied these requirements. The only problem was...

“Sorry, I don’t have any leads on extra members,” Asuhain-san said. “Something on your mind, Irido-san?” she asked, noticing my pensive

expression.

The only problem was that one of the two was the kind of flirty guy that Asuhain-san didn't like. *Eh. Oh well.*

"President Kurenai. I might have two people in mind..."

Atoning Clown

Akatsuki Minami

“Don’t get the wrong idea, okay? I’m only inviting you because Yume-chan told me to!” I couldn’t believe how such stereotypical words had popped into my mind. There was no room for interpretation. That was a bonafide tsundere impression.

“Ugh, what do I do...?”

I hugged my pillow and rolled around on my bed. To recap: Yume-chan had invited me on the student council trip that the president had organized. That action in and of itself made me extremely happy, even more so due to how I’d felt lonely when it felt like she was leaving me behind. I immediately agreed to go.

The only thing was that Yume-chan had a certain condition: “*the boys’ room needs one more person, so invite Kawanami-kun too, okay?*”

Even though this conversation had been done over the phone, I could say with absolute certainty that she’d been grinning when those words came out of her mouth.

Yume-chan *definitely* had the wrong idea of my relationship with Kawanami thanks to the study camp. I wanted to scream at her that we weren’t going to get together, that the mere idea was laughable. Our relationship was very delicate and *very* negative. I really didn’t want her spurning us on for her own amusement. Sure, more often than not I would run my mouth off without reserve, and I always did think it was cute when she and I gossipped, but still!

I let out a deep sigh, unsure how to even go about inviting him. I couldn’t just ask outright. After all, he was the most overly self-conscious person in the universe. If *I* invited him on a trip, he’d one hundred percent misinterpret things and his romance allergy would get triggered.

The only one who knew about his challenging constitution where he’d break out into hives if he sensed any romantic feelings towards him. The really

annoying thing was how he'd still get the same reaction if he misinterpreted things. *I don't think he'd have this kind of reaction if anyone else tried to invite him...*

Sure, I was willing to admit that, at the very least, it wasn't a secret that I'd had feelings for him in the past. Also, I was willing to admit that it wasn't a secret that I'd been stupidly dragged down by the subsequent heartbreak.

I mean, *maybe* I still liked him. To be clear, though, *he* was the one thinking about it like that. *Not* me.

"Seriously, what do I do...?"

I rolled around my bed, thinking about how nice it would be if someone else would resolve this for me. I didn't have much time left, though. According to Yume, it was ideal if I could get her an answer today.

But here's the thing: if a girl invites a guy on a trip, isn't it normal to think that she has an ulterior motive? *Plus*, I'd be inviting him to a hot spring inn of all things. I might as well have told him that we should totally flirt all day and night in the baths! How in the world did Yume-chan invite Irido-kun?!

Then again, maybe I was overthinking things. I was inviting him to a hot spring inn, sure, but we weren't the only ones going. Irido-kun, Higashira-san, and other familiar faces would be there. If anything, being more bold and casual with my invitation would make it obvious that I didn't have any ulterior motives!

Suddenly I heard a ding from my phone. I reflexively grabbed it to look at the notification.

K_KOGURE: You eat yet?

I froze up when I saw who had sent it.

K_KOGURE: If not, let's hit up the usual place.

Though I'd frozen up, the "read" receipt had been sent to him. I needed to respond to him fast and naturally.

Akatsuki☆: There again? Aren't you sick of it?

K_KOGURE: Well, if you're planning on cooking for us, then I'll change my mind.

What is his problem? How can he fan the flames like this despite having the kind of condition that he has? If he wanted a piece of me, though, then I had a counterpunch of a reply ready for him.

Akatsuki☆: Don't come crying to me if I capture your heart with my cooking!

K_KOGURE: Cringe.

I slightly frowned, seeing the vomit emoji he sent afterwards. *I can be the cutesy, naive type if I try.* Either way, if he was able to joke around like this, then he was probably okay. Then again, there was no way we could live our normal lives if we couldn't even joke around like this.

"Oh... That's it."

All I had to do was frame it as a joke.

"Sorry for the wait!"

"Hey... Huh?" Kawanami turned around as I approached him at our apartment's lobby. A look of utter confusion filled his face when his eyes fell on me in my fully transformed state.

I was wearing a very frilly blouse, and despite not wearing them that often, I had a skirt on too. Also, my hair wasn't in its usual ponytail, but down. I had loafers on, maximizing my girl power. From head to toe, I was the spitting image of a girly girl.

When time finally moved again for Kawanami, his mouth twitched. "Just how...much of a sore loser are you?"

"How do I look?" I ignored him and closed the distance between us to look up at him with doe-eyes. "How. Do. I. Look?"

"Uh... You look good. Yeah, totally. I guess at your height, you can really pull off these kinda outfits that creeps like on little girls."

"Heh heh heh." *Wanna die?*

Um... I'm kinda cosplaying as the kind of innocent college girl at the freshman welcome party who guys wanna take home with them, not *a little girl.* I suppressed my urge to kill him and cutely walked around to stand by his side.

“Okies, shall we?”

“You’re keepin’ this bit up?! Also, what do you mean ‘okies’? Are you tryin’ to be cute or somethin’? Why’re you goin’ so hard?”

“If I’m gonna look the part, I gotta sound the part too, y’know?”

“Why are you whispering?!”

As we walked to the family restaurant, I purposely didn’t get clingy with him. Instead, I got as close to him as I physically could—to the point that we could feel each other’s body warmth. *Good. Just like this.*

So far so good. If I keep acting like this, he won’t take anything I say seriously. I could *so* bring up the trip deal as the character I was playing. I couldn’t believe how much of a genius I was!

We entered the usual family restaurant and a hostess guided us to a table. I naturally sat down on the side by the wall and grabbed a menu.

“Hm...” I groaned as I tilted my head. “I’m gonna get the grilled chicken parmesan.”

“That’s not a dish that fits the kinda vibe you’re goin’ for.”

“Aw, but cheese is so cute!”

“Okay, let me take a step back and say that just by saying ‘cute’ doesn’t make *you* fit the vibe you’re going for.”

Crap. He got me. But it didn’t matter—my “cosplay” didn’t have to be flawless.

I began flipping through all the phone notifications I’d ignored as Kawanami ordered the hamburger steak with rice. I went from group chat to group chat, responding. According to Yume-chan, I was godlike for being able to maintain multiple group chats simultaneously, but I was used to it. At this point, I’d feel restless if I wasn’t in the know about all the gossip. Chatting with others was pretty much second nature for me.

Kawanami was the same. He flipped through his phone while sipping on ice water from his seat across from me. One’s surroundings are rather influential. We used to have completely opposite personalities in elementary school, but

now look at him.

When I was with other people like Yume-chan and other friends, our conversations never cut off. I was always thinking about how to effectively use every last minute—no, every last *second* of our time together.

But whenever I was with this guy, more often than not, we were deep in silence. Neither of us thought it was awkward, though; it was normal. It was almost like we were a couple on the verge of breaking up or...family.

Suddenly, I had a thought. If we were just gonna do our own thing, then what was the point of us coming here to eat together? Why did we make plans to meet up? We could've just come here on our own. Why were we sitting at the same table like it was the most normal thing in the world?

At first, it'd been because we lived next door to each other. After that, it'd been because we were dating. But what about now? Our relationship as childhood friends crumbled to bits after we broke up. We were exes in two senses—ex-childhood friends and ex-partners. In other words, we were just living in the afterimage of our past relationships.

Just like the empty cicada shells you find rolling around in fall, our relationship had no substance—it was empty. Suddenly, I realized something. *When did we stop seeing cicada shells? Oh. It's already November...*

"We're gonna have to bust out our winter clothes soon," Kawanami said, not looking up from his phone. It was as if he was talking to himself. "It's already started to get cold. Baths feel heavenly now."

Afterimages didn't last forever. Once they were gone, the only things that'd be left were scars—the ones that I had inflicted on him. I didn't feel shamelessly happy about that whatsoever anymore. I didn't want to go back to how things were, nor did I want to change anything. All I wanted to do was atone.

"Oh, in that case..." *I don't know how I'm going to do that. But I know that it's not okay to let things continue like this.* "Do you wanna come with me to the hot springs or whatever?"

Kawanami looked at me and his lips bent as he began to respond sarcastically. *Exactly. I'll play the fool—no matter how much I need to—if it'll accomplish that*

goal.

Self-question

Yume Irido

“Yume-chan! I got the okay!” Akatsuki-san told me at school.

I put my hands together happily. “Oh, you did it already?! You’re such a go-getter!”

“Yeah, of course! I’m not gonna take weeks or anything to invite someone!”

I had no response. She had a point. There was no reason for me to have taken the time that I did—or cosplay, for that matter—to have invited him.

“But sheesh, we’ve got a good amount of people,” Akatsuki-san said, counting on her fingers. “Ten people total, right? It’s like we’re going on a school field trip.”

“Yeah. President Kurenai said that since it’s gonna be hard for us to all move around as a group, we’ll probably all go and do our own thing to a certain extent. Should I make some time for the two of us?”

“Hey, that’s *my* line!” She said this in a teasing tone but flashed a glance to the side. “But I might ask someone else for that.”

Her eyes fell towards Kawanami-kun who was talking to Mizuto, and I suddenly realized something.

“R-Really?”

“Yeah.” The smile she was wearing somehow made her look like an adult. “I might...be a little serious this time.”

Am I *getting serious?* She hadn’t directly asked me—most likely, it hadn’t even popped into her head. But my mind naturally wandered towards that question.

I unconsciously brought my fingers to my lips, the same ones I’d pressed against *his* under the light of the fireworks at that deserted shrine. *Am I getting serious? Am I getting serious and trying to move the needle?*

Parallel Date in an Exotic World

A Request with No Flare

Joji Haba

I was the kind of person who could only live in the background. I acknowledged that. Even on crowded streets, I didn't have to try to hide; people just didn't perceive me due to my appearance or maybe even my aura. Thanks to that aspect of myself, I never had any worries or problems. It was just how I was, and I couldn't explain it any other way. It was perfect for the likes of me.

Nobody noticed me. I felt comfortable being in everyone's blind spot. If anything, that was my biggest saving grace. I had no need to be in the spotlight. After all, there were countless gifted people in this world.

There were people who were amazing at befriending others. People who continued to face their shortcomings and grow. People who thought it was as natural as breathing to work hard at all times. People who just radiated charisma and could pull anyone into their orbit...

The spotlight was made for people like them. The more the light shined on them, the more it became obvious that they had their own sparkle to begin with. Even if the spotlight was put on me, it'd just show how empty a person I was. That's why I much preferred to be an extra in their story. I wanted to live in the background. That was the thing I wished for the most. Despite that...

"Join me on the student council, Haba-kun," she'd said.

The person who tried and tried to pull me out of the background the most... She not only shined more than anyone else, she was the one person who was most different than me.

The Very Peculiar Trip-Goers

Joji Haba

Nothing good could come from me arriving at the meeting place early. No one would notice me, so I couldn't even serve as a visual landmark for where we were supposed to convene. So, instead, I'd decided to arrive on time and secretly slip in with the other members who'd already gathered. This was my usual modus operandi.

"Oh, there you are, Joe! We're over here!"

Of course, that only worked when Suzuri Kurenai was not present. Even with all the people from across the world passing through Kyoto station's central gate, she immediately found me and waved.

When her clear voice called my name, the others focused their eyes on me, making me uncomfortable. I slightly picked up my pace and walked over to the group gathered by the escalator to the underground level.

It'd been a while since I'd last seen Kurenai-san in casual wear. She had on shorts with stockings—a very mature style which clearly showed off the lines of her legs. On the other hand, she was also wearing a baggy blouse, which made her look more childish. I wasn't well versed in fashion, but my impression was that this intentional mismatch might have been a display of her personal fashion sense.

She swung the small braid on the side of her head like a pendulum and teasingly smiled. "You're a little earlier than usual. Were you just that excited?"

"I simply considered that this particular group of people would gather earlier than the agreed-upon time," I replied in a voice so low that it could've been lost in the surrounding hustle and bustle.

Despite that, Kurenai-san laughed in amusement. "I'll have to thank everyone for being so serious about the meeting time then, since I get to see your face even earlier than expected." She'd made sure to lower her voice just enough so only I could hear her.

It was always so surprising how she could say these things without even batting an eyelash.

“Hm?” She flashed her emerald eyes towards me, noticing my reaction. I immediately turned away to confirm the members gathered in front of the building, which included Aso-san, Asuhain-san, and the former president, Hoshibe-senpai. So far, just the usual student council.

As usual, Aso-san was clinging to Asuhain-san, who was trying to peel herself away with her usual annoyed look. Hoshibe-senpai was leaning on the railing next to the building directory, playing on his phone while trying to suppress a yawn.

The plan had been to meet at nine, which was a little early, but despite what you’d expect, Hoshibe-senpai was always perfectly punctual. If anything, it was surprising that the remaining student council member, Irido-san, hadn’t arrived yet.

“Apparently, Yume-kun is working to bring other participants here,” Kurenai-san said, reading my mind without my consent. “It took her time to force her little brother out of bed since he’s not much of a morning person. I’m certain she’ll be on time for the train, though.”

Her little brother... Mizuto Irido. I’d never spoken to him directly, but I had a one-sided distaste for that underclassman. Despite claiming not to care about others, he was always moving himself *into the foreground when it was important. What I felt towards him might’ve been jealousy or a disdain for someone like me. I wasn’t really sure what it was, but I felt irritated whenever I saw his face.

“Hm? Speak of the devil.”

“Ah! Yumechi! Over here!”

Out of the pedestrian traffic jogged over a girl with long black hair, dragging two people with her. She was slightly out of breath and very apologetically looked at Kurenai-san.

“We’re a little late. I’m so sorry... ”

“Don’t be. I told you that you just needed to be here in time for the train.”

I casually walked behind Kurenai-san and glanced at the two people behind Irido-san. One of them was a person I'd seen on the cultural festival organization committee. He yawned, and a sense of tiredness spread across his slender, calm face. Just one glance was enough to tell that he hadn't fixed all of his bedhead. He really did appear to not be a morning person. It seemed that recently, he'd started growing more popular with the girls of our school, and I posited that this attitude of his may have been one of the reasons why.

The other one was a girl I'd never seen before. My impression was that she was a little uncouth, as she was also clinging to Mizuto Irido. Though she was by no means small framed, she seemed smaller than she actually was, perhaps due to the way she clung to him being reminiscent of a faun's attachment to its mother.

Her name's Isana Higashira...I think. This was the girl rumored to be dating Mizuto Irido. This was my first time seeing her, but I was starting to think that perhaps said rumor had stock to it. The reason she looked so frightened must've had to do with the fact that there were so many people she was meeting for the first time. A very stereotypical shy aura was emitting from her.

I observed that they'd all come here basically empty-handed. Most likely, the three of them must've sent their clothes and other large items ahead to the inn just as we'd done.

"Oh, Yumechi. Who're those two?" Aso-san, appearing out of nowhere, asked.

"Right..." Irido-san said, moving to the side. "Let me introduce them. This is my little stepbrother—"

"Maybe in *your* mind."

"Yeah, yeah," she said dismissively. "He's my stepsibling, Mizuto Irido."

He slightly bowed his head. It was a flawless display of distancing oneself from others. However, that didn't mean anything to a monstrous socialite like Aso-san.

"Hm..." She carefully examined him. "I feel like I've seen you somewhere. Now that I'm gettin' a good look at you, you've got a pretty cute face."

“Senpai...he’s off limits, okay?” Irido-san said, extending her arm in front of her little stepbrother as if to defend him.

Aso-san exaggeratedly tilted her head. “Whaddya mean?”

“No using your femme fatale routine on him!”

“That hurts! Do you think I’m some kind of loose girl who goes after any guy that falls in my sights?”

“Aren’t you? I heard you even tried to put the moves onto Haba-senpai when you first met him!”

Aso-san cutely tried to play things off by sticking out her tongue and lightly tapping herself on her head playfully with her fist. I could remember how annoying it was when she’d taken that attitude with me too.

I turned away for no particular reason and then saw Asuhain-san behind Aso-san, glaring at Mizuto Irido with animosity. It made sense. After all, if she’d gone after the top student in their grade—Irido-san—with so much vigor, it was only natural that she’d hold the same feelings towards the other person who stood above her in the class rankings—Mizuto Irido. She must’ve seen him as a rival. Most likely, the only thing holding her back from picking a fight with him was the fact that he was a guy.

“And this is Higashira-san,” Irido-san continued, introducing the uncouth girl still clinging to Mizuto Irido.

“P-Pleasure to meet your ac...acquaintanth,” she mumbled, bowing her head.

“Nice to meet ya! I’m Aisa Aso!”

“Likewise. Suzuri Kurenai.”

As Aso-san and Kurenai-san returned her greeting, their eyes flung towards Higashira-san’s chest area as if drawn by some kind of magnetic pull.

“Oh... Well, well, what do we have here?”

“The rumors were true, but those are...”

As a gentleman, I had manners and would by no means ever rudely ogle a girl’s chest, but the girls were different. They unreservedly stared at her breasts.

Their faces made them seem as if they were experts appraising some kind of antiques. However, the “oohs” and “ahs” that came out of their mouths one after another made them seem like nothing more than idiots.

There definitely had to be a limit to how much they were allowed to stare at another girl’s chest, and they were definitely past it.

“Rude as it may be to interrupt my upperclassmen like this, I believe that it’s impolite to stare at a girl’s chest even if you’re all girls,” Asuhain-san exhaled and said this from behind the two of them.

Kurenai-san and Aso-san turned around. “Apologies. Even I was overwhelmed.”

“Who *wouldn’t* stare at these?! Everyone would stare! I’d bet *anything*!”

“Is that supposed to be an excuse?” Asuhain-san said with a tired expression.

In the meantime, there was another case of breast-ogling going on. A certain someone was gaping at Asuhain-san’s chest, which was disproportionately huge compared to her small stature.

“My god...” Higashira-san practically whispered. “A real life oppai loli...”

“Who’re you calling an oppai loli?!” Asuhain-san immediately snapped, furrowing her brows and closing in on Higashira-san.

Higashira-san’s shoulders quivered. “A-Apologies! The proper term is a ‘shortstack,’ correct?”

“Who cares about the ‘proper term’?! You should know how unpleasant it is for someone you’ve only *just* met to start talking about your chest, right?!”

“M-My deepest apologies! I’ve only ever been exposed to this imagery in anime and games, so I couldn’t help myself once being exposed to a real-life salacious body like yours!”

“What...did you call my body?!”

“A-Awa wa wa!”

Asuhain-san’s face had gone red from her anger hitting its maximum limit, leaving Higashira-san to cower in fear and become a machine that could only

repeat nonsensical noises. Irido-san immediately jumped in, frantically trying to mediate the situation.

I see. It looks like this girl is the type to say one word too many. Though I was sure that Irido-san would watch over her, I had a bad feeling for what was to come on this trip. During all this commotion, the last two of our group pushed their way through the crowd to us.

“Hey, guys!”

A girl with a ponytail who was about the same height as Asuhain-san practically skipped towards us. Behind her, a tidy guy with bright hair slowly walked over as if he were her guardian.

“The name’s Akatsuki Minami!” the girl with the ponytail said, stopping in front of Kurenai-san and deeply bowing her head. “Thanks for having us!”

“Ha ha. You’re certainly very athletic, Akatsuki-san. This isn’t our first time meeting, so there’s no need to be so formal.”

“Heh heh heh. Sorry, it’s just a habit I’ve picked up from all the clubs I’ve helped with.”

I wasn’t sure when, but apparently Kurenai-san had become acquainted with this first year, Minami-san. Kurenai-san was most certainly someone with an abnormally large social circle, but Minami-san may have exceeded that based on how quick she was to adapt.

“Name’s Kawanami. Thanks and all that.” Now the guy, Kogure Kawanami, gave a quick bow.

“Likewise. I’m Suzuri Kurenai. I hear you’re Akatsuki-kun’s childhood friend?” Kurenai-san said through a smile.

“Well, I guess that’s the absolute nicest way of putting it.”

An intimidating smile appeared on Minami-san’s face. “Hm? Hey, Kawanami, what would the worst way be?”

He paused. “Master and slave.”

“Maybe I should teach you who’s the slave in this situation. Hm?” she said in an innocent, but menacing voice.

“Hey, there are people around today! Stop!”

What would she do if there wasn’t *anybody around?* At any rate, it was clear as day that those two were extremely close. I suspected that the two of them were very sincere when it came to their interpersonal relations, which was apparent by how they greeted their upperclassmen. When Kawanami-kun went to greet Asuhain-san, though, she took a step back and skillfully avoided him. He certainly did seem like the type of guy that she wouldn’t like, at least on the outside. My guess was that he was just a friendly guy and not nearly as flirty as his appearance may have suggested.

“You’re Hoshibe-senpai, right? I’ve heard ’bout you.”

“Nothin’ good, I bet.”

“Nah, you’re a legend.”

Kawanami-kun’s interactions with Hoshibe-san were completely normal. With Hoshibe-san’s large body and hairstyle, he typically gave off the impression of being a delinquent, which usually scared most people away at first. It didn’t seem like Kawanami-kun was even the least bit nervous, though. Having a guy like him around was honestly a big relief for me.

At any rate, everyone had arrived. Standing behind Kurenai-san, I took a look at the nine people who’d gathered around the building directory. I wasn’t sure when it’d happened, but the group of five first years that Irido-san had brought and the five student council members had split into their own separate groups.

Irido-san was the center of the group she’d brought, with Kawanami-kun and Minami-san helping to be the core. The remaining two—Mizuto Irido and Higashira-san—were maybe a step away from the rest of them, having their own conversation.

I observed as Irido-san tried to bring them into the group’s conversation... Rather, *she* was trying to involve herself in *their* conversation. Whenever she attempted to do so, it seemed that Kawanami-kun and Minami-san would casually try to back her up.

I felt like I was getting a glimpse of what their power dynamic was like. Though I’d thought that the two of them had been in their own world, in

actuality, the two of them—Mizuto Irido and Higashira-san—were the center of their group of five. It appeared that the remaining three were trying to involve themselves with them, or perhaps they were being strung along.

They aren't a normal group of friends, are they? Compared to them, our student council group was very simple. As usual, Aso-san was attaching herself to Hoshibe-senpai, Asuhain-san was giving Kurenai-san looks of reverence, although, she'd sometimes shoot looks of animosity at Mizuto Irido, looks of caution at Kawanami-kun, and confused looks at Higashira-san.

So it's gonna be two nights and three days with these members, huh?

"Thoughts?" Kurenai-san asked, suddenly appearing in my field of vision.

I didn't flinch at her abrupt appearance. My heart may have stopped beating for a second, but I was used to not showing any of my emotions through my attitude or expression. Kurenai-san's eyes were filled with curiosity. For some reason, she was abnormally interested in how I viewed others.

"You want me to be honest?"

"Yes."

"Nine's a crowd."

Kurenai-san wryly smiled. "You should be including yourself in that count."

Can you blame me? It's not like I can see myself. You're the only one who can see me, with your high-spec eyes.

What Isn't Clear

Mizuto Irido

After exchanging pleasantries, we got on the JR Kyoto Line to head west.

Despite it being the first day of the long weekend, we apparently got lucky because it was empty enough on the train for us to all sit in the same area. As soon as I sat down next to the window, Isana quickly plopped down beside me, most likely worried about being left behind. Yume took the seat in front of me, leaving the seat next to her empty.

The other seven of our group, including Kawanami and Minami-san, went to the other open seats. The only problem was that the rest of the seats in this car were two-seaters, meaning that one person would inevitably be left out. As a result, the small girl from the student council (Asu...something) was left in the middle of the train, nervously looking around.

“Asuhain-san, over here,” Yume said, beckoning the small girl (Asuhain?) over. When she arrived, she looked at Isana and me with a slightly stiff expression before blinking at the two of us as a sort of greeting and sitting down next to Yume.

She was short-statured, sure, but she gave off a rigid vibe. The outfit she’d chosen was a plain shirt, vest, and jeans. Paired with her short hair, she almost gave off a tomboy vibe.

The biggest mismatch though had to obviously be her voluptuous body that stood out no matter what she did. I could tell from my peripheral vision that Isana’s eyes had locked onto them.

“Uh...I think she already introduced herself earlier, but this is Asuhain-san. She’s on the student council too and a first year like us,” Yume said, tactfully introducing her.

“Hello...” Asuhain-san curtly said, bowing her head slightly.

I wasn’t really sure what was going on, but it felt as if she was directing some kind of animosity towards me. *Hm? Wait. A first year on the student council... Where have I heard this before?*

“Oh.” I suddenly remembered. “You ranked third in test scores.”

Asuhain-san shot to her feet and growled with fury.

“C-Calm down, Asuhain-san! Down, girl!” Yume immediately held her back by the shoulders. “Why’d you have to say it like that?!” she demanded, glaring at me. “I’ve talked to you about her before! Did you forget?!”

“Right. Sorry.”

“Ugh!”

From what I remembered, she viewed the two people above her in the

rankings, me and Yume, as her enemies. I honestly couldn't have cared less, so it'd completely slipped my mind.

"Your days of leisurely enjoying your top spot are numbered!" She was glaring at me as if I'd killed her parents or something.

"I'm going to surpass you in the finals! There's no way I'm going to lose to someone whose head is filled with thoughts of his girlfriend!"

"I don't have a girlfriend."

"She's sitting right next to you!" she cried, thrusting her finger at Isana who'd opened the box of JagaRico that she'd pulled out of her bag.

"She's not my girlfriend or anything."

"She's...not?"

"Yeah, I'm not lying."

"Would you like a JagaRico, Mizuto-kun?"

"Sure."

"Say 'ah.'"

"You are so lying!" Asuhain-san exclaimed.

How rude. Despite how I might appear, I'm an honest guy. Asuhain-san looked at me with doubt as I munched on the JagaRico that I'd mostly accepted out of reflex. Yume watched the entire scene with a wry smile.

Neither Isana nor I had any desire to try and correct the misunderstandings that people had about us, but correcting the group we'd have to be around for the next three days over and over would be annoying. With that in mind, I decided to go into detail.

"She's simply someone who has absolutely no other friends and compensates for that by clinging to me. Honestly, just think of her as a dog."

"Hey!" Isana exclaimed. "That's a cruel characterization!"

"There, there," I said, patting Isana on the head, eliciting a happy purr-like sound from her.

See? Look how calm she is now. Asuhain-san dispassionately stared at us as I moved on to pinch and rub Isana's earlobes. It seemed that she understood.

"These two are always like this," Yume said, trying to smooth everything over. "I know how you feel, but they really aren't dating."

"So they're close, but not dating?"

"Yeah...pretty much."

That about sums it up.

Asuhain-san looked at Isana and me again. "Well, in my opinion, a vague and convenient relationship like that is unhealthy..."

Though it'd just been an instant, I could've sworn I felt myself tense up. She was really showing off her rank as third in our year. She was sharp with her words and clearly laid out her reasoning.

She was wrong, though. Isana and I were just friends. There was nothing vague about our relationship...or at least that's how I felt. If anything, the only vague and unclear thing here was that when I glanced at Yume, I could've sworn that she'd tensed up for a second too.

"Um..." Isana, probably not noticing the briefly tense atmosphere, nervously began speaking. "Would you...like a JagaRico?" Nobody but Isana could've discerned why she'd chosen that particular moment to ask.

The only thing that I could be certain about was the fact that Isana had suddenly offered Asuhain-san a single stick of JagaRico and that as a result of her random action, the atmosphere got tense for a different reason.

Asuhain-san stared at the offering for a little bit. "No, I'll pa—"

"Here you go!"

"Mmff!"

Isana had thrust the JagaRico into Asuhain-san's mouth, leading to her crunching on it like a hamster.

"Heh heh... So cute," Isana whispered as she watched Asuhain-san eat.

It seemed that she'd been looking for the right moment after all. *Don't treat*

someone you're meeting for the first time like a family pet.

A Bountiful Now

Kogure Kawanami

The little less than an hour's train ride turned out to be very worthwhile. I was surprised. I'd thought that the student council would be a bunch of stickin-the-muds, but I smelled something interesting on them. It was especially strong on the Aso girl. I could already tell that she had a thing for the former president, Hoshibe-san, and I'd only just met her today.

She might have acted like she was teasing him for fun, but she couldn't fool me. I caught glimpses of her genuine embarrassment and joy. She was hiding her love for him behind her femme fatale routine. It was honestly extremely adorable.

"Heh heh..."

"Creep alert." Akatsuki's expression as she looked at me made it seem as if she'd seen something gross, but I let it slide.

After all, if she hadn't invited me on this trip, I wouldn't have gotten this inside scoop on the student council. This semester's student council was incredibly popular since it was filled with beautiful girls. If it got out that they had guys they were already into, that might've rained on their fans' parade.

It made sense why the student council members seemed to have a thing for each other though. People naturally gravitated towards people they're in close proximity to. Then again, there were people like me.

"All right, everyone, we're getting off."

We'd stopped at the station before Kobe Station, Sannomiya Station. Compared to Kyoto Station where when you exited, it was like, bam, Kyoto Tower—there weren't any real landmarks that jumped out at you. The line of shopping buildings wasn't special; you could see places exactly like them just about anywhere.

That being said, the unfamiliar landscape made it feel as if we'd come to a

different country entirely. One of the biggest contributing factors was the fact that the buildings were frickin' huge. Kyoto didn't have any of these massive buildings.

"We're stopping somewhere first before heading to the inn, right?" Akatsuki asked while looking at her phone.

"It's called the Ijinkangai. Apparently the city was built a long time ago and is filled with western-styled residences."

"Oh, wow. Western-styled residences? I bet Irido-san would like them."

"Definitely," Akatsuki replied. "Apparently there are some rooms made to replicate the ones seen in Sherlock Holmes." *Sounds fun. I read a little of that series when I was a kid too.* "Whoa! What the heck?! Look! There's a ridiculously chic Starbucks!"

"Huh? The screen's too close. I can't see. Wait, seriously?!" My eyes widened when I saw the picture that Akatsuki was showing to me.

I wasn't especially into those kinds of chic coffee shops, but it was apparently a renovated western-style residence turned into a coffee shop. It was almost like the stage for a western movie.

"Hey, let's go here! Yume-chan, Higashira-san, and the others should come too!"

"Good idea! I'm gonna teach those homebodies how to order from Starbucks!"

"Yeah!" the two of us yelled in unison, bringing up the energy.

Maybe it was because of how close we'd used to be, but we were perfectly in sync at times like these. Since there'd been a downtick in the amount of people who were trying something with Irido-san, we didn't have to be as on guard anymore, so it felt like we'd begun returning to the laid-back distance that we'd had before.

I kinda liked being next to her. It was comfortable. Also, being able to watch all the cute couples around me was quite satisfying.

You're Not Allowed to Be Alone

Todoh Hoshibe

This wasn't the first time I traveled with underclassmen. I was technically the oldest one here, but having Kurenai around made things so easy. I could leave every last detail up to her. Even I was in awe of how discerning of an eye I'd had to bring her on to the student council.

I'd gotten a college recommendation for the sake of keeping things easy, but honestly, I couldn't deny that I kinda felt like I was in limbo. Obviously, I wasn't able to match how everyone was desperately studying for college entrance exams since I didn't have any to take. They were so busy that they didn't accept any invitation to hang out. Even if I suggested that they take a break to switch things up, I'd just be met with disdain.

As a result, the only people I could hang out with were the members of the student council—an organization that I'd already exited from. Honestly, I was pretty pathetic, if I did say so myself.

It's been a while since I've felt this way...like I've been left behind. Although, this was nowhere near to how I'd felt when I messed up my shoulder.

"Okay, let's split up into groups."

It took about fifteen minutes to go from Sannomiya Station to the mountainside by climbing the hill road. As the western-style residences lined up just barely came into view, Kurenai began passing out tickets to everyone.

"The road's relatively narrow. It'd be hard to move as ten, so let's split into groups of two or three."

Of course, she'd done her homework. It'd probably be pretty easy to split into groups. The student council group had five in it and Irido's group of first years also had five. *Hm. It might not be bad to just walk around by myself too.* I yawned as I weighed my options, when someone suddenly grabbed my hand.

"Senpai!"

"Huh?"

Aso had been the one to grab onto me. I was used to this sight. Putting it nicely, she was girly. Badly, clingy. She seemed somewhat resolute in her frilly, doll-like clothing. She looked up at me with determination in her eyes.

“Would you go with Aisa?”

“Huh?”

She held my arm tighter as if to say she wasn’t going to let go.

Love Isn’t All There Is to Life

Mizuto Irido

As we watched Aso-senpai forcefully drag Hoshibe-senpai away, I heard Yume whisper something.

“She’s...serious too, huh?”

“Serious about what?” I asked.

“Huh? Nothing! Just talking to myself...” she said, forcing a smile to try and play it cool.

But it wasn’t exactly hard to tell what Aso-senpai was thinking with how she was acting. The student council was more flippant than I’d expected. The treasurer and Suzuri Kurenai were also flirting. The only straitlaced person seemed to be that small girl—Asuhain-san. I was just a stranger to her, but I was a little worried that she might’ve had an inferiority complex with them.

“Well, I think it’s best if we left those two alone,” Kurenai-senpai said before turning to Yume. “You’re going with those four, right?”

“Oh...yes.”

“Then I’ll go with Joe... Ran-kun, what about you?”

Asuhain-san looked between Kurenai-senpai and Yume as if comparing them. “Um...” she said hesitantly. “Then, I’ll go with you.”

“Okay. Let’s go then.” *Is she really okay not being alone with the treasurer?* But before I had time to speculate any further, Kurenai-senpai spoke again. “All right then, around noon, let’s meet up at the Starbucks a little down the hill.

There's a living room on the second floor that can fit a lot of people," she said with finesse before she, Asuhain-san, and the treasurer went off.

I noticed that Kawanami was weirdly smiling as he watched them walk away. "I guess we ended up with the usual suspects, huh?"

There were five of us here—me, Yume, Isana, Minami-san, and Kawanami. *Well, this is about right.*

"It's all good! We just met these people today. It'd be uncomfortable for everyone if we had to suddenly all be together. Right, Higashira-san?" Minami-san said.

"Mm... So long as Mizuto-kun is present, I don't believe there's much of a difference for me."

"That reminds me—you were talking a lot on the train even though you were with a person you just met," I said.

"A girl with a body like that overrides any shy bone inside you."

It's probably best to stay shy if you're gonna sexually harass someone you just met.

"Isn't that like the pot calling the kettle black, Higashira-san?" Minami said, with a slight wry smile.

"Speaking of which, how does that compare to a person who squeezes the boobs of someone they just met, Akatsuki-san?" Yume asked.

"Tee-hee!" Minami-san jokingly stuck her tongue out in a cute way as if to feign ignorance.

I really have to wonder why all the girls around me are so keen on sexual harassment, stereotypical of old men.

"So, where're we goin'?" Kawanami asked, most likely looking at a map of the Ijinkangai on his phone. "There's somewhere you want to go, right, Irido-san?"

"Oh, yes. There is. It's called the English House..."

"'Kay, let's get goin' then!" Kawanami said. "Looks close."

"Okay, off we go!" Minami-san said, skipping forward.

We followed after her and as we were walking, I felt Isana tugging on the hem of my shirt.

“Mizuto-kun, Mizuto-kun,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Are you okay? Don’t you...wish to be alone with Yume-san?”

I was wondering what was gonna come out of your mouth. What are you even asking? “Listen, Higashira. Who do you think I came on this trip for?”

“Huh? Y-Yume-san’s right?”

“I’m not simping for her *that* hard. Remember? I’m here so you can get new drawing material.”

“Wha...?”

“*I’m* the one who invited you. I’m not gonna throw you to the wayside. You’re my responsibility.” *Isn’t that obvious?*

Isana blinked at me for a little before her expression melted into a smile and she began playing with her bangs.

“Th-Thank you... I won’t act reserved one bit then, okay?”

“As long as you keep it within the realm of common sense.”

No sooner than I said that, Isana leaned her shoulder against mine. *This is exactly what I’m talking about, but...whatever.* This behavior of hers wasn’t exactly anything new to this group of people.

Though it was true that I liked Yume, it didn’t mean I needed to change how I behaved entirely. I wanted to keep a good balance. I needed to make sure I didn’t repeat my past failures.

Only Beautiful Girls Can Be Great Detectives

Mizuto Irido

We'd arrived at a place with white walls and exterior louvered shutters on either side of the windows. I'd only ever seen this kind of thing in western movies, fantasy series, and various anime. It had two floors, and though it was smaller than the kind of western-style houses that mysteries typically took place in, that was more than enough to make it feel like we'd left Japan and entered some foreign country.

"Whoa!" Minami-san exclaimed. "Can we wear these?!"

After walking inside, there was a rack in the corner with deerstalkers and Inverness capes of various colors—the exact outfit of Sherlock Holmes.

"This is so cute! Yume-chan, which color do you wanna wear?!" Minami-san demanded.

"Uh... Beige would be the usual choice, but red and blue look cute too..."

"What about you, Higashira-san?! The cape you wore at the cultural festival looked really good on you!"

"H-Huh? I-I have to dress up too?!" Isana exclaimed as Minami-san dragged her over.

In the next moment, the girls of our group were fussing over the outfits on the hangers, leaving Kawanami and me to watch them from the background.

"Slightly different color options really gets them *this* fired up? Love that for them."

"You're not interested?" I asked.

"I roll with the vibes. If you're not gonna wear one, then I won't either."

"Wow. Thanks for being so considerate."

"Anyway, I don't think a hat and coat are anythin' to write home about, but a pipe's kinda sick, right? When you think Sherlock Holmes, first thing that comes to mind is him smokin' a pipe, right?!"

“The mental image of a gaudy guy like you smoking a pipe is kinda lame.”

“Don’t be so blunt! Come on!”

As we had our own inane conversation, Yume and the others returned with Minami-san leading the charge.

Her cape practically fluttered as she made her way towards us. “Heh heh. What do y’all think? Huh?”

She’d chosen the blue Inverness cape. For the unfamiliar, this was a type of coat with a cape that closely covered the shoulders. But on a smaller girl like Minami-san, it definitely looked more like a poncho than a coat. One might have said that it made her look cute, but it felt wrong for me to be the one to say as much.

Kawanami exaggeratedly examined Minami-san. “Hm... Not bad,” he remarked. “You remind me of a grade schooler in a raincoat.”

“How about you get your eyes checked?!”

“Ow!”

As expected, she kicked him in the thigh. In the meantime, the two girls behind her looked at me restlessly.

“Heh heh heh... Did you wait long?” Yume pompously laughed.



She wore both a very smug expression and a red version of the Sherlock outfit. Isana, on the other hand, wore a white version and was looking down at it and pinching the cloth, seemingly not sold on it.

“What do you think? Nice, right?” Yume asked, confidently showing off her detective outfit. Both the coat and hat were checkered. The nicest way of putting it was that it had a casual vibe to it, but still, it kind of...

“This is less like Sherlock Holmes and much more reminiscent of *Milky Holmes*,” Isana mumbled.

I wasn’t really familiar with the series she was referencing, but I got what she was trying to say. For better or worse, the colors really gave the outfits cosplay vibes. The facility had prepared these outfits, so we couldn’t do anything about it, but the clothes didn’t exactly give off elegant or mysterious vibes. *Is a mystery-crazy person like you okay with that?*

Yume pensively stared at my feet. “You served as a military physician in Afghanistan, didn’t you?”

“Uh, no?”

“Heh heh. I’ve always wanted to try wearing an Inverness cape. Ehe heh heh.” Yume then proceeded to twirl around, making the cape flutter about.

The look of satisfaction on her face made her look like a kid playing around. Seeing her like this, compared to her usual serious self was...

“What do you think? Nice, right?” She looked at me expectantly.

That’s not the word I would use. You look cute, if anything. “You look...kinda smart.”

I suppressed my real thoughts and instead went for a safe comment. She broke out in a broad smile.

“Thanks!” she said before heading over to Minami-san, presumably to take pictures.

Maybe it would’ve been better to say what I was really thinking, but I can’t remember how to put my honest feelings into words anymore.

What Only Existed Outside of Books

“Wh-Whoa! Th-There are faces in the ceiling!”

“That appears to be Sherlock Holmes looking down... Is that a reference to the *Musgrave Ritual* perhaps? But if it’s replicating the scene I’m thinking of, then they should’ve been looking down into a cellar, and he shouldn’t have met Watson yet.”

“Oh! This is Sherlock Holmes’s room?! Hm? But there’re two mannequins. Which one is he? Neither are wearing this coat.”

“He wouldn’t be wearing the coat indoors, Akatsuki-san. But moreover, this look is just something that the illustrator made, and—”

“What’re these...? Bullet holes in the wall? It kinda looks like it spells VR... Virtual Reality?”

“Victoria! You know, the queen of England back then?! He shot that into the wall out of boredom!”

As we walked around on the second floor of the English House, two things became apparent. First, the entire floor had been constructed to recreate the world of Sherlock Holmes. Second, Yume had gone full otaku mode. It was rare for her to so brazenly reveal this side of her when she was usually always focused on maintaining her image as a prim and proper honor student. It just went to show how touched she was by both the gothic atmosphere and the recreation of the Sherlock Holmes universe.

But also, if memory served, she was more an Agatha Christie or an Ellery Queen fan than she was a Sherlock Holmes fan. Then again, for fans of mystery and great detectives, Sherlock Holmes pretty much transcended preferences, so it probably didn’t matter.

“Whoa! This is, indeed, a garden!”

As Minami-san had said, it was indeed a garden—specifically a western-styled garden. There was a flower bed with various kinds of flowers and garden trees that weren’t native to Japan. All of this was surrounded by a white, stone walkway. There was also an area in the back corner that seemed to have been

dedicated to recreating London's subway station—Baker Street.

It had a white roof, and underneath it was a bench, like the ones you saw at bus stops. In the back of the left side, there was a life-size cutout of Sherlock Holmes in a black Inverness cape. Seeing the bench, Isana promptly went towards it, heaving a sigh of relief as she sat down.

"I guess we should take a break. We *did* just climb a hill to get here, after all."

"True. I'm a little tired from walking around too," Yume said.

No, you're tired from being as excited as a kid in a toy factory. I joined Yume and Isana on the bench while watching Minami-san go full extroverted tourist and stand next to the life-size Sherlock Holmes.

"Wahoo! Snap a pic of me with Holmes!" she said to Kawanami, who pulled out his phone to take her picture.

"Hm..." Isana brought out her tablet from her bag, started up its camera, and carefully positioned it to take a picture of the garden and the English House in the same frame. Then, she opened another app and took out a stylus from a case before laying the tablet on her lap and beginning to draw.

"You're drawing *here*?"

"Just a quick rough sketch."

In under a minute, the silhouette of the English House appeared on the tablet screen. Then, Isana began admonishing it with other small details without any hesitation.

"Hm... So doing it like this gives it a western impression..."

When we'd walked around the interior of the building, I noticed Isana looking closely at the designs of the walls and ceilings as well as the furnishings and thoroughly taking pictures of them. It was as if she knew exactly what information she needed to draw.

I quietly watched her. I wasn't an editor or an agent—I was a simple high school student—but I still had an idea of who had talent and who didn't. The irrational part of me was certain that Isana was definitely the former. Just watching her draw wasn't enough for that; it was everything, from the way she

thought to the very basis of her actions. It all convinced me she was some sort of genius.There's no age for ingenuity. Some people have sparks of inspiration at a young age, while others are late bloomers. Some rack up awards starting in elementary school, and some can represent an entire generation after picking up a pen for the first time as an adult.

In Isana's case, her genius had most likely started in her first year of high school. It was a period of time where, as a normal otaku, the passion from happily copying existing works had changed into a focus on improving her own skills. Most likely in the future, she'd look back on this and see this period as the turning point in her life, and I currently had a front row seat to that.

Before I knew it, I couldn't stop watching her sketch. Simple squares became pillars, windows, verandas, handrails, depth—but suddenly, I felt a hand squeeze mine. They weren't gripping it tightly or trying to pull it. They'd simply put their hand over mine, leaving a soft sensation. That was enough to startle me, though, and make me turn around.

Yume was looking at her lap, her hand on mine. It was as if she was trying to keep me here. She didn't say anything or even look at me. The two of us just sat in silence. She didn't express her thoughts, complaints, or even shoot me a glance. Without any of these to base my opinion on, I could only look at her side profile and think that she looked somewhat lonely. *Was I about to leave her by herself?*

I had no clue. I couldn't make a conclusion that quickly. Maybe this had just been another pessimistic delusion of mine. Or maybe, just as my instincts had determined that Isana's talent was the real thing, my instincts had also taken all the evidence available into account and made its own conclusion.

Either way, there were two truths within me. One, I definitely liked Yume Irido. Two, I felt progressively charmed by Isana Higashira but in a completely different way.

Our Good Fortune

Joji Haba

My position in a group was always the same—the very back. It was a place where I was just barely visible from behind the people walking in front of me. Even now, I was walking about two steps behind Kurenai-san and Asuhain-san.

Kurenai-san gently spoke to her underclassman, who still seemed very tense and nervous. Faced with her beloved upperclassman, Asuhain-san could but nod along to whatever Kurenai-san said. Kurenai-san was a genius in regards to the speed with which she could get people to warm up to her, but Asuhain-san still had a hard time getting used to chatting with her, even after spending half a year idolizing her.

We walked like this for a few minutes before climbing up a narrow path that almost looked like an alleyway. As we did, two tubular towers attached to a white-walled western residence, covered with tiles that resembled scales came into sight. This was known as the Uroko House, and it looked like it belonged in a mystery novel. *Sheesh. Even the name sounds like something straight out of a mystery novel.*

Though I'd expected people of the more eccentric variety to be here, the guests seemed to be fairly normal. There were groups of college-looking students, senior citizens, and tourists who were already walking through the doors. So, we walked through the gate, waited in the visitor's line, and entered the front garden after paying to get in.

In the center of the front garden, there was a copper sculpture of a boar, about as big as a large human, enshrined. Kurenai-san and Asuhain-san walked across the straight gravel path and approached it.

"Porcellino..." Asuhain-san mumbled, reading the name on the placard.

"It says that you'll be blessed with good fortune if you rub his nose," Kurenai-san said while reading the placard as well. "Take a look. The nose is the shiniest part on the entire sculpture, since people rub it all the time."

"Oh, it is. It's almost as if just this part is made of gold."

"This little piggy may be tired of this treatment. Perhaps it'd be better if we rubbed his nose as gently as possible."

"I get the feeling that you don't need any kind of luck or fortune, President

Kurenai.”

“That’s not true. I consider the very fact that you came on this trip—no, the very fact that I was able to meet you—as nothing but a stroke of good luck, Ran-kun.”

“I-I, um—”

I had this thought some time ago, but Kurenai-san would still be a heart stealer even if she’d been born male. How could she say such flirty lines with a straight face like that? It was amazing how she could make it sound so sincere too. *Yeah...it really doesn’t sound like a joke.*

I was repeatedly counting my lucky stars that Asuhain-san had decided to come with us. If she hadn’t, I would’ve been alone with Kurenai-san, and I had no clue what kind of “jokes” she’d come at me with.

After they finished rubbing the statue’s nose a little, I switched places with them. I wasn’t exactly the kind of person who believed in spiritual hot spots, but I’d come all this way. It’d be a waste not to rub it at least a little. I slowly extended my hand towards the paint-chipped nose of the boar and suddenly felt another hand from beside me.

Kurenai-san was smiling at me in close proximity. “Now both of us will have good luck,” she said as our pinkies overlapped. “Hm, I wonder what kind of good fortune you wished for.” She giggled as if she were enjoying my expression.

Several thoughts crossed my mind in that instant, but I didn’t let any of them show. Instead, I looked away from her and did my best to calmly respond.

“Someone as unimaginative as me can’t come up with anything.”

“I see, so you’re just leaving it to fate, then?” Kurenai-san took her hand off of the statue and turned around again. “I promise you the best fortune of your life. Look forward to it, okay?” she sweetly whispered into my ear before chasing after Asuhain-san.

I had no words. It took me a bit to take my hand off the statue and go after the two of them. The sensation of her pinky lingered. *Don’t misinterpret things. Don’t misinterpret things. Don’t you dare misinterpret things.* I walked along

behind Kurenai-san, and for some reason, I could've sworn she was intentionally sticking out her pinky.

A Wishless Husk

Tohdo Hoshibe

"There's a place I wanna go to, Senpai!" Aso said, linking our arms and tugging me forward.

She'd always been like this, ever since we met on the student council. She was unafraid of being given the cold shoulder and wouldn't hesitate to try and get close to others.I figured she was the type of person who *needs* someone to give her attention. I mean, she had declared she entered the student council to be fawned upon. But when she took it a little too far with Haba, Kurenai got pissed at her, so she ended up shifting all her attention to me.

There were a lot of times when I got fed up with her—actually, I tended to be fed up with her more often than not—but this particular underclassman had a weird attribute to her that made it hard to turn her away. I wasn't sure how to put it, but at least over this past year, I could tell that she wasn't helpless. That much was evident from how she worked alongside Kurenai. At the same time, though, there was something about her. I wasn't sure I could leave her alone.

As soon as I noticed her constantly hanging around someone like me, it became all too obvious that she didn't have many friends. What was she planning on doing once I graduated? Maybe I was sticking my nose into her business, but I couldn't help but worry.

Thanks to that, I landed in a position where I remained dependent on the student council. At first, I'd just intended to check in on them, but I ended up going back again...and again, despite wanting it to be more of a one-time thing. *Sheesh. I'm starting to envy the former general affairs officer as they study themselves to death.*

"I looked this up online, but there's a spiritual hot spot around here that grants wishes!" she said excitedly.

She was so close that I could almost feel her breath on me.

“Uh-huh,” I said, acknowledging her statement. “That kinda place sounds right up your alley.”

“Huh? Why?”

“I’m gonna take a wild guess and say you were totally into black magic back in middle school.”

“I-I wasn’t *totally* into it...”

“What’re you shiftin’ your eyes away for?”

Aso, who was obviously looking away because she was flustered, curved her lips cutely into a frown. “I can’t help it! All middle school girls are like that! They all draw magic circles in their notebooks and get hooked on gory horror films! I bet there was a time where you wrapped your arm in bandages, right?!”

“Yeah, no. People aren’t like that these days. Anyway...I was always playin’ basketball, so I didn’t have time to do any of that useless ‘look how edgy I am’ crap.”

“It’s *so* nice how self-aware you are. I bet you had girls lining up to date you,” she said through a sigh.

“Hm. Not sure. I don’t really remember.”

“Aw, come on. You were on the *basketball* team. All the guys on it are total players.”

“Could you maybe keep your deep prejudices to yourself?”

Aso giggled and looked up into my eyes. “Don’t worry—I know you didn’t have a girlfriend.”

“*Why* do you know that?”

“Everyone knows, I think. All they have to do is look at you.”

What? Because I look like that much of a dud? Personally, I don’t think I look that *bad.* Aso wrapped her arms tighter around mine, making me slightly tilt my head.

We climbed the narrow hill to reach the western-style residence that Aso wanted to go to. It was a weird place with two demon sculptures glaring

menacingly while holding garden lanterns. Apparently it used to be someone's house and was later turned into a museum.

"So what's here?" I asked.

"Saturn's Chair," she then eerily giggled like some kind of witch. "It's a magical chair that will grant the wish of whoever sits in it."

"Satan? That's a crazy name to be popping up here of all places."

"Clean out your ears, Senpai. I said *Saturn*. You know, the one from the Roman myth?"

"Ah. Gotcha."

"He's apparently the god of harvest." The eeriness was suddenly gone from her voice.

"What, you have some wish you want granted?"

"Heh heh. Yeah. Have a guess as to what it might be, Senpai?"

"Hm... Maybe to get ten-thousand retweets and start trending?"

"Do you think I'm some kind of attention-whore, Senpai?"

"Uh...duh."

"Rude! Aisa's plenty happy just with you watching me..."

"Ha," I snorted, brushing off her comment.

We entered the building and were immediately greeted by a flight of stairs and rooms on either side of it. The room on the right had shelves filled with strange sculptures that looked like twisted animals. If I'd seen it at night, I might've been a little put off. The room on the left seemed to be the one that Aso had been interested in.

"That it?"

Deep inside the room, there were two gorgeous red cushioned chairs. *Interesting. These chairs definitely feel like thrones.* There were very intricate details carved into both the head and armrests. Under the armrest, a baby was carved into the wood. If Aso hadn't corrected my misunderstanding, I would've totally believed this was Satan's chair.

“The one on the right is for girls, and the left one is for boys.”

“Hm. They don’t look too different.”

“Let’s sit down together at the same time!”

What does the timing of us sitting down have to do with anything? But I didn’t have the time to even ask because she’d immediately approached the chair on the right.

“Ready? Sit!”

I matched her timing and felt my butt come into contact with the cushion. It was just as comfortable as it looked. The gorgeous cushion perfectly absorbed my weight, but as comfortable as it was, the carvings made it hard to relax. I looked over to Aso who was sitting straight up in the chair with her hands clasped together.

Oh, right. She said something about a wish. I guess I should probably wish for something too. I took a few seconds to think before heaving a sigh. I couldn’t come up with anything, no matter how hard I racked my brain.

“Senpai, did you make a wish?” she asked, looking over at me, her hands no longer clasped together.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, really? Tell me!”

“No.”

Looking at it differently, I was satisfied with how things were now. But also, I couldn’t help but feel that I was empty. I stood up, since there wasn’t any reason for me to keep sitting there. Following my lead, Aso stood up too and skipped over to my side.

“You’re not too greedy, are you, Senpai? You don’t even spend money in games.”

“Shaddup. What did *you* wish for?”

“Oh? You wanna know?” Aso asked, grinning mischievously, teasing me. “Okay then, here’s a quiz! What do you think I wished for?”

“To be famous.”

“Nope.”

“To be rich.”

“Nope! Aisa’s much more original a girl than that!” Aso said, purposely puffing out her cheeks. *Do girls your age really do that?*

“Is originality really that important?”

“Mm... Now that you mention it, maybe it’s a more common wish than I thought. But at the very least, this is definitely a wish that only Aisa would make.”

“Hm?”

“Didn’t I tell you, Senpai?” Her lips curled into a teasing smile and she seductively poked my face with her slender finger. “I know that you’re not popular with girls.”

I furrowed my brow, not able to interpret the meaning behind her words. “Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Yeah, what indeed?” she giggled before cheerfully walking away.

So, she knows that I’m not popular with the girls and *she made a wish that only she would make?* I stopped my train of thought. Continuing it would’ve consumed more energy than I had within me.

I Don’t Understand My Childhood Friend

Kogure Kawanami

After walking around the Ijinkangai, we arrived at the Starbucks, and it looked just as crazy as it did in the pictures. It made sense that this Starbucks was stylish since it was built from a chic, refashioned western-style residence. Inside were chandeliers, windows, a fireplace, and lamps—it was like walking around an isekai anime. With the way the tables were set up around the place, combined with the imagery of customers enjoying themselves while sipping on their coffee, it almost seemed like we’d walked into a high-class salon.

In the back of the first floor, I saw the standard Starbucks counter I was familiar with. We ordered there and then went to the second floor to get to the large dining room. Right in the middle of the room was a long table that could seat eight people, and in the back, there was a painting which was as big as a blackboard. On the same wall, there was a huge tower of western books. *It's almost like they're not even trying to hide how this is all just for show.*

"I-It's so chic... It's *too* chic..." We were all very impressed by the sights, but Higashira's eyes were practically sparkling.

An otaku like her wouldn't usually set foot into a trendy spot like a normal Starbucks. A place like this, which seemed straight out of fiction, was probably more her speed.

"Let's sit by the window!"

"Whoa, even the way the couch is shaped is chic!"

The windows weren't flat, but angled outwards in an almost fan shape. The sofas were arranged to match that shape, and they even had round tables set up in front of them. *I bet a mafia boss would sit in the middle here.*

Irido sat at the end of the couch without saying a word, and Irido-san quickly sat next to him. *She's a lot more aggressive than she used to be.* Before, it felt like she was nervous about even brushing her shoulder against him, but now it seemed that she was perfectly okay with being close enough to count his eyelashes. She was even speaking to him perfectly normally while looking at him.

But with Irido-san taking the seat next to Irido, Higashira was lost. *I wouldn't put it past her to squeeze herself next to Irido.* With that in mind, I decided to call out to her...

"Higashira-san, over here!"

...But Akatsuki got to her before I could.

She pulled her by the hand and sat right in the middle of the couch. Higashira, nervously agreed, pulled in by the flow of events and sat to the right of Akatsuki.

I sat across from Irido, to the left of Akatsuki, and whispered in my childhood friend's ear.

"You on team Irido now?"

"Whaddya mean? Isn't it normal to wish for your friend's happiness?"

Something was up. I was sure that she hadn't given up on trying to set up Irido and Higashira, but...

"Why don't you quit worrying about stupid things and enjoy your usual voyeurism?" she said, grinning while shooting me a side glance. "Look, those two are finally by themselves."

Something's really *fishy...* I heard Irido-san giggle. Irido didn't look straight at her, but instead kept glancing at her while mumbling something. In contrast, Irido-san was leaning forward, seemingly really into their conversation. Their relationship right now was vexing with how they both only had an inkling of how they felt towards each other.

And yet I wasn't watching them—I kept looking to my side. I glanced at the side profile of the shrimp next to me, slurping up her frappuccino with extra whipped cream. Whether it was when we were friends in elementary school, dating in middle school, when we broke up and avoided each other, or when we reconciled and started hanging out again, I always got the feeling that I understood the thoughts behind her actions. This might've been the first time that I had no clue what was going on in her head.

How to Look at Myself

Joji Haba

"Oh em gee! This place is so hype! I wanna use it as a film spot!" Aso-san said excitedly as Hoshibe-senpai looked on, ignoring her.

With that, the ten of us reconvened and planned to have lunch here before heading to Arima Hot Springs in the afternoon. Fortunately, the rooms were separated between the boys and girls, so I'd finally be able to relax. The relations between this group were all over the place, so I felt a little out of

place. Plus, if I was with Kurenai-san for too long, I wasn't sure what she might do.

"Thoughts?"

"Whoa!" I suddenly heard her whisper into my ear, catching me off guard. Looking to my side, I saw Kurenai-san pleasantly giggling.

"Even though you pretend nothing fazes you, your ears are your weakness. It never gets old."

"I think *anyone* would be startled like I was."

"Are you sure you were only startled? I tried to be as seductive as possible with that breath."

"I was only startled."

If that'd been enough to make my heart race, then no way would I be able to survive her company in a one-on-one situation. I looked away from Kurenai-san. Asuhain-san had her hands full with Aso-san all over her and wasn't looking at us at all. Kurenai-san must've noticed and decided to use this opportunity.

"So? What do you think?" she asked in a low voice, leaning her shoulder against mine.

Even though it was just her shoulder, it was more than enough for me to tell how soft, light, and dainty she was, and how steeped in that feminine scent she was.

"You'll have to be more specific," I said.

"Same question as this morning. What do you think of this group?"

"You expect my answer to change when they were all off in their own groups?"

"You're a person capable of pulling out impressions regardless, though, aren't you?"

I think you have me confused for some kind of great detective. If anything, you'd *be more suited to that role.*

"The group of first years over there are very...complicated."

“Oh?” Kurenai-san glanced over at the five first years sitting by the window.

“It’s obvious that Irido-san likes Mizuto Irido, and he seems fond of her as well. Apparently, the two of them became stepsiblings this year, and while I think that feeling affection for your stepsibling isn’t uncommon...the closeness between them makes it seem more than a simple case of mutual, one-sided love.”

“Oh? And?”

“They both definitely have feelings for each other, but it’s like they drew a line and are trying not to cross it. They like each other, but they aren’t sure if they want to date each other.”

I could tell they had feelings for each other but lacked the will to develop their relationship further. But of course, all this was just nothing more than my own speculation from my own observations.

“So then what about her? The one with the big chest—Isana Higashira, I believe.”

“She’s even more of a mystery. She’s so weird that I’m not capable of even beginning to be able to understand her. It’s obvious that she likes Mizuto Irido, but it doesn’t feel like there’s a love triangle between her, him, and Irido-san. If anything, I get the impression that her beliefs and values are fundamentally different from others.”

“So then what about the other two? From what I can tell, they’re also quite into each other.”

“Not to be rude, but you’re way off base.”

“Hm?”

“The two of them are obviously exes. They’re the type who can still be friends after breaking up.”

They knew each other very well and didn’t have to hold themselves back around each other. But still, I felt that there was a kind of inviolability between them. They were definitely exes. I was confident about that.

“I see... So that can happen even with childhood friends? How boring.”

Anime and manga usually ended once a couple started going out, but in reality, there was a possibility that they'd break up. Of course there was. Thinking how that could happen to me didn't bother me one bit, though.

"The only people who can interact with their ex like that are people with incredibly high social skills. Those two probably have a large network of acquaintances in school. As long as they stay on good terms with each other, there's a lot of advantages."

"You know...I think you should become a secretary for a politician or something when you grow up."

"Thanks for your vote of confidence, but I'm not interested in being someone's fall guy."

Kurenai-san giggled. *Why is it that the cheekier the thing I say, the more she laughs?* "But wow, you really do nothing else but observe people incredibly closely."

"You knew that alread—" Just as I was about to respond, a straw was thrust into my mouth. It was the one from the latte she was holding.

"But you know, maybe you should look at yourself a little more."

My face was reflected in her doe-like eyes. It was a face like any you'd see. It was as if it'd been copied and then pasted onto my head. It was a face without substance. I understood that and removed my mouth from the straw.

"How...do you suggest I do that?"

"You already know how."

My face is reflected in your eyes. Though I can't see myself, I can when I look into your eyes. She was right that I knew that.

Kurenai-san took the straw that had been in my mouth and put her thin lips on it. "Tonight, I'd like you to accompany me somewhere. Alone."

"Just me?"

"Yes," she said, sucking on her straw. Then her thin lips curled into a confident smile as she looked at me. "Let's have ourselves a late night rendezvous. It'll be our little secret," she boldly declared.

Her face was so cool and so bright that I was stunned and couldn’t immediately respond.

The Youthful Summertime Steam Incident

What Lies Behind the Bold Smile

Suzuri Kurenai

“Let’s have ourselves a late night rendezvous. It’ll be our little secret,” I boldly said before standing up from my seat and turning my back to Joe.

Then, I walked towards the wall, pretending to admire the decorations before finally heaving a very heavy sigh but softly enough that I thought nobody could hear. And yet...

“Suzurin?”

“Urk!”

I felt a hand suddenly touch my shoulder. I turned around and saw Aisa and Yume-kun, their eyes sparkling and a grin stretched across their faces.

“Spill the beans. What’d you say to Joe-kun?”

“What was that sigh about? Are you perhaps nervous about something? Was it because of what you said?!”

“W-Well, uh...” *Curse you two. You’re like hyenas! Do you know how hard I worked to look cool walking away after saying all that to him?!*

“Oh? I think she’s getting red!”

“You’re so cute, President Kurenai!”

“Sh-Shut up! This doesn’t mean anything!”

What if Joe sees this?! Urgh! The heat is turned on too high here!

A Marriage for Love in the Warring States

Yume Irido

We left the Kitano Ijinkangai and took the subway from the Shin-Kobe Station.

After a few transfers, we were well on our way to Arima Hot Springs.

“Look, Yume-chan! This Lawson’s not blue!”

“Whoa, you’re right. They’re brown, just like the McDonald’s in Kyoto.”

Right as we left the station, we ran into a very strange sight—a Lawson with a brown sign. We couldn’t hold back our excitement after seeing something so bizarre. Maybe they chose that color to be consistent with the scenery surrounding it.

After leaving the station, we climbed the hill along the river, passing by historic looking stores and gazing at huge buildings that looked like hotels. As we did, the scenery gradually began to look more and more like a hot springs town.

At a certain point, we walked over a bridge to cross a river. There was a sign near the traffic light denoting it as Taiko Bridge.

“By Taiko do they mean...Hideyoshi Toyotomi?” I asked President Kurenai.

She nodded. “Yep. Apparently, he came here quite often. After all, it’s pretty close to Osaka Castle.”

“Oh, I see.”

“It was a so-called ‘hot spring wellness retreat.’ He and his wife were apparently regulars,” she explained as she pointed towards a small area to the side of the bridge.

We’d passed it without giving it too much thought, but there was a pedestal with a statue of what looked to be Hideyoshi Toyotomi sitting on top of it.

“Apparently, not too far down the road, there’s also something called ‘Nene Bridge.’”

“Nene... Toyotomi’s wife, right?”

“Precisely. A statue of her is there, and she watches him from afar.”

Just as she said, a little further down was a bridge with red bars and railing, and right around it was a statue of a woman in a kimono facing the statue by the Taiko Bridge.

“They’re almost like Orihime and Hikoboshi with how a river separates them,” I remarked.

“It was incredibly uncommon for people back then to get married for love and not for strategic alliances, so they were a rare couple. I’ve even heard that because of their difference in status, her family was against it at first,” President Kurenai continued.

“Oh, I see...” *Her family was against it...*

Back then, family influence was much stronger, so the fact that the two of them pushed the marriage forward despite that showed just how much in love they were.

“Well, after that, he shot up in importance and started collecting concubines.”

“Huh?”

“It got so bad that she even complained to Nobunaga directly.”

“Oh, wow...”

What a strong woman. The proactivity of a country leader’s wife is really in a class of her own. She was worlds apart from someone like me who wimped out at every turn.

After that, I got curious and decided to look up more about Nene’s complaint to Nobunaga. As it turns out, the letter he wrote back to her in response is still around. Essentially, what he’d said was, “That idiot won’t get a better wife than you, so don’t be jealous. Instead, conduct yourself boldly as his one true wife.”

Instead of getting jealous, be bold, huh? I glanced behind me at Mizuto as he walked with Higashira-san. She was taking picture after picture with her phone while he looked around with her. They were, of course, so close together that their shoulders almost touched. If they were careless, their cheeks might have even touched. There was no way that anyone who didn’t know them would see this and *not* think they were a couple.

I’m jealous. No, who am I kidding? I’m envious*.* I was the one who actually lived with him. How was a girl not named Yume Irido physically closer to him than I was? Though I’d always say that I was used to it, this thought would

occasionally cross my mind, filling me with unease and confusion.

I liked Higashira-san, and I knew how important she was to Mizuto. I knew I didn't have any right to tell her to stay away from him... I knew this, but I still couldn't stop myself from wanting what she had. I kept asking myself why that couldn't be me next to him. *This isn't good. Now the worries and complaints are starting to pile up in my head. Right now, all I should do is focus on enjoying the trip. That's it.*

Always Ready for Battle

Isana Higashira

"Hey, Isana, where do you think you're going?"

After arriving at our lodgings, we'd decided to bring our belongings to our rooms after retrieving them from the front desk. For this trip, the males and females were separated into their own rooms, and as presumptuous as it may have sounded, I, Isana Higashira, was biologically a girl.

Though I fretted over my periods, I felt that being able to see breasts all the time made up for it, and thus, I accepted my existence as a girl. However, this was a time that I'd much rather have been a guy.

"Oh, nice! Reminds me of a school field trip!"

"Aisa, we need to go through our belongings first. We'll have all the time in the world to play later."

"President Kurenai, should we gather everything here?"

I-I'm in a room with so many strangers. Though I was well-acquainted with Yume-san and Minami-san, staying in a room with three other people that I'd never so much as laid eyes on was playing this game on a much harder difficulty than I wanted to! I began to remember the pure isolation I'd felt during the summer study camp and began to restlessly look around for no particular reason.

If only Mizuto-kun were here. I could've simply clung to him as I'd done earlier! It may have been a little pathetic of me to have to rely on another

person to conduct communications with others, but if I could alter my personality on a whim, then I wouldn't have been in such a predicament.

"Are you done checking your things, Higashira-san?" Yume-san asked me gently.

"O-Ooh... Uha..." I replied in a voice all too bizarre.

Despite that, Yume-san didn't seem to pay any mind. "If you're missing anything, let us know, okay? We'll need to check with the front desk."

I nodded, but internally, I could feel my heart sinking. If I was indeed missing something, there was absolutely no way I could voice that... The very act of speaking to someone else was too heavy a task for me. If anything, I was the type of person who would rather go without something than talk to someone...so long as it wasn't anything too vital, at least.

Fortunately, my bag had all my essentials. I only brought clothes and books. No matter what kind of mistake was made during transportation, I wouldn't need anything immediately replaced.

However, just in case, I went to a corner of the Japanese-style room and inspected the contents of my bag, which my mother had helped me pack. Inside were books, clothes, chargers for my phone, my tablet, and some underwear... *Huh? I don't believe I recognize this. What is this red cloth...?* After rummaging in my bag and pulling out the item in question, I discovered that it was a bra.

"Wha—?"

Even worse, it was of the lacy, see-through variety, aka super erotic. *Wh-What is this?! It's practically transparent! This would leave absolutely nothing to the imagination!* While it was true that due to various circumstances, I'd needed to purchase larger bras, I had absolutely no recollection of having in my possession any of the salacious variety, which had clearly been designed for a single purpose! *Where did these come from?!*

"Oh? What do we have here?" I heard a voice from right behind me.

I jumped a little and spun around and saw Minami-san looking down at me, the bra still in my hands.

“Looks like you’ve got yourself somethin’ fun there, Higashira-san.”

“U-Uh, this isn’t as it appears...”

“Hm? Something wrong?”

As I tried to fool the eyes of Minami-san, the upperclassmen with her hair half down and half in pigtails, (Aso-san?) came over, her interest apparently piqued. When her eyes landed on the item in my hand, her eyes became as large as dinner plates.

“Huh?! What *is* that?! It’s so lewd and humongous!”

“So you really do have underwear for go-time, huh?”

“W-Wait. Please, don’t misunderstand the situation! I-I had no knowledge of this being packed, and—”

“Oh, so what? This is someone else’s then? Judging by the size... No, it couldn’t be— Ranran?!”

“Lemme see this a sec, Higashira-san,” Minami-san said, swiping the bra from me before I could respond.

“Ah—”

“Wha—?!” After reading the bra’s tag, Minami-san toppled backwards.

“Huh? What’s the matter, Akki?!” Aso-senpai exclaimed.

“75...H.”

“Huh?”

Minami-san then showed Aso-senpai the tag, a blank expression on her face.

“Wha—?!?!” Aso-senpai flew backwards as if she’d been socked in the face.

“H...cup?”

“What does that even stand for?”

“H...”

“H...?”

Then the two of them looked at my chest and said in unison, “Honkers.”

That is actually not at all *what that means! Sure, they're large, but the "H" doesn't stand for anything but "H"!*

"Wait. Hold up, Akki. What would the difference between the top bust and underbust be?"

"I'm pretty sure it'd be either twenty-six or twenty-seven..."

"H-Huh? So her bust size is over a hundred?!"

"I-Incorrect! The last time I measured, I was only ninety-eight—"

"Ninety-*eight*?!" the two of them howled.

P-Please stop reacting in unison. It really startles me.

Minami-san and Aso-senpai began observing my chest very closely. "I can't think of anyone else who would need this bra, but...Ranran! Tell me your bra size!" Aso-senpai said, turning around to Asuhain-san.

She'd apparently been listening in, because she had an annoyed look on her face. "60F..."

"60F?!" This time, I reacted with the two of them.

Sixty centimeters... She must be referring to her waist or underbust, right? Regardless of how small her stature is...I've never heard a measurement of 60F before in my life.

Aso-senpai held her head as if to fight back dizziness. "Urgh... Akki, I think I'm about to lose it!"

"Senpai, stay with me! Don't lose to their massive tits!"

Minami-san and Aso-senpai seemed to be suffering from some kind of damage they'd taken, but my eyes were focused on Asuhain-san's chest. *Wow... How lewd.*

After she ran off out of embarrassment, my eyes shifted back to the sexy, flashy bra that Minami-san was currently holding. Judging solely by size, it appeared to have been mine, but I had absolutely no clue as to when it could've come into my possession. I returned my gaze to my bag and saw something resembling a piece of paper, peeking out from underneath my clothes. It was a

memo addressed to me.

Here's a cheat item, so close the deal. Got it? Love, Mom.

Mother... She must have snuck this in when she helped me pack. Is she perhaps the first mother in history to push this *hard for her daughter to have her first sexual experience?*

"Attention!" Aso-senpai demanded. "All those who have brought underwear for the purpose of battle, identify yourselves immediately!"

"We will judge you with the utmost fairness!" Minami-san shouted.

"For the record, I, Aisa Aso, have a black pair that I brought!"

"Senpai?! You can't be pointing fingers if you're doing the same exact thing!"

By the time I realized it, I was caught up in chitchat with Minami-san and Aso-senpai. I didn't even have the time to feel shy. Also, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that every single pair of underwear that the president brought was of the perverted variety.

"There is no day in one's life that *isn't* a battle," she'd responded.

"We are not worthy!" Aso-senpai and Minami-san cried in unison.

Where I Belong

Aisa Aso

"I guess this is where we say farewell for now...Senpai," I said, sniffling.

"Ugh. Knock it off with the obviously fake waterworks."

I giggled and skipped back to the girl group after he brushed me off with the usual cold shoulder, which I'd grown accustomed to. The plan for the evening was for all of us to explore the hot spring town, so naturally, we needed to split into two groups—boys and girls.

Looking for souvenirs and experiencing different kinds of food was fun and all, but taking a dip in the hot springs was a must for girls! Since there wasn't mixed bathing here, it was convenient that the guys and girls split up.

Well, having some time apart every now and then was important. Also, it gave me time to come up with a battle plan for tomorrow. But also, if there was time today, it might've been nice to just walk around—just the two of us.

"There's a public bathhouse that we can enter for cheap. Let's start there," Suzurin, who'd thoroughly done her homework on the area, said as we walked through the town filled with wooden buildings.

I'd always imagined a hot spring town being populated with couples walking around in yukatas, but to my surprise, everyone was pretty much wearing normal clothes. Suzurin had explained earlier that since the main road was a slope, it was hard to walk in geta.

"Aisa, I have to say, you seem to be trying pretty hard today," Suzurin grinned at me.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"You're just continuously going on the offensive, no matter when. I didn't expect you to so boldly steal Hoshibe-senpai away like that."

She must be talking about this morning. That was nothing. My pride almost feels bruised, knowing that she's praising me for something so basic.

"Easy-peasy. After all, I'm a little serious this time."

"'Serious'...?" Yumechi asked.

She was my cute underclassman as well as my pupil. "Well, yeah," I said, boldly. "You know how he's a third year, right? Entrance exams are over and after the year ends, third years won't be required to come to school, so who knows when I'll be able to see him? With that in mind, I'm thinking of making him understand my charm before that happens."

"Just be honest. You're scared of him forgetting all about you after he graduates."

Slander! There's no way a girly, cute underclassman like me would be forgotten by an inexperienced guy like him! Or at least, up until now, that's what I *would've* said.

"Well...yeah. Maybe. That might be part of it."

With my sudden honesty and lack of denial, Suzurin looked surprised and blinked her infuriatingly huge, doe-like eyes. “So...you’re *actually* serious this time.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

Up until now, I’d never wanted a specific person to like me. I’d always been the kind of person who wanted to be fawned over by many others. Seriously, it could’ve been *literally* anyone. I just wanted someone to compliment me. Because of that desire, I was on socials and also made sure to talk to shy guys. But now...I didn’t care about anyone else. I just wanted this one person to look at me.

This was probably the first time I’d ever thought this way. Calling this “love” made me feel like I’d lost at something. It was embarrassing, but I was so scared and filled with desire that I couldn’t lie to myself.

I didn’t want anyone else to take him from me. The only person I wanted to be in his eyes was me. It didn’t matter how rude he acted. I was okay if he did that forever as long as it was to me and only me. I wouldn’t be able to bear it if anyone else took my spot. *Wow, when did I start thinking like this...?*

“Well, anyway, sit back and take notes, fellow single ladies. I’ll show you how to steal the heart of a guy in just these three days.”

“I’m impressed. You jinxed yourself so casually.”

“If anything, *you’re* jinxing me by pointing it out!” *I know you’re only acting all composed like this because Joe-kun’s not graduating yet!*

“Good luck, Senpai. I...I’m really rooting for you.”

“Yumechi! Thanks! I knew it! Having underclassmen is the best!”

Yumechi wryly smiled as I squeezed her tightly. I thought I noticed a glimpse of her falling deep into serious thought. Then again, I might have just been imagining it, so I immediately decided to scrap it from my mind.

Girls Don’t Really Have These Kinds of Conversations, but There Are Always Exceptions

Yume Irido

“Getting serious”. Akatsuki-san had said it, and so had Aso-senpai. They might have both played it down slightly by saying that they were only going to get “a little serious,” which was on brand for them since they rarely ever showed their true thoughts. But the very fact that they said “serious” meant that they were going into this with the appropriate amount of mental preparation.

What were the two of them getting serious for? For Aso-senpai, it was so she could still be with Hoshibe-senpai even after he graduated. But what about Akatsuki-san? It didn’t seem like she was doing anything too special yet, but I was certain that she had her sight set on Kawanami-kun.

Either way, both of them seemed close enough to the people they were interested in. And yet they were “getting serious.” What about me? I must’ve asked myself these two questions a million times by now: *Am* I *getting serious? Do* I *think that there’s a need for me to get serious?*

“Yume-chan! You’re taking too long to get undressed!”

In the middle of my long train of thought, Akatsuki-san appeared in front of me, fully naked. She seemed to have no fear and stood there, hands on her hips, with her towel over her shoulder.

“Akatsuki-san...shouldn’t you cover yourself a little?”

“Why? We’re all girls here,” she said with a skeevy chuckle.

You’re not wrong, but that absolutely doesn’t give you the green light to brazenly stand like that in front of others.

We were currently undressing in the changing room of the girls’ bath. But because I’d gotten lost in my thoughts and also wasn’t exactly used to bathing with others, I was hesitating a bit in front of my locker, facing it in a way to avoid others’ gazes. I’d been in the middle of quickly taking off my shirt, but it seemed that there were people who weren’t as shy about being naked in front of others.

“You feel embarrassed because you think there’s something to be embarrassed about! It’s normal to be naked here, so you should act normal and get naked!”

“I know, but...”

“Come on! Get naked! Hurry up! Show me!”

“What was that last part?!”

Very occasionally, Akatsuki-san would say some things that made me doubt her femininity. That being said, I knew she was joking, and I got the feeling that these kinds of outbursts had lessened recently.

“Okay, everyone, I’ll be going on ahead!”

Akatsuki-san wasn’t the only one who was being bold. President Kurenai had also gotten naked without any hesitation. She began making her way to the bath, her plump butt in full view. I was somehow moved as I watched her walk away.

Sure, this was the first time I saw her naked, and her tender, porcelain skin was so beautiful that it gave me goosebumps. But more than that, her posture, the way she walked, the way she acted—it was all too natural. It was as if she were born to be the center of attention. As a testament to that, Akatsuki-san had narrowed her eyes and glued them to President Kurenai’s butt.

“She’s more on the petite side, but her body’s fantastic. Her boobs aren’t anything special, but that just accentuates the appeal of her hips. Look at that bad boy! How many babies do you think she can pop out of tha—”

“Knock it off.”

I blocked Akatsuki-san’s eyes with my arm. *In the near future,* m*aybe it’ll become more commonplace to wear bathing suits at public baths.*

“You have a pretty rockin’ bod yourself, Akki!” Aso-senpai said, nude as well, a towel slung over her shoulder. “You’re very slender and tight where it matters. You do sports or something?”

“I help sports clubs out every now and then. But...” Now it was Akatsuki-san’s turn to grin at Aso-senpai while looking at her.

“Paisen, you have the body of a model! That ‘routine’ of yours is so pointless!”

“It’s not pointless! I’m doing it because I want to!”

Aso-senpai, who'd taken off her clothes and unequipped the bra with the massive amount of pads stuffed in it, was stark naked. Seeing her slender, long body like this really made me think she could make it as a model or a swimmer. Though naked, she seemed more picturesque than lascivious. I was reminded of the artistic nude paintings or even *Venus de Milo*. Her waist especially had me, a fellow girl, marvel in how thin it was.

"You're not in any clubs, right, Paisen?! What the hell's up with your thin waist?!"

"Heh heh. Amazing, right? I'm working really hard at this, thinking that if I keep my waist thin, then my bust'll get bigger."

Suddenly, it was like Akatsuki-san had been turned into Aso-senpai's lackey and was admiring her as she struck pose after pose. Akatsuki-san put her fingers together as if they were a camera.

"Yes! Yes, very nice! Click, click!"

"Um...Yume-san, is she...?" Higashira-san, watching with a confused look on her face, whispered in my ear.

"It's best to let sleeping dogs lie, Higashira-san..."

She wasn't aware of Aso-senpai's vanity, so seeing the stark difference in her body lines must've been a big shock for her.

"Hawa..." Higashira-san made a strange sound as she stared at the modest slopes of Aso-senpai's body.

It was starting to hit me that I really was surrounded by beauties. Both Aso-senpai and President Kurenai had gorgeous bodies. Asuhain-san and Higashira-san...well it went without saying that they had great bodies too. Akatsuki-san did sports, so she had what people would consider healthy bodylines. Everyone around me was way too high level. *Going into a bath with all of them made me feel kinda...inferior.* I unhooked my bra as I thought this.

"Hey...Akki?"

"Yes...Paisen?"

"A girl like Yumechi..."

“A serious and pure girl like her...”

“It’s kinda hot watching her get undressed.”

“It’s *really* hot.”

I felt a slight chill, so I quickly covered my chest with my towel.

“She might have the dirtiest body of everyone.”

“Oh, Senpai, Yume-chan has the dirtiest body even without getting naked!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” I cried out.

I sure would appreciate it if my upperclassman and friend stopped leering at me! They proceeded to run away, fake screaming and frolicking like children about how I’d snapped at them. *Sheesh, those two... There’s a strange synergy between the two of them that I can’t keep up with.*

I was ready to go into the bathing area, but it seemed that Higashira-san and Asuhain-san were still in the middle of changing. The former had only taken off her shirt, while the latter had only taken off her vest.

“Are you two okay? Embarrassed?”

Now that I thought about it, I felt like I remembered Higashira-san saying that she was embarrassed being naked around other girls. Maybe Asuhain-san felt the same.

“N-No, I’m not embarrassed at all,” Asuhain-san said, frowning, her fingers still on the buttons of her shirt. “It’s absolutely natural to take off all your clothes to bathe. I’ll be right behind you, so please go on ahead.”

“Okay... If you’re sure...”

She didn’t have to fake it. I found myself amused by her attitude. Then, she slowly began to unbutton her shirt. In the meantime, Higashira-san, who’d only taken off her shirt and was pretty much just wearing a bra and her skirt, seemed to be struggling with something as she wrapped her arms around her back.

“Apologies... I only recently purchased this bra, so I’m still unfamiliar with the placement of the hooks.”

“Do you need help?”

“Y-Yes, please...”

I walked behind her and put my hands on the back of her bra that stretched across her pale back. *This bra has three rows of hooks. I think it’s so you can adjust the size of it to match your bust. But also, she had it hooked on the last row... Don’t tell me, she thinks she’s going to get even bigger?* I unhooked the bra while feeling somewhat scared, and then there was a boing. Or at least, I *thought* I heard that sound. But there was no way. Boobs that had been freed from their restraints and were once again claimed by the forces of gravities couldn’t possibly make a noise like that. *B-But I could’ve sworn that they did...*

“Phew... Thank you very much.”

“N-No problem...”

I left for the bathing area as if I was running away from seeing something fearsome. *Now that I think about it...in the half year that I’ve known her, I’ve never seen her naked.*

Four Fruit

“Whoa! The water’s golden!” Akatsuki-san exclaimed excitedly looking at the huge bath filled with water.

I wouldn’t have described the water like that, though. If anything, it was a dark reddish brown. I couldn’t even see the bottom of it. After giving myself a light rinse from the shower, I slowly submerged myself in the bathwater, being sure to leave my towel on the edge of the bath.

“Whew...”

It feels so good... We’d walked a lot today, so it made the bath feel even more heavenly—as if it was massaging my body. I also really liked how the water was opaque enough that I didn’t have to worry about any of my body being seen. I could just lay back and relax.

“Phew, this bath is divine...”

“Senpai, you sound like an old man.”

“And what’s wrong with that? We’re at a hot spring,” Aso-senpai replied to Akatsuki-san. “Did you know that this one in particular is apparently featured in the Chronicles of Japan, Akki?”

“Wow, that’s about mythology, right?”

“Out of the thirty volumes, only the first two depict the age of gods,” the human Wikipedia, President Kurenai said, placing her towel on her head.

“Anyway, this place is great! I bet it’s ’cause the gods themselves took a dip in here. Probably...” Aso-senpai said, submerging herself up to her chin.

It was hard to believe she’s the same person who was all fired up about stealing Hoshibe-senpai’s heart. She was in full relaxation mode. Or maybe she was simply recharging her batteries.

“Where’re the other two?” Akatsuki-san asked, turning around while seated at the edge of the bath.

“They’ll probably come out soon.”

Oh. Speak of the devil. Out of the changing room came the sound of two girls walking barefoot. Since Higashira-san was a little taller than me, it made Asuhain-san seem even shorter. That being said, the general vibe between the two of them was the same. After all...they both were bouncing and jiggling.

“U-Um, is...something wrong?”

“No, nothing in particular,” Higashira-san responded to Asuhain-san.

“Then why have your eyes been fixed on me this entire time?!”

Asuhain-san tried to lean over to cover herself from Higashira-san as she looked down at her, but Higashira-san followed suit and leaned over as well. Every action they took, they jiggled and shook...like pudding.

The four of us could only watch in silence as the four fruits from their chest approached us. I’d always known that they were big. I’d even known that they were soft after touching them. But I didn’t know how pale her skin around there was and how no matter how much they bounced, they’d go back to their original position. This was unknown territory!

Despite having such huge and heavy assets, neither Higashira-san nor

Asuhain-san were losing. What were they fighting against? Gravity.

Higashira-san's were perhaps best described as being the shape of a bell. The roundness of her lower breast made their weight very obvious.

On the other hand, Asuhain-san's were shaped like rice bowls. They were beautifully hemispheric with a very defined, perfectly round shape. On second thought, maybe they were more shaped like regular bowls.

Those four white fruits rose and fell like the water in the bath before returning to their original shape. This sight packed an incredible punch. Before I knew it, we'd been turned into machines, only capable of moving our eyes up and down as we followed their boobs.

"Apologies for the wait," Higashira-san said nonchalantly, kneeling down right in front of me.

As she did, I could've sworn that I saw her bell-shaped lumps stretch straight downwards, if only for a split second. In the meantime, Asuhain-san scooped up some of the bath water using the designated wooden bucket and poured it over herself. The droplets of water glistened as light came into contact with them, making her small body sparkle.

"There we go," Higashira-san said, following suit.

As she brought the bucket over her shoulder, her forearm brought up one of her boobs as well, squishing it into a different shape. Her underboob drew a perfect arc that might've appeared on a math question. I looked up from the bath as the water flowed off of her as she poured it over herself.



“Um... Is something the matter?”

It seemed that Asuhain-san and Higashira-san had both finally noticed our reactions. Still, I couldn’t say anything. All I could do was deeply revere in awe, the miracles of their body. However, there was one brave enough to reach out towards the miracle in front of our eyes.

“Higashira-san...” Akatsuki-san almost groaned. She then sidled up next to her and asked with a very serious expression, “May I possibly touch your raw tits?”

“Wha—?” Higashira-san blinked as if in a daze.

In the meantime, Akatsuki-san stared at her fruit as if praying to them. “Don’t misunderstand. My request has absolutely no dirty motives attached to it. As a human being, my instincts are telling me to do this. Perhaps... Perhaps if I am able to touch them, something might change within me!”

“Like...what?”

“What I could never change before—my destiny, my fate, my life... That which eludes the understanding of humans but is predetermined for each and every one of us...”

“I-I see...”

There are times when I get the feeling that Akatsuki-san is a genius.

The very instant I began thinking this, I couldn’t hold myself back anymore. “Higashira-san...could I as well?”

“What?! Et tu, Yume-san?!”

“I-I’ll settle for poking—just one finger! Please!”

I desperately bargained with her, but I got the feeling that I was just making my request sound even dirtier.

“Hey, Ranran... Come over here for a sec?”

“No.”

“Please?! Just a second!”

“No! I have a really bad feeling!”

“Ran-kun... Would you kindly come over here?”

“E-Et tu, President Kurenai?!”

It seemed that Asuhain-san had her own believers requesting permission.

In manga, there’s always a stereotypical scene where girls are all like “Wow, did you grow again?!” But that doesn’t ever happen in real life. That kind of scene was much more austere in real life. There was religious faith in that which was large. It was the same logic with the huge Buddha statue in Nara. Therefore, big breasts deserved the appropriate amount of religious devotion. We *had* to touch them.

After a lot of mulling it over in her head, Higashira-san averted her eyes embarrassedly. “I-If you insist...”

We received permission. Akatsuki-san and I looked at each other and nodded in agreement.

“Okay.”

“One each.”

“Huh?!”

I went to the right of her, Akatsuki-san to the left, and we both extended our hands. I touched her pale skin, still wet from the bath water, with my finger. Though I’d barely put any strength into my touch, I felt the pad of my finger easily sink in.

“Oh...”

“Whoa...”

“Oh my god!”

“Whoa!”

The two of us let out various sounds of surprise and admiration. *What the heck...? What the* absolute *heck?!* Her breasts were so springy that no matter how much I pushed in or changed their shape, the springiness of her boobs was so strong that I could feel it pushing back on me, trying to return to its original shape. Beauty wasn’t just exclusively outer appearance or sound; touch was

important too.

“Ahn! P-Please be more gentl— Hyah! N-Not my nipples! Those are off-limits!”

Oh, right. No nipples. I’ll refrain from describing them. Apparently, according to the Ten Commandments, idolatry was not okay. All one needed to know was that they were cute and beautiful.

I found myself sighing with pleasure, even more than when I’d gotten into the bath.

“I feel like my life’s gonna be different from now on,” Akatsuki-san said.

As I stared up at the ceiling, enchanted by the experience, Akatsuki-san was partially desperately rubbing her breasts with the hand that she’d just used to knead Higashira-san’s breast. Perhaps she was hoping that whatever had caused the growth of the beautiful, huge breasts on Higashira-san’s chest would be passed onto her.

Higashira-san, with a tired expression, submerged her divine body into the red-brown water. “Is this really how it is with girls...? I truly believed this kind of situation was a fictitious event that occurred only in manga.”

“Heh heh...”

“Hm, well...”

Akatsuki-san and I both awkwardly looked away. Our eyes fell on Asuhain-san who’d been captured by Aso-senpai. Her face was bright red as President Kurenai-san groped her, examining her breasts as if she was appraising them.

This definitely isn’t normal... I swear it isn’t...

“I suppose I know now. Mizuto-kun was fairly reserved when he did it, though.”

“Huh?” Akatsuki-san and I both snapped our heads towards Higashira-san in the face of her unexpected statement.

“Uh... H-Hold on. What does that mean? Don’t tell me...”

“Wait, Higashira-san, has Irido-kun touched your boobs?”

“Yes. Why?”

Th-That miserable guy! He has such a calm face, and yet— Is he really out here vehemently denying they’re friends while he’s touching her boobs?!

“Although, I suppose that was more of an accident. He immediately moved his hand away too.”

“An accident...huh?”

“Ha ha ha! He lucked into it?!”

Excuse me?! In the half a year plus that we’ve lived together, not once has anything like that happened to me. Even in the year plus that we dated, he never even *once* touched my boobs!

“I don’t mind one bit,” Higashira-san said nonchalantly. “These things are bound to happen when you spend enough time together.”

No, they aren’t!

“Higashira-san, have you—” *Have you seen him naked?* I wanted to finish my sentence, but I swallowed these words.

That was close. I don’t know what came over me. I was so close to getting into a one-up battle with her and starting a whole new discussion. *But...there’s no way she has. Yeah. There’s no way she’s ever had a chance to get into the bath with him. I’m the only one who’s seen him naked. I’m the only one who knows the most private part of him. Heh heh...*

“Oh, right,” Higashira-san began, letting the top of her boobs breach the water like a whale surfacing for air. “That promiscuous boy is your neighbor, correct? I’m sure that you’ve had your fair share of erotic accidents.”

“Ah.”

You’re really going to ask that? I internally shuddered with fear. I’d purposely avoided asking her any deep questions about their previous relationship. They lived so physically close to each other for over ten years. There was no way that there wasn’t at least one incident in all that time. Or maybe there were no incidents but deliberate “accidents.” However, I didn’t have the courage to try and ask my friend about such private things.

I nervously checked Akatsuki-san's expression. She had on a cryptic, but bright smile.

"Hm... Who knows?"

"I believe that's the precise answer someone would give if something had indeed happened."

"Yeah, I guess. But you don't really wanna hear all about how I ran into him at an awkward moment and pretended not to notice."

"You're practically revealing what occurred, though."

Huh? What? I want details!

"Minami-san..." Higashira-san said casually. "I get a vague feeling about you."

"Hm?"

"That you have experience."

I froze. Or rather, I couldn't tell whether it was me or if the hot water itself had frozen. *"Experience." Even I know what that really means.* Did the physical nakedness of us extend to how open we were with our questions too? Higashira-san had perhaps unconsciously crossed a line, going into taboo territory.

Sure, even I had wondered the same thing. Akatsuki-san was always giving me advice, and sounded like she had a lot of relationship experience. Plus, there was a guy living right by her. I couldn't help but be suspicious. If Mizuto and I had been living together when we were dating, I'm sure that at some point we would've...

I gripped my chest, my heart beating uncontrollably, while looking at Akatsuki-san.

"'Experience'...huh?" Akatsuki-san smiled with a troubled expression before opening her mouth to reply.

The way she replied, though, I think I'll keep between us.

Handmade Handcuffs

Mizuto Irido

“This croquette is crazy good!”

“Good thing we kept lunch light!”

“I bet this was all a part of Kurenai’s calculations. She’s crazy efficient at scheduling even when it’s for leisure time.”

“Whoa, they’re selling cider. Be right back.”

The guy group was mainly focused on walking around, sampling the various foods that the hot spring town had to offer. It wouldn’t have been surprising if people passing by didn’t think we were part of the same group due to how all over the place in terms of personality and looks we were. That being said, we did have *one* thing in common—we all had absolutely no interest in going into multiple baths over the course of a single day.

I held an apparently famous croquette as we walked down the hill, and as we did, I saw a roofed area in the distance where people were sitting on the ground. Well, that was my initial thought, but as we got closer I realized they were actually sitting on something, and their feet were submerged in water.

Oh, they’re in a foot bath. From what I could tell, it didn’t cost anything, and people passing by would stop here, take off their socks and shoes, and rest their feet inside. *What a sight perfectly characteristic of a hot spring town.*

“Huh?” Suddenly, one of the people enjoying said footbath turned to look at us from her spot on one of the wooden boards. “Oh, hey, it’s you, Senpai!” Aso-senpai said, turning towards us.

“Whoa. What’re you guys doin’ here?” Hoshibe-senpai asked.

Upon closer inspection, I noticed President Kurenai, Asuhain-san, Minami-san, Isana, and Yume with their feet in the stone bathtub as well. Before we knew it, we naturally gravitated towards them.

“Have you guys already gone into any of the hot springs?!” Aso-senpai eagerly

asked Hoshibe-senpai.

“Nah. What’s the point? There’s one at the inn.”

“So you’re walkin’ around and eatin’ instead? Whew, what a guy thing to do. We just got out of a bath.”

Hm, now that she mentions it, their hair and skin do look kinda glossy...I think. Honestly, I wouldn’t really know the difference. It’s not like I’m carefully observing them all the time or anything. How am I supposed to know?

“In that case, why don’t you at least try the foot bath?” President Kurenai, who’d taken off her stockings, suggested, a grin on her face. “Some spots just opened up. I’m sure we can fit the four of you easily,” she said to Hoshibe-senpai while scooting over, making space between her and Aso-senpai.

I see... President Kurenai’s being her wingman.

Minami-san must’ve picked up on that because she energetically agreed. “Oh, good idea! Kawanami, Irido-kun—you two should take a dip too! You’re not gonna have one of these in the inn!”

“You’re so right! We came all this way to a hot springs town. Should enjoy everything it has to offer!” Kawanami, also taking the hint, immediately took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his pant legs, and sat next to Minami-san.

By accepting the invitation and also sitting next to a girl, he’d cleverly crafted a situation where it felt only natural to follow suit and do the same. *Those two really are like peas in a pod.*

“Guess this is perfect for a spot to chill a beat,” Hoshibe-senpai said, sitting next to Aso-senpai.

As he did, Haba-senpai and I were left standing, but that wouldn’t last for long. Though I got the feeling that he didn’t want to sit, President Kurenai extended her hand and forcefully pulled Haba-senpai over to sit next to her.

I looked at the sight before me. We were split up into guy-girl pairs. *What is this, a cabaret club?* I internally sighed and decided that in times like these, it’d be best to sit next to Isana. But as I moved towards her...

“Here.”

I found that Yume had already made space for me next to her. She'd purposely made Isana move over a spot so there'd be an opening between the two of them. If I sat there, I'd be sandwiched in between the two of them, but if I chose to ignore her, it'd be extremely obvious that I was avoiding it. If anything, I got the feeling that the latter would be the more humiliating option.

In short, I was in checkmate. *Hats off to you if you planned this, Yume.* I walked over, a slight feeling of defeat in my mouth, and sat between the two of them, dipping my bare feet into the water.

"How is it? Nice, right?" Yume asked, looking at me.

I could feel the warmth of the water seeping into my feet. Any muscle fatigue I'd had felt like it was melting away. I had to admit, it was pretty nice.

"It's been a while since I've walked around this much, so yeah it's nice. Still not sure how this differs from a regular bath at home, though."

"You should try the hot springs—they're *much* nicer. The water's cloudy and gold. Right, Higashira-san?"

"True..." Isana yawned. Her eyes looked unfocused and she kept blinking over and over again.

"Tired?" I asked.

"Yes... My morning began at a much earlier time than usual, and I took a bath already..."

"You were fine in the bath," Yume countered.

"That's because none of you would allow me a moment's rest."

"H-Hey, don't make it sound like we did something dirty! Although, I guess that's not too far off base..."

Uh...explain? What exactly happened in there? Isana began to doze off for real, gradually leaning more and more on me. When her shoulder touched mine, her warmth flowed into me. *It must be because she just got out of the bath.* Now that I was this close, I could easily tell how fluffy her hair was and how soft her face was, like a baby's.

"Don't *actually* fall asleep here," I said. "There's nowhere to lean back against,

so it'll be hard to support you."

"I humbly request your best efforts to do so regardless..."

"Well, I humbly decline. Hey!"

Isana rested her head on my shoulder, her hair brushing against my cheek and the nape of my neck. I could smell a sweet, clean scent characteristic of someone who'd just gotten out of the bath. *Fine.* Not having much choice, I wrapped my arm around Isana's shoulders in place of a back rest.

"You better not be mistaking me for your pillow..."

"Your chickens are coming home to roost. You only have yourself to blame for letting her use your lap as a pillow who knows how many times," Yume said in an accusatory tone.

"I don't *let* her—she does it all on her own," I countered.

I had never ever invited Isana to use my lap as her own pillow. Not a single time.

"I get her, though," Yume added. "Being here's really relaxing."

"It's really that nice?"

"Oh, right, you're always quick to get out of the bath. You just don't appreciate baths as much as I do."

Yume stretched out her legs in the water, lifting them up slightly. The part of her legs that protruded from the water sparkled from the droplets. Her legs were so clean and smooth, unlike mine which had visible pores. I couldn't help but stare.

As I did, my eyes inevitably moved their way up to her kneecaps, which were sticking out of her rolled up skirt, and then to her thighs. I had to force myself to quickly pry my eyes away and look down at my own legs.

"You should take your time when you get in the hot spring. I mean, how many opportunities are you gonna get to come to a place like this? Hey, your skin might even get super soft," Yume said, faintly smiling at me, a light coat of lip balm on her lips.

Now that I got a closer look, I noticed that Yume's skin was as smooth as a baby's and slightly flushed, just like Isana's. *What am I getting flustered about, though? I've seen her right after she's gotten out of the bath at home. This shouldn't be any different, but...*

"So what, you wanna see me with soft skin?" I asked.

"Heh heh. Maybe a little."

As we had a casual conversation with each other, I felt her pinky lightly brush against mine as it rested on the wooden board we were sitting on. Suddenly, electricity flew from where she touched me. *This has to just be a coincidence. Just a little of an overreaction from me...*

"You already have really beautiful skin and a baby face— You know what? I bet if you entered the hot springs, you might exit as a girl."

But I couldn't move away. She intentionally began rubbing her pinky against mine.

"What kinda ancient manga trope are you referencing?"

"I wasn't, but, oh, I guess there was something like that back in the day. I might have seen it on Netflix."

It started with my nail, and then she slowly worked her way back until she reached my knuckle. Her pinky began to burrow in between my fingers towards the skin fold, intertwining her pinky with mine.

"Old anime have *so* many episodes. It's so easy to lose track of time once you start watching," she said.

She began to dig into my skin fold as if she were playing with it. Did she want something? Maybe I was just misunderstanding things, but there was a certain interpretation of her actions that I couldn't get out of my head. Mulling it over twisted my brain in knots. I needed to take a chance. Was she just toying with me? Or...

I took my ring finger and burrowed it in between her fingers.

"Nnh..."

I couldn't be sure, but I was almost positive I heard a faint sound come from

her. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't bring myself to look at her face and confirm it. But I could've sworn that I heard an almost...moan come from right beside me.

Yume's slender fingers felt softer than I remembered. I rubbed the side of her middle finger as I made my way towards the skin fold, just as she'd done to me. Her ring finger that had been in the way moved up just the tiniest bit, making it easier to touch her middle finger.

The tiniest thread that'd been holding me back snapped. I began to move my fingers one by one across Yume's hand, starting from her knuckles and ending at her fingertips. Then, I gradually moved my palm over her hand. The world went completely silent. All I could focus on was how soft, smooth, and small her hand was.

I'd almost never thought that my hands were big, but her hands were completely covered by mine. Times like these, I could really feel the difference in our genders. I wanted to chase that feeling more, so I slid my palm towards her wrist.

It was so thin that it felt like it could snap at any given second. If I moved my thumb a bit, I would've been able to wrap my entire hand around it, like handcuffs in a sense. As long as I did that, Yume wouldn't be able to run away. I felt a faint beating through the pads of my fingers. I could feel her pulse.

I wasn't sure exactly when, but our conversation had ended.

My Childhood Friend Can't Be This Cooperative

Kogure Kawanami

Very nice! A very bittersweet atmosphere had descended on this foot bath, and I couldn't help but internally press the like button as a spectator. The Irido siblings weren't the only ones cozying up to each other. Aso-senpai was going on the attack, boldly pressing her shoulder against Hoshibe-san. The student council president was barefoot in the water, playing with Haba-senpai by rubbing his feet. The only thing ruining this picture was Higashira, who'd passed out on Irido's shoulder.

It was totally worth it to set things up so that the guys and girls would be paired off. I was also grateful that the girls were so willing to play along. After all, the guys I was with were super passive.

“You’re in a good mood,” Akatsuki said from next to me.

I tried to hold back a huge grin. “Well yeah. Who coulda guessed things would go *this* according to plan?”

“I really don’t get you. So just *any* ol’ couple does it for you?”

“Course not. I don’t give a crap about those loose couples going from fling to fling. I think romance is best served innocent and pure.”

“Oh, I see. In that case, the student council’s perfect, huh?”

“You sound like you know more than you’re letting on... Oh right. When the heck did you become friends with the student council girls?”

“Just kinda happened during the sports festival when I was on the cheer squad. We’re pretty good friends now. I might even have some insider info.”

“Huh?”

This was the most obvious bait in history, but I couldn’t help but take it. This was the student council we were talking about—a collection of bona fide beauties. There were tons of different rumors goin’ around about them, but every last one of them were very good at keeping secrets. Even with my information network, I couldn’t get anything solid.

Akatsuki grinned. “Curious, aren’t you? You wanna know *all* about their crushes.”

I do. Buuut I can’t jump on this opportunity too fast. She’d just keep dangling information about them in front of me, keeping me dependent on her.

“What do you take me for? I’m more in the know than you’d think,”I asserted.

“Oh? Whatcha got?”

“I know how Aso-senpai gave Hoshibe-san a homemade lunch during the sports festival. I also know about how the student council president and Haba-senpai disappeared somewhere together during the cultural festival too.”

“Uh-huh... So basically nothing, right?”

“Come again?”

“See, the thing is, girls become pretty loose-lipped when you befriend them.”

Say...what?! Before I knew it, I was excitedly looking at Akatsuki’s face.

“Hee hee,” she snickered impishly. *God dammit! It’s not fair that you get this opportunity just ’cause you’re a girl!* “Wanna know? Of course you do, don’t you? If you say ‘pretty please with a cherry on top,’ I might give you one of my prized rumors as a treat.”

“Urgh...”

“Hm?” Akatsuki leaned her shoulder against me and pointed her ear at me.

Dammit! I don’t have a choice. Goodbye, pride... “Pretty please...with a cherry on top.”

“Heh heh.” Akatsuki grinned from ear to ear. *God, you piss me off!* “Okay, this stays between us, got it?”

Then she beckoned me to lean in and moved towards my ear. I felt her breath on my earlobe, and then she lowered her voice to a whisper. It tickled my eardrum as she spoke.

“So you know, Aso-senpai? She’s prolly gonna confess to Hoshibe-senpai on this trip.”

My eyes widened and my head spun to face Akatsuki. Her usual grin was on her face, but I could tell she wasn’t kidding.

“You...serious?”

“*Super* serious.”

I shot a side glance at the girl with her hair half down and half in pigtails as she sat next to Hoshibe-san. Aisa Aso had stolen the hearts of many guys at our school with her devilish cuteness ever since she was a first year.

Most girls who tried to act like she did would just come off as cringey, but her beauty was a great asset to make it all come off as natural. The tradeoff for this was that other girls tended not to like her.

Despite her flirty reputation, I'd never heard of her actually going out with anyone. Most people said that her ideal man was too godly for any of the guys in the school to match, but now, everything was starting to fall into place. She hadn't dated anyone because she was aiming for the heart of the former student council president, Tohdo Hoshibe.

Hoshibe-san was pretty famous in his own right. Not only did he have stellar grades, he also used to be on a sports team. Add in his above average height, and you got yourself a bona fide chick magnet...or at least on the surface.

I'd heard that he'd always laughed at the idea of getting a girlfriend, saying it would be more trouble than it was worth. That being said, that kind of attitude combined with his looks only served to make him look even cooler, resulting in girls being even more into him.

If a girl like Aisa Aso who was adored by guys and a guy like Tohdo Hoshibe who was adored by girls started dating...that'd be the birth of a power couple.

"Hey, Senpai, let's take a selfie!"

"Ugh. Pass."

"Then I'll just take one, 'kay?"

"You know you need someone's permission before taking their picture, right?"

"Say 'cheese'!"

"Don't you *dare* post this."

Aso-senpai steadied her phone and moved in towards Hoshibe-san, making their shoulders touch and angling her chest as close as she could get to touching him. *That body spacing... Her method of attack... Yeah, there's no mistaking it. She's going in for the kill.*

"See? What'd I tell you?" Akatsuki said proudly.

But...something was off. "You... What are you planning?"

"Hm?"

"You give me shit for being a voyeur and now you're feeding me

information?”

Something’s up. What’s in it for her? She’s definitely planning something.

“I’m friends with Aso-senpai, and as her friend, I wanna cheer her on. Telling you helps because I know that you’ll do whatever you can to make things happen between them.”

She’s...not wrong. It checks out, but there’s something about her words that feel...planned. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was fishy, but before I could press any further...

“Okay, everyone, we should get going. We shouldn’t hog this spot,” the student council president said.

“Roger!” Akatsuki said, shooting to her feet.

I didn’t have a chance to continue my questions. Akatsuki immediately started calling out to the other girls.

“Wakey wakey, Higashira-san. Come on, Yume-chan, let’s go!”

Higashira rubbed her eyes, and Irido-san looked like she was lost in the clouds as she responded with a dazed, “Oh... Right...”

I lost any chance I had at talking to Akatsuki any further.

“See you at the inn, Senpai!”

All I could do was watch as the girls gradually disappeared up the hill. *Something’s up... What’s gotten into her?*

After the girls were completely out of sight, I heard Irido let out a long, heavy sigh. Maybe it was just my imagination, but he seemed redder than usual.

“You good?” I asked.

“Yeah...” He said in a difficult-to-interpret tone before drying off his feet in silence.

“We should get goin’ too,” Hoshibe-san said.

And with that, the four of us left the foot bath.

Could You Stop?

Tohdo Hoshibe

We walked around the hot spring town until the sun set, and then we returned to the inn to take a dip. Other than that, we didn't have anything especially planned, so we had free time until dinner was served.

I sat down on a bench in the lobby, wearing a yukata, and began flipping through my phone. It honestly wasn't too bad going around the place with my underclassmen, but it was important for everyone to get some time to themselves every now and then. Spending time by myself in an inn beyond what any high schooler could afford was very quaint.

"Senpai?"

Or at least, it would've been, had a familiar voice not have suddenly called out to me. I looked up and saw Aso's similarly familiar smile looking down at me. For the record, "familiar" in this case meant her usual, forced, flirty smile.

"Whatcha doin' here all by yourself?"

"Nothing. That's what I'm doing."

"Heh heh, the lone wolf attitude doesn't suit you at all." Aso grabbed her sleeves and shook them to the side of her body.

Realizing that I was ignoring her, she walked in front of me, leaned down, and looked me in the eyes, still shaking her sleeves.

"Don't you have something to say to me, Senpai?"

God, she just does not *give up.* Aso was in a yukata too, shaking her own reddish sleeves. It was annoying how a simple yukata felt fresh on her just because of how revealing her usual clothes were. She was actually not too bad looking when she didn't try so hard. I frowned at the irony.

"Clothes really make the person, huh?"

"Oh, so you're saying I'm the cutest in the world?"

"Sorry, are we speaking the same language right now?"

“Yep! Senpai-nese!”

I guarantee *there’s no way—even in your made-up language—that what I said can be interpreted like that.* Aso proceeded to sit next to me without even asking. She immediately scooched over until our shoulders just barely didn’t touch, not giving me a chance to leave.

And then, she whispered in my ear. “Good job today, Senpai!”

I tilted my head away from her. “On what?”

“You worked hard to lead your underclassmen around, didn’t you?”

“Wouldn’t really say I worked hard. If anything, I feel like Kawanami was leading *me* around.”

If it was just me and the other two guys, I would’ve agreed that I’d have worked hard to lead them around, but with Kawanami being as proactive as he was, I’d been able to take it easy.

“I think the very fact that you made an atmosphere that allowed the first year, Kawanami-kun, to lead everyone around is plenty praiseworthy. After everything’s all said and done, you’re good at looking after others.”

“Don’t praise me. It feels like you’re trying to manipulate me.”

“I’m being serious, though.”

For just a split second, I heard a tone of pure seriousness in her voice. At first, I thought that I’d heard someone else, but when I turned around, it was the usual face of my underclassman.

“Listen. I’m being serious. I *really* think you’re amazing, Senpai.”

“Are you okay? What happened to your usual cringey way of talking in the third-person?”

“Well, if I don’t take a serious tone, how are you supposed to take me seriously?” she said, putting her hand on mine. It was almost like she was grabbing it. “You’re an amazing person. You’re smart, athletic, and a good judge of character. And...no matter how much I annoy you, you never push me away.”

“Not for lack of trying...”

“*Now* who’s not being serious? If you really wanted to get away, you wouldn’t keep hanging around the student council after resigning.”

I fell silent. The reason I kept popping into the student council was because I was wondering whether they were doing okay. Of course, I had absolutely no reason to worry with Kurenai as my successor. Even as the vice president, she’d been more president-like than me, the actual president. I knew then that she’d do a much better job than me. If anything, I was most worried about...

“I might have already told you this, but I’m an older sibling,” she continued. “Heh heh, easy to tell, isn’t it? Since I’m always looking after my little sister, I’m starved for affection.”

“So what, I’m supposed to be the older brother you never had?”

“Yep. You’re my dependable older brother. Doesn’t that make you happy?”

“Not one bit. Having a little sister like you would just tire me out.”

“Then...” Aso squeezed my hand. “Would you stop being my older brother?”

Uh...what? If I stopped being her older brother, then what would I be instead? Ugh, what am I thinking? I was never her brother in the first place. But her eyes—those serious eyes of hers were almost pointing towards the answer.

“Hm? Pfft. Senpai, are you getting the wrong idea?”

“Huh?”

In the next moment, it was like there was a paradigm shift in her face. She’d gone back to her usual, teasing smile.

“Don’t tell me you were thinking that you could be my boyfriend instead of my older brother?”

“No...”

“Oh? You sound kinda irritated. Did I hit the nail on the head or something?”

“God, you’re annoying!”

I pushed her shoulder away from me, prompting her to giggle and stand up.

“Well, I’ll see you later. I think you should be a little more honest, Senpai.”

With that, she left with a spring in her step. I watched her, head in my hand as she disappeared. There was an annoying mixture of jumbled up feelings inside me that wouldn't go away. *What's your problem...? Are you gonna keep goofing around or be serious? Pick a lane.*

Dishing about Your Love Life Is the Most Fun

Aisa Aso

"Heh heh..."

As we ate the luxurious feast in front of us, I couldn't stop smiling. I'll give a hint why. It wasn't because the food was really tasty. Okay, that was part of it. But there was something even more enjoyable than that—the image of Senpai's face that I'd saved in my head.

"Heh heh heh..."

His had been an expression of pure surprise. He was actually thinking about us maybe becoming an item. *Jeez. He might act all aloof, but he really* is *a guy. You don't have to hide it, Senpai.*

"Aisa..." Suzurin suddenly put her chopsticks down.

"Hm? What's up?"

"Fine. Do it."

"Do what?"

"Brag."

As soon as she said that, Yumechi, Ranran, and Akki's heads flew towards Suzurin.

"A-Are you sure, President Kurenai?!"

"I don't really think that's a good idea! It's gonna ruin the food!"

"Wow, your magnanimity knows no bounds."

I don't really get what's going on, but I can tell that you're all being rude.

Suzurin rested her head in her hand. "Having her grin like an idiot for the

entire meal would ruin the enjoyment even more. I think it's best if she just gets it over with and lays everything bare."

"Huh? Lay what bare? Aisa has no clue what you're talking about."

"Enough of that. Something happened with Hoshibe-senpai, right? Speak!"

Aw, why're ya so scary and mad? Is it because things aren't going well with your special someone?

"Well, if you wanna hear *that* badly, then I guess I don't have a choice. I might just have to spill every last embarrassing detail."

I wasn't kidding about it being embarrassing, though. This was supposed to be a secret between me and Senpai. But it looks like they're all just *dying* to know, so I gotta tell them. Yep, no choice but to do just that. So then, I proceeded to tell them everything that had happened.

"Isn't he *so* cute?! But it's like, I can totally tell he has a thing for me. Aw, man, what am I gonna do?"

For some reason, Suzurin and the rest just stared at each other in silence.

Uh... Where're the squeals? Shouldn't you guys be blushing since everything was so cute?

"Your attitude led me to believe the two of you kissed or something along those lines," Suzurin said.

"I legit thought you asked him out..." Akki muttered.

"I'm surprised you can get that excited from something so minor, Senpai," Yume scoffed.

Harsh!

"This is cause for celebration! I made *him* of all people hide his embarrassment! It's a *huge* victory!"

"Not to be rude, but are you sure it wasn't just in your head? He called you 'annoying,' didn't he? Maybe you should be taking his words at face value," Ranran said.

"Don't burst my bubble!"

Ranran was always like this, throwing reality in my face. How could she do that to me when I'm her upperclassman?!

"Regardless, even if he was hiding his embarrassment," Suzurin interjected. "You're much easier to please than I thought. If you're bouncing off the walls from that, then what are you going to do if something *actually* happens?"

"If you're gonna be all smiles like that, at least save it for something more meaty," Akki chimed in. "After all, if you react like that when something good happens, it'll show on your face when something bad happens too. It's a hundred times more annoying to deal with someone down in the dumps than on cloud nine."

"That's true..." Suzurin continued. "There's nothing more annoying than a girl whose emotions are all over the place."

"Hard agree!"

"You're calling *me* emotionally unstable?!"

I'm mentally strong *if anything! I shrug off all the hate I get from girls like it's nothing!*

"W-Well, shouldn't we be happy that there's some progress?"

Oh, Yumechi! Having a cute understudy like her is really the best!

"She's been unable to make any progress for a year, right? I don't think it's too strange for her to be this happy for getting such a minute reaction out of him."

"Urgh. Your words are stabbing me all over."

She's right, though. It's been a year without any progress. Even though I look like the type who plays with guys for fun, I've yet to get anywhere... Is it really that bad to have just the looks of that kinda flirty, loose girl? It's better than actually being one, right?

"Now she's getting all depressed." Akki frowned.

"S-Sorry, Senpai!" Yumechi apologized. "I think how you acted was really cute!"

“R-Really?” I asked through sniffles.

“Yeah! You were so much cuter than the way you usually act for no reason—like you’ve got everything in the bag.”

“‘For no reason’... Is that how I usually act?”

“W-Wait. No, that’s not, uh...”

You can’t even look me in the eye! You call me “Master,” but that’s what you really think of me?! I could cry right now. Girls are so scary and two-faced!

“Don’t get so down, Aisa,” Suzurin said, picking up her chopsticks. “You’ve gotten a lot better than how you used to be just a year ago.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?!” I screeched.

“Was she really that much worse back then?” Yumechi asked, tilting her head.

Uh, your phrasing makes it sound like you think I’m plenty bad right now!

“‘Worse’ doesn’t even begin to cover it. She used to try and put moves onto Joe whenever she got a chance. It got to the point where I flat out asked our upperclassman, the general affairs officer, why they would ever recommend Aisa to be appointed to the student council.”

“Oh yeah, we were like cats and dogs back then. Aha ha ha!”

“This is no laughing matter. I was seriously thinking of ways to get you forcibly removed.”

“So, what changed?” Akki asked. “You two seem pretty friendly right now.”

“Well, that’s the thing,” Suzurin said, flashing a cryptic look at me. *I have a bad feeling....* “For better or worse, people change when they’re in love.”

“Oh! Yeah, Aso-senpai definitely seems like the type to change because of a guy!”

Akki, you’re pretty rude to your upperclassmen too. “You make it sound like I was into him first,” I said, pouting. “For the record, *he* approached *me*.”

“True. You generally avoided Hoshibe-senpai in the beginning.”

“Huh? Really?” Yumechi said, surprised.

Suzurin grinned. “He’s aloof, and teasing a guy like that is no fun. If anything, he was hard for her to deal with. Despite her looks, Aisa’s surprisingly not good with conventional guys. She only really comes alive when there’s a shy guy she can dominate.”

Then I heard a stifled laugh, the origin of which came from Isana-chan who’d been quietly eating her food until now. Realizing that all eyes had fallen on her, she began to panic.

“A-Apologies, please ignore me! I most certainly wasn’t thinking about how you’re such a stereotypical otaku princess that it was hilarious!”

“Well, you just said it out loud,” Akki quipped.

Isana-chan, realizing what she’d done, began blabbering in a panic. That being said, I wasn’t really annoyed or anything. She was right. I was the otaku princess type, at least on the inside, not body-wise.

“At any rate,” Suzurin continued, “she didn’t really get involved with Hoshibe-senpai too much in the beginning. But you’ve seen how Hoshibe-senpai looks after others. Apparently, he noticed how cringey she was being and talked to her every now and then to check up on her. Then, before she knew it...”

“Hold up! You make me sound like such an easy woman!”

“Aren’t you?”

You bitch... Not even a moment’s hesitation.

“For your information, something *did* happen. Until then, I really did find him annoying!”

“Oh, really? Why don’t you enlighten us all as to what that ‘something’ was?”

Oh crap. I just dug my own grave!

Suzurin’s lips curled into a faint, cryptic smile. “You like boasting about your love life, don’t you? Then by all means, go ahead.”

Yeah, I like talking about how things are going*, not how things started! This just feels like I’m being vulnerable.*

“I’m not alone, right?” Suzurin asked. “You all want to hear, don’t you?”

“Yeah!”

“Definitely!”

Yumechi and Akki responded with eyes full of wonder. Realizing that I no longer had anywhere to run, I sighed and began to reluctantly recount what happened roughly a year ago.

“If I remember right...it was during the sports festival.”

My Seriousness

I wanted someone to look at me. I realized that I had this desire after a play for my elementary school’s arts festival. As someone who was naturally good looking, I was easily chosen as the star of the play.

I became the heroine of the story as I stood on the gym’s stage. My classmates praised me, and their parents applauded me. Then, the next day came, and everything went back to normal. It was then that I felt that “normal” wasn’t enough.

Now that I knew what it was like to be fawned upon, everything else felt extremely mundane. *Why aren’t people looking at me more now? They were* just *looking at me yesterday!* If back then I’d joined a theater troupe, and truly tried to become an actor, this may have been my origin story as a girl who chased her dreams of making it big. But I had neither the proactivity nor the passion to do that. All I could do was carry around the dissatisfaction of not being fawned upon and aimlessly go through day after mundane day.

Even in middle school, I tried writing poems, doing weird makeup, and other stereotypical “finding yourself” kinda stuff. But I was never able to translate these things into actual activities. If I were talented, maybe I could’ve satisfied my need for attention from streaming, but I wasn’t. I knew my limits.That’s why even in high school, I was only ever able to tease shy boys. Even now, I have no clue why my upperclassman recommended me to the student council. After all, my peer was *the* Suzuri Kurenai. I didn’t match up to her at all. She was a genius in every possible meaning of the word. No matter how I looked at it, she was the main character, and I was a mere side character. That might have been why

I found it so fun to try and mess with Joe-kun.

He didn't really give me any fun reactions or anything, but Suzurin did. It was hilarious to see that same girl, lauded as a genius—a genuine ball of charisma—get pissed when I tried to do anything to him. It was so funny, I couldn't help myself. Thinking about how a main character like that had her head filled with thoughts of me made me so happy.

For the record though, this isn't some yuri story. This was more like how people send annoying replies to social media posts of famous people. There was a certain sense of fulfillment that came from having someone amazing spend even a little of their time to deal with you. Having someone else's greatness cover how insignificant of a person you are was such a petty type of self pleasurement.

That's how small a person I was, and it didn't take that long for *him* to see right through me.

"Aso, you should do things seriously or not at all."

This happened after the sports festival ended. This was the first big job that I'd finished on the student council. He called out to me just as I was about to leave. Everyone had been so satisfied with how they'd pulled things off.

I thought he was talking about my work on the student council, so I was a bit upset. "I think I did my job pretty well..."

"Yeah, you've got skills. You did everything flawlessly—well everything except stuff that involved Kurenai."

I jumped a little. It felt like I'd been stabbed deep inside my chest. Then, as if to protect myself, I felt a great anger explode out of me.

"*She's* the one bothering me! Why am *I* the one being yelled at?!"

I couldn't believe he was saying that despite not knowing anything. *How can you say that without knowing* anything*?! How can you say that when you haven't even been looking at me?! All you ever do is laze around. You've never even tried to talk to me! Don't talk like you know the first thing about me!*

Back then, he was really great at doing anything and everything, and it was

hard to believe that he had anything he was particularly worried about. This was especially true since he'd been the one to bring Suzurin onto the student council. He was the same kind of person as Suzuri Kurenai. There was no way he'd understand a side character like me.

But then...

"If you try to buy attention with cheap tricks, you're only gonna get somethin' of equally cheap value." He kept landing critical hits. "Is that really good enough for you? If so, then forget my lecture, since it's so off-base and all."

He only said things that hit me right in my vulnerable spots. "Goodbye..." I said meekly, and then I ran away.

His assault of logic that hit me right where it hurt the most almost brought me to tears. But my pride just barely wouldn't allow me to play off my weakness with tears, so instead I scurried away.

I was pissed. So pissed. After suppressing the tears, all that was left was rage. Why did he have to say that to me? Sure, he was the student council president, and sure, he was my upperclassman, but it didn't give him the right! We hadn't even talked to each other that much. How dare he look down on me like that?!

How dare he accuse me of not doing my best?! I *was* doing my best! If not, then I wouldn't have been doing exercises to maintain my figure! If not, then I wouldn't have been stuffing my bra! I hadn't cut corners even once! *You're just a damn virgin loser who doesn't understand girls!*

"Onee-chan! Dinner time!"

Before I knew it, it was already nighttime. I'd returned home and dove into my bed. In the midst of working out my anger, hours had passed. *What's going on? Even I'm surprised. How could all of this time have passed with me cursing him out in my head on repeat?*

What was worse, this continued the next day as well. I'd remember his words and get angry. Whenever I saw him during student council, I'd try to find every last fault I could with him, almost like a mother-in-law. Sometimes he'd talk to me and I'd pretend like nothing was wrong, while in my head, I was cursing a storm at him.

What did he even mean “do things seriously”? After a while, that’s the question that I began to ask myself. What did that even mean? I wasn’t holding anything back no matter what I did, so what was there left to do?

It was true that I was a coward who could only go after people weaker than me, but if I tried any harder at that, I’d feel bad. That’d just be picking on the weak even more. I’d been purposefully holding back. If, for example, Joe-kun got serious about me, it wouldn’t have been funny how incredibly horrible things between me and Suzuri Kurenai would’ve gotten.

That’s why... That’s why I decided that if I was going to get serious about something, I needed to aim higher, not lower. For example, maybe a big guy like Senpai who I had difficulty dealing with.

“Whatcha up to, Senpai?”

You’re the one who told me to try my best. Remember, you’re the one who wanted me to get serious. I’ll show you what Aisa’s like when she gets serious.

My desire had always been for someone to look at me, but now, it wasn’t just “someone.” *Now, I want you, Senpai, to look at me. Look at me. This is me being serious.*

A Fool

Joji Haba

After our meal, we decided to relax and play a game on the console that Kawanami-kun had brought. As he purchased various materials on the screen, he asked Hoshibe-senpai a certain question.

“Huh? Who’ve I dated?” Hoshibe-san repeated.

“Yeah. I mean, you look like a pretty popular guy. I’m sure you’ve had at least a couple of girlfriends.”

“You’re not asking if I’m with someone, but who I’ve *been* with?”

“If you were already in a relationship, you wouldn’t let Aso-senpai come on to you like she does.”

I’d landed on a blue square, increasing my money—I wasn’t doing anything too flashy, but this conversation was making me anxious. The topic of Hoshibe-senpai’s past love life wasn’t something that had ever really come up until Aso-san had started acting the way she was now.

At the very least, I’d never heard any kind of exciting stories like that when he was the president. Though there had been a moment where people were saying that he might have been dating the upperclassman who was formerly in charge of general affairs, we suspected that he might’ve dated before that.

After all, he’d once been a spectacular basketball player; in fact, he was even his team’s ace despite only being a first year. Add his height into the equation and you had yourself a prime candidate for a popular guy.

“Hmm, past girlfriends...” Hoshibe-senpai said pensively, not reacting whatsoever as his avatar in the game was attacked by the Poverty God. “I had one in middle school, but it only lasted, like, a really short amount of time.”

“Oh, really?” Kawanami-kun sounded very intrigued.

The other first year, Mizuto Irido, finished his turn in the game and then picked up the book he was reading. Despite this being the first time playing this

game, he'd figured it out almost instantly and was now casually switching between reading and playing.

"What was she like? Who asked out who?" Kawanami-kun asked.

"She was normal. Not extremely cute or ugly—a completely average girl. She asked me out, saying that she fell for me watching me play, but..."

"But?"

"She broke up with me because I spent all my time with the team and not her."

Kawanami-kun looked conflicted. "Is it...okay if I laugh?"

"Sure. Sure sounds like a joke, doesn't it?"

"Ah, but girls really do be like that sometimes. It's like the things they say are completely different from what they actually want. Do they expect us to be mind readers or something?!"

"Heh. Yeah. Most people would make the connection that if I'm on a team, I can't really hang out after school. It's like, did she really think that just because we started dating, the time we could spend together would magically increase or somethin'?"

"Yeah, there's a lotta people out there—not just girls—who don't think things through. It's like they're not capable of thinking things through and all the possibilities. Anyway, so what happened with her?"

"Well, I only ever saw her when she came to watch the team practice, so I never ran into her again after she broke things off. Not sure if she found it awkward or if she was just fed up with me."

"Kinda messed up if that's how she felt about you after everything. Kinda selfish."

I could more or less imagine what this person looked like without knowing them at all. Every day they'd see a cool hero, giving his all at practice. It wasn't like idols that she could only see through her computer or TV screen—she was seeing him up close, in person. She idolized him from a distance, but realized that she might be able to touch him if she reached out. Charmed by the

possibility of that, she worked up the courage and found that she reached him much easier than she'd expected. But even so, accomplishing that didn't change anything.

"What a fool. She got it in her head that she could actually break out of the background," I suddenly mumbled. Hearing about how foolish and pathetic she was made it impossible for me to stay calm. "Everyone has a place where they belong. Getting it into your head that you can actually break out and become something else only results in undeniable proof being shoved in your face of how lacking you really are."

I didn't say this to contribute to the conversation. I couldn't care less if anyone heard me. Maybe that's exactly why I'd said that, because I didn't expect anyone to listen to me. But Hoshibe-senpai was.

"Well, you're not wrong," he said as he seemingly searched his memories. "But...back then, there were a lot of girls cheering up a storm for me. Still, though, she was the only one to actually ask me out." He'd said this in such a calm tone, I knew it was the truth. "Personally, I respect the hell out of her for that courage."

He...has a point. Maybe I'm just a fool. A failure of a fool, even.

Even if I Can't Believe

Suzuri: 10pm. B1 vending machines.

I had no choice but to follow her instructions. I used my naturally faint presence to slip out of the room. The game corner was in the inn's basement, and since it was so late, the only light came from those of the flashing arcade cabinets. There wasn't a single soul around...except for a certain girl in a bunny suit next to the vending machines. *Wait, what?*

I did a double take. There sure was a girl in a bunny suit. For a second, I thought I was seeing things, but the light from the vending machines illuminated the familiar face of Kurenai-san—the very same person who'd called me out here. The person lauded as a prodigy ever since she entered our

school, the charismatic student council president that every student in our school looked up to—that very same person was for some unknown reason wearing a very risqué bunny suit.

Even worse, she had her back to me. If she was facing me, that would've been plenty awkward—where would I even look?—but viewing her from behind presented an entirely different challenge. I could see the pale of her back through the suit's opening and how the suit was digging into her butt. I was in danger.

Kurenai-san was on the smaller side and might not have had a large chest, but her butt was on the slightly larger side. This was probably something that only I knew because of how many times she'd thrown herself on me. Plus, maybe it was because of her bone structure, but despite being on the smaller side, she still had an hourglass figure with wide hips, which made her body seem so incredibly feminine.

The sight of her body in the bunny suit with black tights digging into her skin, suggestively advertising her beautiful hips, nearly had me *only* wanting to see her from behind.



Suddenly, our eyes met, making my heart skip a beat. *Crap. Has she realized I was staring at her?* I felt more and more awkward by the second. I wanted to run away, but Kurenai-san had most likely seen through all this from the start.

“What’re you doing over there, Joe? Come closer,” she said, peering over her shoulder.

She knows. I knew she’d know. Of course she’d see through my hopelessly immoral lust. Knowing that arguing was pointless, I followed her instructions. The closer I moved, the brighter her skin became. All I could do was look away in an attempt to pretend I wasn’t interested.

Kurenai-san giggled. “Oh? Just where might you be looking? I don’t see anything over there.”

“Sorry...”

“What’s there to apologize for? I haven’t the faintest idea,” she said while pressing a button on the vending machine.

She grunted a little as she bent over to retrieve it, sticking her butt out towards me. Suddenly, I felt a strong gravitational pull towards it. No matter how much I told myself I wouldn’t look, my eyes kept being sucked back to her butt, which bounced like a lure bobbing on the water.

The bunny suit emphasized the various curves on her body, and it was hard not to notice the pale skin that lay beneath her tights. Having all of this practically shoved in my face was awakening my carnal desires whether I liked it or not.

Stop. Know your place. Internally, I beat back the animal fighting to break free. As I did, Kurenai-san finally stood up and turned towards me.

“Seems like *someone* enjoyed the show.”

Seeing her in the bunny suit from the front was powerful in its own right. The outfit wrapped around her waist almost like a corset, outlining the slimness of her waist and the size of her breasts. Also, I wasn’t sure if it was because the size of the outfit wasn’t perfect, but there was a small gap in between her breasts and the suit. I felt like I could see a little more skin than I was supposed

to.

“Why...are you wearing that?”

“We were playing a penalty game. The winner got to choose a cosplay for the loser to wear. I was a little too lazy to change out of it, so I just headed straight over.”

“You’re lying... I’m just noticing it now, but there’s a yukata on the bench over there. You wore it over the bunny suit, then took it off when you got here.”

“Heh heh... Perceptive as usual.” Her bunny ears bounced as she moved to the bench to pick up the yukata she’d taken off. “Take a seat. You’re gonna tire yourself out if you keep standing there forever.”

Though she had picked up the yukata, she didn’t put it on. As I calmly sat on the bench, Kurenai-san gave me one of the cans that she’d bought.

“Here.”

As she leaned forward, she made sure to emphasize her chest. The top half of her outfit wasn’t exactly tight against her body, so I began worrying that I might be able to see inside. Fortunately, it seemed that she’d taken that into account.

“When I put this on, some of the girls got incredibly worked up. Apparently, it invokes the ‘ass effect,’” she explained, sitting down next to me while rolling the can in between her hands like a hand warmer. *‘Some of the girls’? One hundred percent, she means Aso-san.* “Now I’ve learned the truth: girls have more weapons to them than their breasts, so I decided to give it a go as soon as possible.” At first, I thought she was just trying to shoot me a flirty look, but then she grabbed me by the shoulder before I could even react and brought my ear close to hers. “Are you in the mood to put a baby in me?”

She giggled, pulling back as I froze up at her words. I could only let out a long sigh. “Why are you only ever this vulgar around me?”

“Even if a girl is pure, she can still become a little vulgar in the presence of their crush. Also, isn’t it a rush for an honor student like myself to talk dirty? Or at least, I’ve read that to be the case.”

“I must sound like a broken record at this point, but...throw whatever you’re

reading in the garbage.” *The advice she gets is so spot on, I can’t deal with it.*

“Oh, by the way, if you’d like me to bear your child, I’d prefer if you held off until after we’ve graduated. However, if you want some ‘trial runs’ before doing the deed, we can do so to your heart’s content.”

“Girls aren’t the only ones who dislike dirty jokes, you know.”

“Usually I’d heed your warning, but not today.” Kurenai-san teasingly giggled, hooking her finger around the chest area of her bunny suit. “It’s been a while since I’ve felt such a passionate gaze. I think it’s a little unfair for you to tell me to act more appropriately after bathing me in that lust of yours.”

“Urk.” I had no comeback. Today, I had no way of regaining my footing against Kurenai-san. As if to fan the flames, she began tugging on the fabric around her chest.

“By the way, this fabric is surprisingly tough. It doesn’t really feel like it’ll rip at all. Wanna try?”

“I’ll pass...”

“Oh, don’t be like that. I know how much you were looking at the space between my chest and the bunny suit. You don’t have to steal glances—you can just look as much as you’d like. C’mon, dive in.”

Kurenai-san was definitely getting a big head. She began lightly tugging on the chest area while leaning forward. I backed up in order to avoid her, but that had a limit, and I’d reached it. I fell back onto the bench with Kurenai-san on top of me. Usually, one would think that she’d move away, but instead, she sandwiched my hips in between her thighs, literally mounting me.

I looked up at her as a faint smile spread across her face. “Kurenai-san...please move.”

“No.”

I could feel her butt on my lower half. I let out a stifled scream, which seemed to amuse her, because she giggled.

“I decided that I’m not going to let you run today. Not until you admit your lust for me.”

“Just what about this is so fun for you? Knowing that I felt that way about you would only gross you out.”

“Sure, if it was any other guy, I’d be grossed out. But I’d be ecstatic if *you* said you felt that way about me.”

“Why? Someone only after your body would be the lowest of the low, regardless of who it is.”

“Well, you only ever look at other people. You’ve never talked about yourself.”

I had no response.

“That’s why I’ll be happy if you talk about yourself in any capacity. It’ll make me feel like we’re finally on the same level.”

This is all in your head. We live in different worlds. Even if it weren’t, a person like you absolutely can’t move into the background to be with someone like me.

“Listen, Joe...” Kurenai-san put her hand on my cheek and stroked around my temple with her thumb. “You might think that I’m the type of person who can do anything with ease, but...there are things that I have to try hard on too.”

I had no words.

“Even right now, I’m doing my best to hold back my embarrassment. I feel like my face is about to burst into flames. Even though I’ve said all this, I’m internally regretting having said anything at all.”

Yeah, right. You look and sound perfectly fine. But then again...I knew that she wasn’t the type to lie like this.

“It takes a lot of courage every time I tell you that I like you, Joe. It may not seem that way to you, but I’m always serious. So, don’t you think you should give me a response at least once?”

“Personally, I respect the hell out of her for that courage.” Suddenly, Hoshibe-senpai’s words played in my head. Though he complained about his ex, he still praised her for the courage she showed. He probably wasn’t too in love with her, but he seemed thankful for the experience.

I’d shrugged off every advance that Kurenai-san had made on me so far. After

all, I had no right to be with someone like her. The spotlight was on her, the main character of this story. Someone like me didn't have any right being next to her. That's why I didn't want to hurt her for this flight of fancy of hers—this almost joke-like scenario.

That's why I kept rejecting each and every last one of her attempts. But all I'd done was trample all over her courage. I'd hurt her and continued to keep hurting her. I wasn't so stupid to think that she'd merely been playing around—that she'd go through all this effort over and over again just for the sake of a joke. But still, I couldn't believe it.

All my life, being alone had been natural. Being ignored had been natural. Not being noticed had been natural. It was hard to believe that the first person who really saw me was a beautiful person like this.

"Kurenai-san, I..." *I still can't believe it, but if you're going to be courageous, then it only makes sense for me to be as well*. "I was incredibly...turned on by you."

Kurenai-san's eyes widened and then widened even further. Seeing her face like that made me feel like my head was about to explode. I began to immediately regret speaking up. I wanted to disappear. But still, Kurenai-san didn't let go of me.

"Heh... Heh heh." Her shoulders began shaking. Then she grabbed my face with both her hands, making sure I couldn't get away as she stared straight into my eyes. "What part of me?"

"Uh...what?"

"What part of me specifically turned you on?"

"Do I...have to say?"

"Of course. You're not leaving until you do."

I really wished she would just let me off the hook. I almost felt like I was about to cry, but I knew that there was no getting away from her.

"Your back...was like porcelain. Your shoulder blades and the outline of your shoulders—the places that I can't usually see..."

“Okay. What else?”

“Y-Your...butt. The way the clothes dig into it...”

“Okay. What else?”

“Your chest... The way I can almost see it is...”

“What else?”

Every time she asked, she’d move her body closer to me. I could feel her soft mounds squish against my chest, her soft breath caress my neck, and a sweet scent waft from her body. The stimulation seeped into my brain, paralyzing me.

That’s why, more than words or actions, the hardest piece of evidence showing how stimulated I was came from...

“Huh?” Kurenai-san let out a sound of surprise as she turned to look at her butt. She noticed a certain sensation against her. “Is this...?”

“I-I’m so sorry...”

I couldn’t help it. In this position there was absolutely no way for me to hide it. Kurenai-san’s face gradually became redder and redder. Then, her body began to shake and break out into a cold sweat.

“J-Joe... Uh...”

“Y-Yes?”

“My courage for today...may have run out.”

Huh?

While I tried to make sense of things, Kurenai-san quickly got off of me and held her yukata to her chest. “I-I’m really sorry! Bye!” With that, she ran off like the wind.

All I could do was watch her run off from my awkward position on the bench. I was almost sure that her sweet, paralyzing scent lingered around my head. *That was...cute.* Remembering how Kurenai-san got flustered like that was enough to make me go crazy. *She was very cute.*

The Committee of “I Definitely Could’ve Gone All the

Way”

Suzuri Kurenai

I quickly redonned my yukata and returned to the girls room. It seemed that Ran-kun was the only one present.

“Welcome back, President Kurenai. Where did you go?”

“Oh, I just went to get a drink,” I said calmly while making my way to the rest space by the window.

I sat in one of the chairs and casually opened the can that I’d bought. Internally, I was screaming. *I definitely could’ve gone all the way!* There was no doubt. The mood was right and everything! *If I just hadn’t chickened out... But of course I was going to chicken out! Though I’ve heard about how these things go...I couldn’t believe that the very same extremely cute Joe would just suddenly...suddenly... Ahhhh!!!*

What is wrong *with me?!* I never got nervous when it came to other things, so why did I have to freak out right then and there?! This entire time I acted like nothing fazed me, but suddenly I’m showing just how much of an innocent girl I was!

We totally could’ve done it. We totally could’ve gone all the way! Sure, the location might not have been ideal even if no one had been around, and doing that kind of thing in public is kinda... Yeah. I was the type of person who was considerate to others, and thus would want to choose the right place. So, yeah, it wouldn’t have happened there, but...it totally could’ve!

I want to sleep. Thinking this, I decided to go and collapse into my futon, but the bunny suit I was wearing underneath my yukata was in the way. *I wonder what outfit I should wear next time...* I thought as I began undoing the fastener on my back.

Once the Lid is Opened

Mizuto Irido

“Hm?”

After we stopped playing the video game, I left to find a good place to read in the inn, when I ran into a familiar face.

“Oh, Mizuto-kun.”

Sitting on one of the couches in the now silent lounge were Isana and Yume. Isana looked up from her tablet, while I could’ve sworn that Yume glanced at me and then awkwardly averted her gaze.

“What’s the matter? Have you perhaps become an outcast of your group?”

“No, we’re just all doing our own thing.”

I was a little concerned about what was going on with Yume, but first, I needed to respond to Isana.

“What about you two?”

“Same boat. Yume-san and I were exploring the inn. It has many interesting areas! But now, I’m showing her the pictures I took and the ones I drew today.”

“Oh, really?”

They’re finished enough to show other people? I was kinda curious, so I moved closer and took a peek at her tablet.

“I-I’ll be right back. Bathroom,” Yume suddenly said.

It was as if we were the same poles of a magnet. When I got closer to her, she moved away. I watched as she ran away...in the opposite direction of the bathroom. Suddenly, I remembered what had happened at the foot bath, which was almost as incomprehensible as a fleeting daydream.

Up until now, I’d been keeping my cool and trying not to cross the line, but those fleeting emotions of mine had made me go past it. I still felt guilty and confused about what I’d done.

“Mizuto-kun, take a seat.”

“Right...”

I pushed away the jumble of emotions inside me and sat next to Isana, taking Yume’s seat. It was still warm from when she was sitting here only moments

ago. The thought nearly made me hesitate.

“The Ijikinkangai was wonderful, wasn’t it? The compositions are quite moving, wouldn’t you agree?”

Isana seemed utterly oblivious as to what was happening inside me, and without hesitation, she leaned her shoulder against mine so she could show me the compositions on her tablet. *Oh no... This might be one of those days.*

My gaze was irresistibly drawn—even more than usual—towards the cleavage peeking out from her yukata, her porcelain nape, and her silky hair that brushed against it. The unfamiliar setting, so different from our normal lives, seemed to accentuate these traits even more. *No, I think the lid of restraint holding me back is still open.*

Isana remained entirely unaware, which explained why she was sticking to me as she usually did. Her body had a different softness to it, something that guys didn’t have.

She began speaking in a voice that tickled my ears. “It’s been rather challenging to turn all of this into art. I’ve no idea whatsoever what the logic is behind each individual part. Perhaps it’d be better if I studied that, but that seems like more effort than I’m willing to expend...”

“Why not just study the bare minimum? You might be better off if you just look things up only when you need to, instead of throwing yourself into studying. That way you’ll avoid getting bored like you usually do,” I suggested, trying to put out the fiery emotions inside of me.

It’s fine. This is just how we always are. There’s nothing wrong with her being this close to me. Just as I was finally cooling off from the sudden outburst from inside me, Isana suddenly began touching my shoulders and chest.

“H-Hey! What are you doing?” I asked, doing my best to not give away how much this freaked me out.

“Heh heh,” Isana giggled happily. “You really are my safe place,” she said, squishing my cheeks with her hands.

Her small palms sank into my skin. “Being around unfamiliar people made me quite nervous, so please allow me this opportunity to recover.”

“What am I, a save point?”

“I would consider you more of a respawn point if anything.”

Meaning that you’ll always come back to me in the end? She continued to knead my cheeks. As much as I wanted to push her off, I got the feeling that touching her anywhere would not be a good idea right now, so I stayed frozen.

“Hm?” Isana tilted her head. “Where’s your usual resistance? Is it perhaps time for a kiss?”

“No, it’s not... The fabric of the yukata’s kinda thin, so it makes it hard to touch you.”

“What do you mean? Touching you is no problem for me, so you should also touch me without reservation.”

You just don’t get it! Do you even know how much your boobs are poking out?!

“Hm?” Isana furrowed her eyebrows, finding something suspicious. Then she moved her face close to mine. I tried to turn away, but with her holding my cheeks, my movement was limited.

“You’re...somehow cuter than usual.”

“H-Huh?”

“It’s as if my inner sadist desires are being stimulated. In other words, it feels much more worthwhile to tease you.”

Uh...whatever you’re thinking, stop. Right now.

The next instant, Isana grunted, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me into an embrace. I felt her huge, soft boobs squish against me. The sensation was similar to water balloons, but there was a more raw...direct feeling to them. I felt like I was starting to see stars. *Wait...she’s not wearing a bra!*

“Your body is as stiff as a board,” she whispered into my ear. “Have you finally succumbed to the allure of my breasts? This must be the power of Arima Hot Springs melting away your self-control.”

She continued to press her boobs against me, seemingly enjoying it. The buoyancy of them was so great that no matter how much she pressed them against me, they bounced back to their original shape. My eyes widened.

“Heh heh. This kind of opportunity doesn’t come every day. I’m going to celebrate by making you even more embarrassed. Like this!”

“Hey, stop!”

It was as if she was getting revenge for all the times I didn’t react to her. She must’ve been bothered by that up until now.

That Can’t Be...

Ran Asuhain

I gasped and hid behind a corner. All I could do was shiver with surprise. One minute ago, I saw the familiar faces of two people in the deserted inn lounge—Mizuto Irido and Higashira-san. By the time it registered in my head who they were, they’d already gotten right into very inappropriate activities.

I would’ve understood if she was simply leaning her shoulder against his, but the amount that she was touching his face, the proximity of their bodies—the hugging! Though there might not have been anyone around, it didn’t give them the right to do these things in a public space!

It was obvious that Mizuto Irido and Higashira-san were not *just* friends. No matter how much they denied it, there was no way that a guy and a girl could be that physically close to each other if they were not in a relationship of some sort.

I’d thought that Higashira-san was more on the shy and modest side, so I’d assumed that Mizuto Irido had usually been the one to go on the offensive, but the scene in front of me told a different story. It seemed that Higashira-san was the aggressive one.

I-I knew something was up! I should’ve known from when she was ogling my breasts in the bath! But given how meek she seemed, I never would’ve guessed that she was so immoral! I wanted to yell at my past self for thinking even for a

minute that we were the same kind of person just because we had a shared boob problem!

What they were doing was definitely something that only a couple would do. They weren't simply getting physically closer to one another. It was like there was no reserve or hesitation between the two of them—like their hearts were melting into one.

This might have been the first time I was seeing this kind of thing so up close and personal like this. There'd been couples when we were walking around, but they were acting appropriately in public—around others. When they were alone, though...this must've been how they acted.

I felt neither envy nor admiration. Though I got the same kind of feeling of wonder one gets while watching something unusual through the bars at a zoo, I had no desire to mimic the behavior. If anything, I was confused. If he didn't act like that, couldn't Mizuto Irido claim the top spot at our school?

He'd already done it once during midterms. If he'd just focused even a little of the attention he put towards Higashira-san to studying, couldn't he surpass Irido-san and take first place? *I want to be first, not just once—forever.* Was dating someone so great that he was willing to throw away his chances of winning? *I don't get it. Not one bit.* Would...Irido-san, Aso-senpai, or even...President Kurenai know the answer?

No way. There's no way that President Kurenai of all people—a person who has no equal—would ever let her head run amok with thoughts of boys.

Expelled From Paradise

Kogure Kawanami

"Heya! I'm here to hang out... Huh?"

I'd been lying in my futon, playing with my phone, when a yukata-clad Akatsuki peeked her head into our room.

"All alone, Kawanami? Where's everyone else?" she asked, surveying the room.

“Off doin’ their own thing. All the guys here are introverts.”

Hoshibe-san was the type of person who’d go with the flow, but he was primarily a person who preferred to be by himself. It went without saying that Irido and Haba-senpai were both loners. But also, the reason that we’d split up to do our own things hadn’t just been because of their personalities.

I looked up at Akatsuki as I continued to lie down. “What about you? Same thing happenin’ with the girls?”

“Yeah. They’re all off doin’ their best.”

“Heh heh heh. Thought as much.”

At least for us, everyone started going off on their own after Haba-senpai disappeared. I’d already confirmed that the student council president had said something to him back at the Starbucks. There was no doubt that she’d asked him to meet her later. In fact, they might’ve been flirting right that very minute!

“Gross. What’re you grinning about?” Akatsuki asked, standing by my pillow while looking at me as if I were trash.

I stared as the hem of her yukata fluttered. “I saw your panties.”

“You liar. I’m not wearing any.”

“For...real?”

“Nope! Were you hoping I wasn’t?” she asked, grinning.

This kinda struck a nerve. “Hell no. I was just scared of rumors to start about a girl going commando in a public space.”

“Aw don’t worry, nobody would know anyway. The yukata’s long enough. Anyway, isn’t it better when you can’t see the outline of the panties through the yukata?”

“Hold up. So *are* you wearing any?”

“Wanna check?”

She asked, beginning to pull up her yukata, flashing her porcelain thighs. This kind of behavior from her wasn’t enough to elicit anything from me, but I had a feeling that if we continued this conversation, things would get bad, so I

refrained from commenting.

Akatsuki proceeded to sit next to me. “So, how’s the trip been for you so far?”

“Frickin’ fun! Getting a front seat to the student council love show is a welcome surprise.”

“You should thank me then, since I’m the one who invited you.”

“Uh-huh.”

After that, we spent some time just playing with our phones.

“Are you really happy just watching other people’s romances?” she asked, breaking the silence.

“What’s this all of a sudden? Yeah, I am. I’ve said that like a thousand times.”

“I was just wondering if you got envious or anything.”

“Nope. I’m done with romance. You of all people should know that.”

“True. Well...I guess if that’s okay with you, then that’s good.”

I looked at her face, feeling kinda suspicious of the way she was acting. I could’ve sworn that I saw a little bit of sorrow in her young, almost middle schooler-looking face.

“There’s something really up with you today.”

I’d felt this ever since earlier today. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something was off about her. It was the faintest feeling—kinda like when you have a pebble in your shoe. It was that amount of unpleasantness.

“It’s nothin’ really,” Akatsuki said calmly. “It’s kinda like I took a bite out of an apple after a snake egged me on to.”

“Speaking cryptically like you’re smart really isn’t your style.”

“Oh, shut up. I wanna sound cool every now and then too!”

She’s referencing the Bible*, right? Adam and Eve, if I remember correctly. They took a bite of an apple that gave them knowledge of good and evil and then they’re expelled from paradise. Hm, knowledge of good and evil?*

“So, what, you just now learnin’ common sense? Could’ve used that ten or so

years ago. Maybe then I wouldn't be so traumatized."

"Yep. True."

Though I'd just said that jokingly, she'd surprisingly agreed. Her response felt like it had a certain weight to it, catching me off guard. Akatsuki hugged her knees as if she was trying to curl into a ball. Then she turned to me.

"Kawanami, you should get a new girlfriend."

"Huh?"

My brain couldn't keep up. All I could do was blink in confusion.

Akatsuki faintly smiled. It was as if her emotions had been scraped away. "It's like...I don't know our boundaries anymore—they're blurring. Regardless of if we're friends, broken up, or how we are now, chugging along in limbo...something's gotta give. That's why you should get a girlfriend."

"Couldn't you just get a boyfriend?"

"You got in the way of that. Remember when I proposed to Irido-kun?"

"Oh..." *Right. I forgot about that.* "Then just choose someone who's actually available! Girl or guy—doesn't matter."

"Hm, I don't think I can. Not sure it's possible to love anyone more than I love Yume-chan."

"Then maybe it's just best for one of us to force it?"

Who cares about our boundaries blurring? What's wrong with staying in limbo? Sure, there were a lot of problems left unresolved. For one, there was my allergy. I'd also never told my parents about our relationship, and she still teased me all the time for shits and giggles.

But what was wrong with that? It wasn't like anything she did to me was life-threatening. Life wasn't a game where we had to solve each problem that came up in quests. We definitely weren't gonna get any money or experience points even if we did.

We didn't need to do anything. We could just ignore our problems. Who cared about boundaries? I was perfectly okay with how things were now. She

might've said something about something happening that couldn't be taken back, but there wasn't anything I could think of that I wanted to take back.

Is it really so bad?

"It's *really* bad," Akatsuki stated clearly, declaring that things couldn't stay the same. She was saying that our relationship couldn't stay like this. "If I'd been a normal girlfriend, you wouldn't have ended up with that weird allergy. It's a scar that you have to bear because of me. That scar's gonna be pushed onto whoever falls in love with you, and I can't let that happen. I can't just act like nothing's happened between us, and I definitely won't be able to just smile and talk normally to the girl you date. Knowing that, can you really say that you still want things to stay this way?"

As long as I had this allergy, I was bound to make someone cry. This wasn't an exaggeration. I wasn't that dense. I knew that there'd be people who'd fall for me, and I knew that I'd reject all of them. It'd all be because of the scar that Akatsuki had left.

"You might be okay with it, come to terms with it, and find a way to enjoy life, and that might be good enough for you, but...what about the girls who fall for you? They're all gonna be unfairly rejected just because of what I did to you. Then to add to that, your childhood friend—the very same person who hurt you—will still be by your side like nothing happened. There's no way they'll accept that."

"That's...true."

There might have been some truth to what she was saying. I might've only been thinking about myself. Maybe I didn't have any knowledge about good and evil.

"I've made up my mind," she mumbled before suddenly straddling my stomach.

"H-Hey."

"I used to think that if you were okay with things, then I'd be okay too, but I know better now. I know what I have to do." She pinned my shoulders down. Her eyes sparkled with seriousness as she looked down at me. "Ko-kun, I... I still

like you.”

“Urgh.”

Suddenly unpleasant memories flashed through my head. Though I thought I’d already come to terms with them, the scars remained. A chill ran across my body making my hairs stand on end. My love allergy was flaring up.

“I’ll cure you,” she said, as though she weren’t bothered by my reaction at all. “If you still say that you don’t want a girlfriend, then fine. But I’m definitely gonna cure you. I can’t push this problem onto someone else.”

There was a certain unpleasantness in her eyes as she smiled. It was as if she’d moved on. As if she’d made up her mind. Her smile was eerie, but unwavering.

“Hey, Ko-kun?” Though her voice was sweet, it felt like a sharp blade. “Have you heard of exposure therapy?“

Aisa’s Seriousness

The Perfect Excuse

Tohdo Hoshibe

I messed up my shoulder right after entering high school. I was doing a layup—a completely ordinary shot that I’d done a million times before. I instantly switched from dribbling to making a shot. My feet lifted off the ground as I reached out to the hoop. Suddenly, my body was overtaken with pain.

The distance between the hoop and me grew more and more. All I could do was look up at the unmoving net, unable to try and reach out to it again. It took me a moment before I could even realize what was going on. My mind couldn’t make the connection between the agony from the intense pain and the fact that I was crawling on the ground. *It’s far... The hoop’s so far away.* It’d always been just within reach for me, but now it seemed like a distant dream.

It took until summer for my treatment to end. Of course, that meant that I missed the tournament. The Rakuro Basketball Team was already on the weaker side, so they easily got knocked out in the second round.

All I could do was watch them lose from the bench. As I did, my upperclassmen told me that it was okay, because I still had two more years. They were right. It was the right thing for them to say to cheer me up. They offered warm words to me, the first year who couldn’t really participate in their practice.

But...it was far. The backboard, the hoop, the net—they were all way too far. Everything felt so out of reach.

When summer vacation rolled around, there was apparently a new practice regimen, but at that point, I couldn’t even bring myself to go to the gymnasium. My shoulder should’ve been fine, but it still ached. When I tried to raise my arm, I practically relived the pain from that day.

Every time I tried to head to the gym, I immediately stopped. Though I’d been

there for all these years, it no longer felt as if the place I'd become so familiar with was somewhere I could reach. The gymnasium that I'd gone to day after day felt insurmountably far away, as though it were a different world entirely.

What if I overdo it and make my shoulder even worse? If this injury were to affect my quality of life in general, that'd destroy the rest of my life. Was it really so necessary to keep playing basketball that I'd risk everything?

Be smart. It's not like I was serious about basketball past middle school. That's why I'd chosen a school without a good basketball team, one that excelled in academics instead. *Yeah, this is a good opportunity to move on.*

If anything, I should've been welcoming this chance to move forward instead of continuing to do something half-assed. There were a ton of things I wanted to do instead of basketball.

After a week of skipping practice, I'd managed to come up with concrete reasoning to back up my decision. This wasn't a setback, but a way to move on. I pretended that it wasn't because I didn't have the guts to try and make up for lost time. Then, with that, I quit the team. Not too soon after, I was invited to the student council.

A Little Calorie Dense for a Morning Conversation

Yume Irido

I stared at the unfamiliar wood ceiling for a few seconds until it finally registered in my head that I was on a trip. I groaned slightly as I got up. I'd yet to put in my contacts, so I looked around at the blurry room and waited for my mind to fully boot up.

"Morning, Yume-kun." I turned around to the source of the serene voice and saw President Kurenai sitting in a chair in the rest space.

Though she hadn't changed out of her yukata, she'd already done her hair. There wasn't a single strand out of place. She was sitting by the window, the soft rays of the sun caressing her skin as she leisurely sipped on a cup of black tea. Maybe this was part of her morning routine. This was something that I only envisioned aristocrats doing, but it looked completely natural when she did it.

“Good...morning,” I said with a yawn.

“You’re the first one awake. Is this when you usually get up?”

“Well...” I glanced at the clock and saw it was about seven in the morning. “Yeah...I’m always up around this time.”

“Very good adherence to schedule. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Oh...yes. Thank you.”

I got out of my futon and weaved around the others to join President Kurenai. On the way, I combed my hair with my hand, trying to fix it. By the time I sat myself down in front of her, there was already a steaming cup of tea in front of me.

“Thank you very much.”

As I took a sip, the warmth from the tea washed across my head, clearing the fog. I exhaled with relief and placed the cup down.

“Um,” I began, “how long have you been awake?”

“Hm? Since about five or so. It’s been a while since I’ve slept so soundly.”

Sorry...what? Didn’t we all go to bed around twelve? You only slept five hours? Despite that, she didn’t look tired at all. She really did seem to be the type of person who didn’t need a lot of sleep. *Compared to her...* I took a glance at the rest of the people in our room.

“How unladylike...” I couldn’t help but wryly smile at the disastrous scene before me.

As expected, Asuhain-san was cutely and peacefully sleeping in her futon, but the other three were a different story. Various limbs were sticking out of Akatsuki-san’s futon. Higashira-san’s boobs were on the verge of spilling out of her messy yukata. As for Aso-senpai, well, she was hugging her comforter as if it were a body pillow, and her panties were clearly visible.

“The guys can never see this...”

“Good thinking to have two separate rooms, right?” President Kurenai said.

“Agreed.”

Their sleeping postures were *horrendous*. Plus, they were all braless. It made sense for Akatsuki-san and Aso-senpai because they were...slender, but I couldn't imagine that it was comfortable for Higashira-san every time she tossed and turned. According to her, she usually followed her mother's strict instruction to wear one when she slept, but she really didn't want to. I completely understood where she was coming from.

"What do you have planned for today, Yume-kun?"

Her question was so sudden that I had to take a second to gather my thoughts. "Um...if I remember right, we're all going to Harborland today, aren't we?"

"Yes, but we haven't decided how we'll all split up just yet," she said with a cryptic smile. "I was just wondering if you had someone you wanted to walk around with."

"Huh?"

D-Does she know? I really want to go with Mizuto, but I'm sure that he's going to want to go with Higashira-san so he can look after her. Plus, after what happened in the foot baths... Urgh! All he did was touch my hand a little! Why do I have to feel like we did something extremely dirty?! I even ran away from him last night because of that! It must be because of the open heart discussion the girls had in the bath right before that.

"What about you?" I asked, trying to shift things away from me. "You're planning to go with Haba-senpai, I'm guessing?"

"Hm? Uh, well..." This was one of the few times that I'd ever seen her get flustered, even a little. *Something happened!*

"This is a good opportunity to share what happened, don't you think?" I said, fishing for information. "I might even be able to help you out."

"I'm...not very keen on flaunting my embarrassment."

"I have something I'm embarrassed about too, so let's both share. That way we'll be even!"

With that, I shared the events of yesterday and how Mizuto touched my hand

in a kinda dirty way.

“Is that...it?” *Huh? Why is her reaction so muted?* She tilted her head in confusion.

For some reason, I felt the need to quickly counter. “H-He didn’t *just* touch me. He, like...burrowed in between my fingers and was, like, tempting me or something.”

“Pfft.”

“D-Did you just laugh at me?!” Are you looking down on me?!”

“How rude of me. I’m sorry—it was just very...adorable.”

Wh-What? Why is she acting so calm? Like I’ve got nothing on her? What happened between her and Haba-senpai?!

“So, last night...” she began explaining.

She didn’t hide how elated she was as she talked all about what had transpired. After she’d been forced to wear the bunny suit as a penalty, she’d gone to meet Haba-senpai without changing. She had managed to get him in the mood, apparently, but she returned to our room without actually doing anything.

“See? That’s why I couldn’t help but laugh a little about how you were fussing over a little hand-holding.”

“Um...President Kurenai?”

“Yes?”

“Your story’s nice and all, but in the end, isn’t it just a story about you wussing out?”

She fell silent.

“I’m right, aren’t I? Even though you’re usually so aggressive, you freaked out when it was *actually* go time. Ultimately, the story is about the student council president—the very same one who is lauded as the biggest prodigy our school’s ever seen—freaking out and running away.”

“Sh-Shut up! There’s a place for everything, and that wasn’t it. Would *you*

want to lose your virginity by the vending machines? A place where anyone could pass by at any second?!”

“Aren’t *you* the one who seduced him there, though?!”

“I’d rather not be lectured by a person seduced by the most banal of activities!”

Urk! Th-That hurts. As I steadied my breathing, I remembered something I wanted to ask. First, I made sure to confirm that nobody was awake yet.

Then, I lowered my voice. “So, I’ve been wondering...”

“Yes?”

“You know how you’re always seducing Haba-senpai? Well, if things did end up going in *that* direction, are you prepared? Like...are you *protected*? Do you have that kind of stuff?”

President Kurenai clammed up. *Does that mean...?*

“So...no?”

“Isn’t it immodest for girls to be carrying around those kinds of things?”

“I think it’s more that you’re not ready. You’re probably always thinking that there’s no way he’ll actually go along with your advances.”

“Stop throwing logic in my face! *I’m* the upperclassman here, you know?!”

As soon as we got into this topic, I could see her shrinking back, so I couldn’t help but tease her a little more than I should’ve. Well, there was that, and I felt this was a good opportunity to give her a good talking-to.

“Wouldn’t it be better to try and make sure you have everything ready? You know now that Haba-senpai is definitely interested.”

“Where should I be...keeping it?”

“I’m...not too sure myself. Maybe in your wallet?”

“Sh-Shouldn’t the guy be carrying one around?”

“You’re always throwing yourself at him—when exactly is he going to have a chance to get one?!”

President Kurenai groaned as if in pain, her face getting red. I knew why she felt hesitant, but also, it would've been a huge scandal if the student council president herself got pregnant.

"F-Fine... I'll get some...eventually."

"Eventually?"

"*Eventually*!" she practically screamed.

Suddenly, we heard a cute groan, making us jump and turn around. Asuhain-san was moving around in her futon. *She's awake?* She sleepily opened her eyes and looked at us. *She didn't hear our conversation...right?*

"Good...morning..."

Judging from her voice, she must have *just* woken up this second. But just in case, I decided to ask her.

"G-Good morning, Asuhain-san. Did you catch any of our conversation?"

"Huh? What conversation...?"

"We're going over the itinerary for today! Is there anywhere you'd like to go to?" President Kurenai said, smoothly covering our tracks.

Asuhain-san rubbed her eyes. "Not in particular..."

I quickly exchanged a look with President Kurenai. *We're in the clear!*

"Oh! Okay, no problem!"

"Let's ask the others! Help me wake them up!"

"Okay..."

Phew...that was close. I had no idea what'd happen if Asuhain-san, someone who hated guys, heard what the person she revered like a god was up to. Thinking about it now with a clear head, this certainly wasn't a topic we should've been having first thing in the morning. Then again, the conversation felt important. *Wait...should I be prepared too? N-No way, right? I don't think Mizuto would ever impulsively throw himself onto me. In the first place, I'm not as direct with my approach as President Kurenai is! But more importantly...I've been struggling to even look at him without running away.*

As I had these thoughts, I helped wake up Higashira-san and Akatsuki-san while also trying to fix their clothes from their disheveled, immodest state. How did their obis get this loose just from sleeping?

After going through all that, all six of us were finally awake and getting ready for the day. As we were confirming the schedule for today, Aso-senpai spoke up, determination in her voice. “I have a favor I’d like to ask you all.”

Declaration of the Beginning

Kogure Kawanami

“*You might be okay with it, but...what about the girls who fall for you? Ko-kun, I... I still like you.*”

How much of what she had said was true? How serious had she been when she’d said it? Had she just been teasing me as usual? Or had those been her real feelings? Everything she did was riddled with tricks and mind-games that it was impossible for me to tell what was really going through her head anymore.

Does she actually still like me? It was possible that she still felt something for me. After all, *I* had been the one to break up with her. I was fully aware that she was also trying to be considerate of my condition and doing her best to hide any feelings she may have had for me. I also knew better than anyone that she wasn’t the type of person who could easily shift gears in the course of a few months.

I was the same. I was fed up with her. I wanted a break. That wasn’t a lie—I really did. But it was also true that I had liked her in the past. If she hadn’t turned into such a monster, we probably would’ve still been together. I would’ve explained things to my parents, and we would’ve flirted with each other at school. The fact that I was a hundred percent sure about all of this should show how much I used to like her.

So if that were the case...if her personality had improved since then... *No, stop. There’s no point imagining this. It’s stupid. After all, my body isn’t going to allow me to fall in love.* No matter what, I couldn’t handle it when people showed me affection.

“*I’ll cure you.*” Her words rang in my head.

What’s gonna happen to me? If I really do get cured...what will I do?

“Morning.”

As soon as I opened my eyes, I froze. *H-How?! I* know *I slept in the guy’s room yesterday. Why is* she *here?!* Any drowsiness I had disappeared. I just gaped at her as she slowly reached out towards me.

Then she warmly smiled at me as she rubbed my cheeks like one might a cat’s. “You know...you look pretty cute when you sleep.”

A chill ran up my spine. My body began to shiver, even though I was still in my futon. Her hand movements, her expression—she looked at me as one might look at a baby bird or something weak that needs protecting. I was like a bird in a cage, and she was watching me.

Suddenly, she climbed on top of me. It didn’t feel like she was human. She was as light and limber as a doll, and yet she was warm and soft like a person. Fear and arousal mixed around inside me. Both had been carved inside me by her. I knew just how soothing—and at the same time, fearsome—girls could be. These two emotions were jumbled up inside me as they mixed with one another, intertwining.



Then in a cool but sweet voice, she whispered in my ear. “Hold it in. Everyone’s watching.”

It wasn’t until she pointed this out that I finally looked around the room and saw that Hoshibe-san and Haba-senpai were watching us, their interests piqued. In contrast, Irido yawned, seemingly uninterested. *That’s right. Those two are only watching because they don’t know what we’re like.*

I held back my nausea and held my body back from shaking. I forced down all the horrible memories and imaginations running through my head. I couldn’t let anyone see this pathetic condition of mine.

“Good boy. I’m so proud!” she whispered in the same sweet voice before finally getting off of me. “Get up and change already. You’re gonna make everyone wait for you!” With that, she skipped out of the room, the hem of her yukata fluttering as she did.

Hoshibe-san, watching her leave, commented, “I knew it. You two are definitely dating, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean ‘you knew it’?”

It took me a while to be able to get out of my futon. Akatsuki’s weight, her warmth—they lingered on me as if they’d been etched into my body.

“*Do you know what exposure therapy is?*” she’d asked.

Of course I do. You’re not the only one who wants me to get over this condition. I’d looked into things I could do as well. For exposure therapy to work, I had to expose myself to the cause of the trauma and overcome it that way. *Is that really what she’s doing? She’s starting that* today*? Is she planning to do stuff that we used to do when we dated until I get better?!*

Optimal Equipment

Aisa Aso

“Can you guys help me choose an outfit for my date with Senpai?!”

I’d made this request a few hours ago. Here we were, in the present, at the

mall in Kobe Harborland. The girls and guys ended up splitting into their own groups, and right now our group was heading towards the fashion area.

I had a date planned with Senpai later in the afternoon. I'd gotten him to promise and everything!! That being said, it was only common sense that, going into this boss battle, I wore the ultimate equipment.

Some might wonder why I wasn't buying these clothes way *before* my date with him...actually, Ranran asked me that straight out. Her point was completely logical and straightforward, and thus, so was my response.

"You really think logic works on me?!"

I *mean, look at me! Look at my clothes! They're frilly and flowy! It's the kind of style that's one step away from being considered children's clothes! I love this style! I can't pick anything else! Street clothes and cosplay are essentially the same to me!* Bare minimum, at least, I was self-aware enough not to wear stuff like this on a date.

This wouldn't be the first time that I'd hung out with him, but those times, I'd worn my usual style. He would always scoff at me, but it was more fun that way. Today was different, though. After all, today was the day that I was going to ask him out. That's why I'd decided to throw away my shame and request aid!

"I'm a little curious why you're acting so haughty, but you *are* my friend, and this will be one of the biggest days of your life. I've no problems lending you a hand," Suzurin said. "I've always thought that we needed to do something about your fashion sense, so this is a great opportunity."

"The hell's your problem?! My style's cute!"

"Then we're done here. Go on a date in those clothes you're so proud of."

Urgh... Get your logic out of here. This is why everyone thinks that the student council is filled with hardasses.

"It's better this way, though, right? It's more fun to have a goal when you're shopping," Akki said. "Y'know, I've always found it pretty weird how she has the body of a model and chooses to dress like *that*. We're honestly saving her life right now."

“Akki...you’re kinda just openly dissing me right now.”

Every one of you just became enemies with many girls of the world.

“Aso-senpai’s pretty tall and slender, so a cooler style might suit her,” Yumecchi said.

“I’m not sure if those would function well as date clothes, Irido-san,” Ranran responded.

The two of them seemed to be taking this seriously. The last member of our group though, Isana-chan only seemed interested in taking pictures with her phone. Surprisingly, her clothes were pretty stylish. Wasn’t she a homebody? Where’d she learn to dress like this from? Compulsory education?

“First thing’s first. We need to decide on an attack plan,” Suzurin said. “If you’re going out with Hoshibe-senpai, then it’s pertinent for your styles to complement one another. Today, I believe he was wearing...”

“A jacket and jeans. Both were cold colors,” Akki chimed in. “He’s playin’ it safe by not wearing flashy clothes, but at that height, anything he wears’ll look good on him. Pretty impressive.”

“He sure is!” *Yep, my guy is* tall*! He’s a whole 187 centimeters! He looks good in* anything*!*

“Aisa, it’s a little bit early for you to be bragging. You’re not even his girlfriend.”

“You should at least wait until *after* you’ve confessed, Senpai.”

“Sorry...”

I was getting a little overly excited. It didn’t seem like I could stay calm given that I was heading into the biggest turning point of my life.

Suzurin and the others continued to exchange opinions. “If he’s wearing more subdued colors, then maybe it’d be best if she went for something bright?”

“Oh, good idea! But also, it’s winter already, so we can’t go too crazy!”

“So, what’s it gonna be? Pants or a skirt?”

“Usually on dates, I’d imagine a skirt to be the most natural choice, but...”

“She has good legs—it’d be a shame not to show ’em off!”

“True. First, let’s take the pads out of your bra.”

“Wait! If you do that, I won’t have one that—”

“Buy one that fits then,” they snapped at me in unison.

“But I came here in my sexy underwear...” I grumbled as we entered the store.

Then, we grabbed various items around the store, and I went into the fitting room.

“All done,” I said, pulling back the curtain. “Whaddya think?”

“Whoa...” they all said in varying tones.

First on the chopping block was a blouse with an open neck area and a pleated skirt. Overall, it gave off a traditional schoolgirl vibe.

“Well...”

“Yeah, this is kinda...”

“Gyaru style.”

“Yep. Definitely gyaru.”

The end result was a gyaru style outfit. All I had left was to put some accessories around my neck and wrists and wear a sweater around my waist.

Ranran let out a small snort. “It looks good on you, like it was made for you. Pfft.”

“Hey, what’s so funny?! Are you trying to say that an honorable otaku like me looks like one of those floozy gyarus?!”

“If anything, you look like one of those gyarus who are nice to otakus. Real gyarus wouldn’t wear their hair the way you do.” Akki turned to Isana-chan. “As our resident otaku, what do you think?”

“Huh?” Isana-chan looked like she didn’t know how to react with the spotlight being thrown on her so suddenly. She surveyed me then for some reason pointed her phone at me. “Well...she is definitely the type of person I’d like to

come up and talk to me in an overly friendly tone when I'm feigning sleep."

"See? You got some huge words of approval, Senpai!"

Urgh... Listen, I'm an otaku too. I know what she's trying to say!

"But..." I started.

"Something not right?" Suzurin asked.

"I don't think this matches what I'm going for. I'm really serious about today, and I want him to think that something's different about me. But I'm the type who just usually goes for it, you know?"

"So you're looking for something with a shock factor."

"Yeah! Exactly!"

Gap-moe is something that has traditionally gone straight to the heart of many since old times! This would elevate the usual me to new heights! There was no guy alive who wouldn't fall for this! Even that doofus incarnate of a senpai wouldn't be able to resist...well, that was probably the case.

"This kinda outfit would work best on a more serious, quiet girl. Maybe someone like..." I trailed off.

Then all our gazes turned to a certain pair.

"Huh?"

"Wha—?"

Standing there was an example of innocence, Yumechi, and a representative of plain girls, Isana-chan. Both of them seemed confused, unsure of what was going on.

"Hm..."

"I see..."

Suzurin and Aki's eyes glinted with curiosity. *Heh heh heh... Time to take a quick detour.*

The Bias of the Otaku-Gyaru Bias

Mizuto Irido

“Heya! You a local?”

“Nope. Sorry,” Hoshibe-senpai said, casually brushing off the girl who’d come up to him.

From the minute we set foot in this shopping mall and split off from the girls’ group, we’d been hit on twice. It was a bit novel at first, because I had no idea girls *actually* tried to pick up guys, but now that it had happened twice, it was getting annoying.

I’d been right in assuming that Hoshibe-senpai’s height really caught the attention of girls. As evidence, he seemed very adept at dealing with their advances.

“Sorry, Senpai, making you deal with all this by yourself.”

For some reason, Kogure Kawanami, who you’d think would be the stereotypical flirty type, would hide behind Hoshibe-senpai every time a girl came around. Maybe it was just my imagination, but he seemed a little pale.

“Huh? Don’t worry ’bout it. Gotta at least act the part of your upperclassman every now and then. If anything, I’m surprised. Had no clue you weren’t comfortable talking with girls.”

“Well, I don’t have any problem if they’re talking to me normally, but...”

He was always going on about how love was meant to be observed, not experienced. Most likely, getting hit on was just plain annoying for him. Maybe it would’ve been better if our groups hadn’t split up. It’d be harder for girls to hit on us if the six of them had been around.

“H-Heya...”

“Hey, cutie? Where ya from? You on LINE?”

I sighed, hearing another group of girls call out to us. *Really? Again? What’s going on with Kobe’s public decency?* Just as I turned to face the group of idiot

girls who were ruining Japan's public decency...

"A-Aha... Ha ha ha... H-Hi..."

"It's, like, Mizuto-kun! I'm, like, so surprised. You on LINE?"

Oh, I know these idiots. One idiot was one who didn't have their heart in the personality they were trying to act out while the other idiot only knew the singular flirting tactic of asking if I was on LINE.

Both of them wore off-shoulder tops that revealed their cleavage, their skirts were short, and there was no trace of their usual meekness. One of them appeared nervous, while the other gave off overly hyper vibes, clearly indicating their lack of understanding regarding the behavior of such girls. Yes, this would be Yume Irido and Isana Higashira—introverts disguised as gyarus.Both of them were introverts just dressed as gyarus—Yume Irido and Isana Higashira.

"What are you two doing?" I asked.

Yume groaned. "Peer pressure from girls is a frightening thing..."

"We, like, look pretty good, and we're like, kinda cosplaying. It, like, makes everything more exciting!"

You seriously think just saying "like" a lot makes you sound like a gyaru? Then, I looked behind these two idiots and saw a group of girls bursting with laughter. *I think I get what's going on now.*

"So...what do you have to do to end this penalty game of yours?"

"I-It's not a penalty game..." Yume trailed off.

"It'll end as soon as your expression shows desire!" Isana said with a grin.

Isana then cried out and grabbed me by the arm, squishing it against her body. A soft, deep sensation spread across my arm. Then she rested her head on my shoulder and giggled.

"Gyarus are all about invading personal bubbles," she explained. "They care not whatsoever if their breasts touch others."

"Keep your biased notions to yourself." *Also, how is this any different than usual for you?*

“Yume-san, you should also dive in!”

“Huh?! Me too?!”

“Become a gyaru in both mind and body! Know no shame or embarrassment just for this moment!”

Wait. No. Stop. That’s really *not a good idea!*

“O-Okay...”

I didn’t have the chance to stop her. Yume gathered her resolve and, with a hint of hesitation, moved to the opposite side of me. She let out a soft yet determined yell, as if to motivate herself, before firmly grasping my free arm, clinging to it tightly with her entire body.

Immediately, I felt her presence envelop the upper half of my arm. While she wasn’t holding me as tightly as Isana, it was evident how soft and springy she was. My mind felt like it was on fire from the sensation. She was so close I could feel her breath on me.

From that close proximity, she looked up at me timidly and asked, “What...do you think?”



That...is a loaded question. “At the very least...i-it’s embarrassing.”

This is not *something you do in a public place like this. There are so many people walking by that it’s making me anxious.* But the silver lining was that with this much foot traffic around, I didn’t feel like I could lose control of myself. Yume, seemingly catching the meaning behind my words, immediately blushed.

“O-Oh, of course! Sorry!” she said, immediately moving away from me.

As the body warmth from Yume faded away, I felt relieved...but also a little sad. Meanwhile, Isana continued to cling to my arm while snickering.

“It would appear that my gyaru power exceeds hers. After all, gyarus do not have the common sense that would render them capable of heeding the stares of those around them or experiencing any sense of shame.”

“You need to get off of me too. Also, stop openly voicing your biases.”

I used my free hand to casually push her off of me.

“Aw,” she said, disappointed.

Most gyarus have more common sense than you. I exhaled, cooling my head down. *The guys in our group are pretty reserved, but the girls are seriously all over the place.* I glanced at Yume in her revealing attire—a far cry from her usual reserved outfits. *You* do *know that we’re going back to the same house tomorrow, right?* I might’ve been able to hold back today, but...what about tomorrow? *Idiot.*

No Choice but to Ride the Big Wave

Isana Higashira

“Hm...”

Something unusual is occuring, I thought as I slurped up my udon while surveying the table. Though Mizuto-kun looked no different as he consumed his yakisoba, he was looking at the person across from him at a strange frequency. Sitting there was Yume-san, and coincidentally, she was barely attempting to

converse with him either. Instead, she continued to only chat with Minami-san.

The two of them seem slightly more distant than usual. When we'd sat down, I'd been considerate and left the space next to him open. However, Yume-san ignored that and sat right in front of him instead. I suppose there was the possibility that sitting in front of him was a better spot in her mind than next to him, though that wouldn't explain what had transpired in the foot bath.

Thinking back to when he'd joined us there, I could've sworn that Yume-san had forcefully created a space between myself and her so that Mizuto-kun could sit right beside her. My memories are a little fuzzy, so it's a little difficult to say this with absolute certainty.

Mizuto-kun was similar in the sense that despite being on this vacation with her, he didn't appear to be making any moves whatsoever. Though I was glad that he was focusing his time on me, I wasn't such a child that I needed him to dedicate every second of every waking minute to me.

This made me respect the proactivity of our upperclassman very much. She'd immediately donned the clothes we suggested for her date and then promptly sallied forth without hesitation. She reminded me of a warrior as I watched her walk away, filled with determination. That was the heroic visage of a maiden heading out to confess her feelings. I was touched.

Hm? Wait, why am I acting like I've never experienced any of this before? For the record, I once confessed my feelings to Mizuto-kun. Perhaps, when I'd left to ask him to court me, others had viewed me as having the same heroic visage as our upperclassman.

However, I suppose, Yume-san and Mizuto-kun's situation isn't especially simple, since they're trying to return to their previous romantic relationship. Even worse, they share the same domicile. If things were to not work out, it wouldn't be so simple for them to return to being friends like it had been in our case. In fact, it may not have been possible.

Hypothetically speaking, if he *had* accepted my proposal to date and we broke up, then I could imagine how awkward things would have become between us. *Actually, I'd like to issue you two a round of applause for your ability to keep this up despite being stepsiblings. I just know that if it was me, I would've simply*

holed up in my room or lived a life of unending, unfulfilled lust.

While I thought about all of this, our group concluded lunch and exited the food court.

“Akatsuki-san, do you have plans for the afternoon?” Yume-san asked.

“Oh, sorry. I’m doin’ my own thing.”

“Huh?”

Even I was surprised by the following, unexpected turn of events. She grabbed the promiscuous boy (Something Kawanami) and boldly let out a declaration.

“The two of us are goin’ on a date! See you guys later tonight!”

“Huh?! W-Wait!” he exclaimed.

It seemed we weren’t the only ones who were confused. The promiscuous boy seemed clueless as to what was transpiring as he was pulled away, disappearing into the distance.

Both Yume-san and I needed to pick our jaws off the floor from surprise.

“I’d heard that they were childhood friends, so I’d considered the possibility, but...” I said.

“Wh-When did they...?”

Despite insisting that he was a ROM expert who had no interest in romance, he’d apparently put the moves on Minami-san. *I’m not sure if his transgressions can be forgiven. I sentence thee, promiscuous boy, to death.*

Mizuto-kun was the only one between us who seemed suspicious rather than confused. “Not sure what’s going on there...”

Out of our group of ten, four of them had gone on a date. Despite this being a student council sponsored trip, it was not as strong in its moral code as it should have been. With the example that had been set, it felt wrong *not* to go on a date at this point.

“Hm?” Suddenly, an idea flashed in my mind. If I rode this wave and went with the flow... “Mizuto-kun?”

“Yeah?”

I tugged at the hem of his shirt. “We should go on a date as well!”

“Huh?”

“You, me, and Yume-san,” I clarified.

“Huh?!”

“Huh?”

Armor of Seriousness

Tohdo Hoshibe

There I was, heading to the meeting place—in front of a frickin’ huge giraffe statue or somethin’—when I saw a girl, fidgeting with her bangs while waiting. I had to do a double take at first because she was in a completely different outfit than when I’d just seen her earlier.

She was now wearing a knitted sweater, a knee-length tight skirt, and then tights, likely to keep herself warm. Gone was her usual childish fashion sense, and in its place was a mature, subdued vibe.

She must’ve put this on after shopping with the girls. I’m guessin’ that Kurenai rebuked her for her usual style and forced her to buy these.

“Hey...” I casually waved my hand at her.

Noticing me, she brought her handbag in front of her knees, and said, “Senphai—”

She obviously got tongue-tied. Though she froze up for a moment, she quickly followed that up by saying, “J-Just give me a second.” Then she turned her back to me and began taking deep breaths.

I watched as her shoulders rose and fell over and over. Then when she finally turned around again, a teasing smile spread across her face.

“You’re late, Senpai! Points off for making a girl wait.”

I can’t believe she’s still trying to pull this off despite already messing up once.

Honestly, I'm kinda impressed. "To be fair, you weren't that far away in the first place. We came from the same mall, you know. You just happened to be at an exit closer to the meeting spot."

"Oh? Making excuses? Minus one point."

"Actually, what's all this about points anyway? Should I be gradin' you too?"

"Sure, bring it on. So, tell me, how many points is Aisa today, Senpai?"

She seemed so confident as she put her hands along with her bag behind her back. *Oh, I get it. She wants me to compliment her outfit. I could say somethin' like, "You clean up nice," but it's a bit cliche. Maybe...*

"Cleanliness is next to godliness."

"What the heck is *that* supposed to mean?!"

Can't you tell? I'm saying that you look nice. Like this, no one would suspect her monstrous need for approval.

Aso forced a frown (apparently, she could clean up her appearance but not her mannerisms) and skipped one step towards me.

"Have you really not noticed that there's a theme to this outfit?"

"How the hell should I know?"

Hm? Wait... Now that she mentions it, I feel like I've seen this before, but where? Was it a magazine or something? She had on a brown, knitted sweater, and a tight, blue skirt... *Oh. They're the same color as my shirt and jeans.*

"Heh heh, did a lightbulb go off?" she grinned while moving to stand next to me.

"We match, Senpai!"

"What is this, some new way of harassing me?"

"Rude! Give me credit. I at least held off on matching the color of your jacket. I had the common sense to know that going that far would actually annoy you."

"Ah, I see. So, all I need to do is close my jacket and hide the color of my shirt to make it less obvious that we're matching."

“It’ll be like we’re sharing a secret, Senpai.”

“Sheesh, it’s just one thing after another with you!”

Aso’s shoulders shook as she giggled. *God...did you really buy clothes just for this? That can’t have been easy on your wallet.* Suddenly I remembered her words from yesterday. “*I’m serious.”* Why exactly did the image of her serious face flash in the back of my mind?

“Senpai?” *I couldn’t tell if she was fooling around or what.* “You do know that there’s a girl right next to you who threw away her usual style and tried really hard getting dressed up for you, right? Shouldn’t you...compliment her a little more?”

Dammit... She paid for all this outta her own pocket. I can’t be callous about that. “You look good. Should always dress like this.” Suddenly she covered her mouth with both hands. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing...” she said, looking away, hiding her expression. “I was just...happier than I expected.”

There wasn’t a trace of her joking around. I could only hear joy in her voice. “*I’m serious.”* Her words echoed in my head once more.

Commencing Treatment

Kogure Kawanami

“Hey! Stop!”

Finally, after we could no longer see Irido and the others, Akatsuki stopped tugging me along.

“Hm? What?”

“Don’t give me that! A *date*?! When were you thinkin’ of telling me?!”

“I just did.” She giggled teasingly. “Oh wait, do you not like surprises?”

“This wasn’t a surprise—it was you strong-arming me!”

Sheesh. What if Higashira puts her grubby paws on Irido?! There’s a weird tension between the Irido siblings today...

“Well, whatever. Just chill. Don’t you realize I made a perfect opportunity for you?”

“Huh? What are you talkin’ about?”

“If Aso-senpai goes on a date, then you and I go off on a date too, wouldn’t that make it so that the remainder of the group feel more inclined to go on a date?”

I gasped in surprise. *No way... Did she purposely declare we’re going on a date for everything to work out this way?*

Suddenly, she squeezed my arm. “But then again, I *did* wanna go on a date with you too,” she added.

“Wha—”

“How would you feel if I said that for real?”

The hives that were starting to form receded as soon as I saw her annoying grin. *What the hell?! Are you serious or not?!*

“Don’t worry. Sheesh, I’m gonna ease you into things.”

“Ease me into what?”

Is she talking about the exposure therapy? But she didn’t answer my question and instead flashed a cryptic smile at me.

“Let’s get going. It’s been a while, so let’s have ourselves a fun date, Kawanami.”

Being called “Kawanami” instead of “Ko-kun,” which she had called me when we were childhood friends, filled me with relief. When she used my surname, it made me feel less close to her. That being said, despite my relief, there was still a huge amount of unease lurking at the bottom of my heart. I didn’t need anyone to point that out to me. It was obvious enough.

An Unknown Fear

Yume Irido

“Oh, look, Mizuto-kun! Do you see that?!”

“See what?”

“That! It’s the protrusion that you stand upon to stare out towards the boundless ends of the sea!”

“That’s...not what you think it is at all. That’s what you tie boats onto to dock them. They’re not for people to stand on.”

“Huh?! I never knew that...”

There were a number of protrusions along the wharf in evenly spaced intervals. Higashira-san kept trying to stand on them, and Mizuto was by her side, making sure she didn’t accidentally fall into the water. I watched from behind as this all unfolded.

Why... Why can’t I talk to him? Higashira-san had even made this opportunity for me... Even back in the mall, the three of us had gone into a bookstore, and we’d talked a lot...but not to each other. Ultimately, I’d only really been able to bring myself to speak with Higashira-san.

I know, it’s ironic that I of all people am thinking this, but I’m totally getting way too into my head! The way he touched my hand was only a *little* pervy! When we were still dating, I’d gone to his room with every intention of giving him my first time! This was small potatoes compared to that!

I was essentially acting like a kindergartener... *What is this, some kind of regression to romantic infantilism? Why am I so overly conscious about this? Is it because we live together? Is it because if we tried, we’d find an unlimited amount of opportunities to do the deed? Or maybe it’s because I saw Mizuto naked in the bath? I...have no clue. There are way too many possibilities.*

If it was because he liked me and wanted to date me again, then his actions were honestly on the tamer side. For god’s sake, President Kurenai went and straddled her crush on a bench while wearing a bunny suit. Then again, her way of going about things wasn’t normal.

I felt envious of Aso-senpai and how her heart didn’t falter no matter how many times Hoshibe-senpai gave her the cold shoulder. *Isn’t she...scared at all? I was scared back when I met Mizuto during summer break. Before he and I ever started dating, I was always so scared that even the slightest action or word*

from me would make him hate me. Even now, I'm scared. I'm frightened. But the fear right now wasn't because I was scared he'd hate me. Him hating me was almost a huge assumption at this point. *So what am I so scared of? What am I lacking?*

"Oh, Yume-san!"

As I got lost in my thoughts, Higashira-san's voice pulled me out of them. She was holding down her hair, which had gotten ruffled from the sea breeze, with one hand, while pointing at something with her other.

"Would you like to ride that?"

"Huh?"

Her finger was pointing towards a huge ferris wheel.

The Student Council President Is the Biggest Breaker of Public Morals

Suzuri Kurenai

Why... Why can't I talk to him?

As a result of Yume-kun and the rest going on dates of their own, I'd ended up in the same party of three as when we'd walked around the Ijinkangai—me, Ran-kun, and Joe. In other words, I'd been handed an amazing opportunity.

After the disastrous, unsightly escape I pulled off yesterday, this was a better opportunity than I deserved to hope for.

"Wow...I'm in awe, President Kurenai! I've never seen a real luxury cruise ship before!" Ran-kun said, looking up at the cruise vessel towering over her small body.

I'd suggested that since we were by the sea, it might be fun to walk around the harbor, but I hadn't expected Ran-kun to be so interested. Perhaps she'd never been around a place like this before, so everything was new and curious to her, greatly exciting her. Every time she spoke to me, her voice was filled with emotion, as though she was truly moved.

As an upperclassman, it was nice to have an underclassman revere me as much as she did, but it did come with the tradeoff of me not having any chance to speak with Joe. He, however, was acting perfectly normal and was firmly in the background as usual. I was almost positive that the people around us were only perceiving myself and Ran-kun and had absolutely no clue Joe was present or even part of our group.

Though I might've been able to sneak in some short exchanges with him like I'd been able to yesterday at the Ijinkangai, unfortunately, the conversation I wanted to have with him required much more time than a short exchange could allow. *When can I talk to him about this?! Actually, before that, how am I even going to explain myself for running away last night?!* The more I thought about it, the worse things were going to get. If anything, he might begin to interpret my behavior as avoidant.

"You know...I've been thinking, but..." Ran-kun started, nervously looking around. "Walking around here reminds me of Kamogawa. I really wonder why couples like being around bodies of water?"

It was true that there were pairs of boys and girls who seemed to be couples around us. Of course there were. Harborland was one of the main tourist spots in Kobe. That being said, there were families with children, and people our age as well, so it wasn't strictly couples.

"I don't think the fondness for water strictly applies to couples," I said. "All four of the great civilizations were built near a river too."

"Maybe my eyes are just drawn to couples. Is it because of what I saw last night?"

"Oh? What did you see last night?"

"Mizuto Irido," she practically spat. "I saw him flirting with Higashira-san in the inn last night. She was touching him all over his face and embracing him as if to squish her chest against him... Such i-indecency in a public place."

Hm? Aren't those two only very close friends and not actually dating? Where would that put Yume-kun? According to Joe's observations, those three aren't in a love triangle, so...

“How enviable to be so enthralled in one another that their surroundings faded.”

“What do you mean, President Kurenai?! It’d be one thing if they were in the privacy of their own room, but they were in the lounge—a place that anyone could’ve walked into! Getting heated in a place like that is not what any people with self-control would do!”

I couldn’t respond. *She...has a point. Dressing in a bunny suit and straddling a boy in a place where anyone could’ve walked by is not what a person with self-control would do.*

“That irks me so much! How can a person like that be ranked *second* in our grade?! I’m sure that underneath that calm exterior is the heart of a beast! He’s a pervert who gets off on humiliating the opposite sex!”

I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for being a person who gets off by having the opposite sex tell me what parts of me turn them on.

“Those who have stellar grades should be setting an example for their peers. They should be acting with more grace and decency just like you, President Kurenai!”

“Yeah...totally...”

I promise I’ll do better to act with more grace and decency.

There’s No Point to Foreshadowing if You Don’t Notice It

Tohdo Hoshibe

Aso brought me to a restaurant that she’d looked up. It was a pretty swanky place with a terrace that you could see the ocean from.

“It’s so different actually being here!” she marveled.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Feels kinda awkward being here as a student.”

“According to what I read online, it’s even prettier at night. It’s the kinda beautiful sight that’ll make me wanna say ‘cheers’ to your eyes.”

“Shouldn’t it make *me* want to say that to *you*?”

“Then say it.”

“Ugh. Cringe.”

“That’s what makes it fun!” This was the kind of pointless conversation we had as we ate. “Anyway,” she continued, “I bet you’re the cringey type of guy who wants to propose to someone in a restaurant with the night sky as a background.”

“Yeah, so? Are you saying that *you’re* not like that too?”

“What kind of girl do you take Aisa for?!”

“One that wishes for dreamlike scenarios from shojo manga despite her age.”

“That’s the absolute *worst* insult you could say to a girl! Though...I can’t deny that I admire those kinds of scenarios...”

“See? You’re definitely the type that wants a guy to raise a glass to your eyes. Here, *cheers*.”

“Hey! You didn’t have to bring your glass so close! I don’t want you to *physically* raise a glass to my eyes!”

“So, what were you saying about proposals?”

“I was just giving my opinion on being proposed to at a restaurant where you have a good view of the night scenery...not that it’s night right now. I’m not a huge fan, to be honest. It’d be too embarrassing with all these people around.”

“Well yeah, a restaurant’s not exactly private.”

“I think, if anything, home proposals are the best! Imagine this: in their third year of living together, they’re just sitting together in the living room, doing nothing special, and then he’ll just be like, ‘Maybe we should get married,’ and she’ll be like ‘Yeah, sure.’ Doesn’t that sound great?!”

“At the very least, I get it.”

“What?” she said indignantly. “Seems like there’s something you want to say.”

“When all’s said and done, it sounds like you just want a surprise.”

“A surprise?! Are you trying to say I want something stupid like a flash mob?! How rude!”

“You’re being pretty rude to people who do flash mobs.”

“But, Senpai, you know...” She smirked.

“Huh? Why are you grinning like that?”

“Were you asking me about proposals in anticipation of the future? I told you about the kind of proposals *I* like, but maybe you asked me about that for your own future reference?”

“Would it clear things up if I said I was using this as a reference to propose to someone else?”

“No! That’d make me mad!”

“Yeah, that’s why I said that.”

I’m surprised how used to her I’ve become. I can fire quips off at her without even skipping a beat, almost on reflex. It’s hard to imagine having this kinda instant banter with another girl.

“But honestly, a night sky might be nice,” she said softly while staring out at the Kobe harbor, reflecting the blue of the sky. “It’ll be embarrassing if other people are around, but...if it’s somewhere, just the two of us, with a view of the beautiful night sky, that’ll be best.”

“Best for what?”

“What indeed?” Aso smiled cryptically.

Though it felt like she was foreshadowing something, I didn’t catch on to what it might’ve been. Not one bit.

Medical Treatment Until I'm Sick of It

Kogure Kawanami

Akatsuki and I were currently at the Kobe brick warehouse in the southern area of Harbor Land. It was a place that was renovated to have swanky cafes and other kinds of stores inside.

"Lean in a bit more," Akatsuki said, forcefully pulling me closer to her. Then, in the next moment, there was a shutter sound. "Wow, the red brick really makes it! This'll do numbers!" Akatsuki excitedly showed me the picture she took with the old red bricks in the background. "Doesn't it look like a cover for Detective Conan or something?"

For real. If only we still had the Sherlock Holmes costumes from the other day. "You make it sound like you wanna show this picture off."

My eyes fell on the picture. She and I were so close to each other, it was hard to think we were anything but dating. It'd just be a repeat of the study camp if she showed this to anyone else.

"Don't worry. This is just for the memories," she reassured me.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Y'know, just something to look back on and be like, 'Wow, what a fun time.' Pretty please?" she asked, cutely tilting her head.

I hate how she's completely aware of how she can totally pull off these childish gestures without it being weird at all. Ugh, it's so obvious how fake her act is! But if you think that you're gonna throw me off with a little playacting, you're dead wrong.

"Look, I'm not saying you can't post it, but...it's kinda weird how you're not even the type to take pictures of your food, and now you're suddenly switchin' gears to taking these kinds of pictures?"

"That's 'cause I don't care about food pics, but I'll never have enough pics with you."

“Urp...” I felt hives breaking out across my arm.

You want more pictures of me? You see me literally everyday to the point where I’m surprised you’re not tired of seeing me already, but now you want more *pictures? What’s the point?* Seeing that I was at a loss for words, Akatsuki flashed a grin at me.

“Hold it in. You can do it. Look,” she said, shaking her empty hands in front of her face. “I’m not gonna do anything to you.”

It was the same kind of gesture people would do to show that they weren’t molesting anyone. She wasn’t going to do anything to me... She hadn’t even laid a single finger on me. She hadn’t tried to feed me, wash me, or go into the bathroom with me. *I’m okay... I have nothing to be scared of.*

I steadied my breath and focused on the reality of the situation, causing my hives to subside.

“Oh, nice. Progress, maybe?” Akatsuki nodded, satisfied while watching me recover.

“You’re really trying to cure me, huh...?”

“If you’re not scared of me anymore, other girls’ll be a cinch, right? After all, I’m the most unhinged girl in the world.”

“Why do you sound so proud about that?”

“Heh heh heh.”

She has a point, though. I can stand this more than I used to be able to. My condition might not be as severe anymore.

“I’m gonna keep up this treatment until you’re sick of it!” she said, folding her arms as if she was trying to hug herself. “I’m only helping you because I don’t have a choice. Don’t get the wrong idea, okay?”

“The tsundere act does *not* suit you. Look at my arm—it’s not even giving me a single hive.”

“Heh heh, yeah, yeah, just you wait.” Akatsuki stood on her tippy toes and began whispering in my ear. “I’m gonna give you so much love today you won’t have the strength to stand anymore. Brace yourself.”

I began trembling. I couldn't tell if this was because I was worried or a different feeling entirely. I felt completely lost.

Suddenly, I felt her blow into my ear. "Gah!"

"Aha ha ha! That freak you out? Got chills?"

I'm not worried—it's something else. Who the hell actually *blows in other people's ears?!*

Put Lids on Smelly Things

Mizuto Irido

After reaching the front of the line for the ferris wheel, we entered the gondola in order—me, Isana, and then Yume. After I sat down, Isana immediately sat opposite of me, right in the middle, leaving no room for Yume.

"Huh? Uh, Higashira-san?"

In the middle of Yume's confusion, Isana grinned. "Yume-san, there's a seat open *right* over there."

What's with that mischievous look on your face? Yume looked first at Isana and then at me, but during her hesitation, the door to the gondola shut and we began moving.

"Sit down. It's dangerous," I said.

"R-Right..." Not having a choice, she sat next down to me.

We slowly rose towards the sky, and soon enough, we had a bird's eye view of the Port of Kobe and a large spread of the buildings in the area. It just so happened that a white cruise ship was passing by as we were ascending. Though the outside scenery was impressive, my attention was being drawn towards someone inside.

With Yume sitting next to me, I couldn't help but remember what'd happened at the foot bath yesterday. Thinking back, it wasn't even that big of a deal. I'd just touched her hand a little. Just her fingers, even. It wasn't like we'd kissed. It wasn't as if I'd groped her butt or boobs. So why was it that I couldn't get it out

of my head?

Holding hands had been so normal for us when we were dating. Linking arms, hugging, even kissing had all been daily occurrences for us. But...I got the feeling that whenever I'd done any of those things, my intentions hadn't been so lustful.

Our physical contact when we'd dated had been more on an emotional level. We'd opened our hearts to one another and had let each other inside. But what I'd done yesterday had been fueled by lust or maybe my instincts. One might even be able to say it'd been the animal hidden deep inside of me. It wasn't something that was okay to show others. But now both Yume and I were aware of our animalistic, impulsive sides.

We'd shown each other our dirty sides—devoid of self control—and we allowed it to happen. Though all that we'd done had just been simply touching hands, the fact that we'd allowed it to happen shook us to our core. It was like a floodgate had opened. It made us both realize that we were okay with this kind of behavior from each other. It was enough to make us feel like it was okay to give up on holding ourselves back. And that...freaked me out a bit.

"Whew, we're so high up!" Isana said in amazement as she looked out the window, completely oblivious to what was going on. "I would bet that the scenery is much more magnificent come nighttime! I wonder if we made a mistake coming so early in the day."

"Riding Ferris wheels at night is for asking someone out," I said.

Coming here at night would've been extremely dangerous. The night scenery being the only source of light while being in an enclosed space with Yume would've made it impossible for me to not touch her.

"Oh, is that so? Then perhaps that upperclassman of ours is going to confess here."

"What upperclassman?" I asked Isana.

"Oops. Am I allowed to speak about this, Yume-san?"

Yume wryly smiled. "I don't see why not. There's no harm now since we won't see Hoshibe-senpai and Aso-senpai until later."

Oh, those two... I can kinda guess who's gonna ask who out. "Ballsy move. If things don't work out, the rest of the trip's gonna be awkward."

"I believe things will work out," Isana said optimistically. "They seem very friendly with one another to the point that an outsider may already perceive them as dating. I can't imagine him saying no to her."

Both Yume and I fell into an awkward silence. It took a little before Isana reacted after seeing my face.

"Oh. Now that I recall...I was in a similar situation, and ultimately, I got turned down, didn't I?" Isana laughed, which made me, the guy who'd turned her down, feel like I shouldn't attempt to cheer her up.

Yume awkwardly smiled. "It'd be nice if everyone could go act like nothing happened like you were able to, Higashira-san."

"Well, I was after Mizuto-kun's body, not his heart."

"Knock it off," I said.

Sure, the only difference between dating someone and being friends with them is whether or not doing dirty things with them is okay.

"If you simply wish to spend time with someone, being simply companions with them is perfectly acceptable. However, in most cases, the desire to court someone is part of a desire to do dirty deeds with them, no?"

"Well, I guess," Yume started, following up with "maybe, but..." under her breath.

Though I was sure how I felt about Yume, I still had no intention of asking her out. It might've been because I couldn't deny the dirty thoughts I had. I might have been unconsciously rejecting the idea because I could tell that I was looking at her with ulterior motives.

Even if Yume came out and said she was okay with it, I wouldn't be. I couldn't accept that side of me. I was probably just being overly self-conscious from my own inexperience, from my own stupid pride. Even so, I didn't want anyone to think of me as someone who could only show how he felt with his lust.

I need to come up with a more elegant solution to this...if there even is one.

“Everyone has their own reasons for dating, though,” I said. *Is there even a more elegant solution? Well, either way...* “Isana’s thinking about this surprisingly logically, and that’s probably why you’re agreeing with her, but there are people who find value in relationships, and their reasons don’t have anything to do with logic. Or what? Are you saying you’re the type who only views the opposite sex as an outlet for your carnal desires? Are you hiding your lust behind your usual calm expression?”

“Huh?” Isana sounded confused.

Yume blinked her eyes in surprise. Most likely, she didn’t expect me to speak to her directly. The dam in her heart holding everything back was cracking, and it was prime to break at any second. That’s most likely why she couldn’t face me. She was getting way too into her own head. The only thing to do was put a lid on the thing causing the stink. The lid in this case was self-control. As such, I used my lid to pretend I hadn’t seen anything; that way I could retain my sense of self.

“O-Of course not! Who would be interested in your stringy body?!”

“Who said anything about *my* body? I was just talking about the opposite sex in general.”

“Grr...”

“Hold on!” Isana interjected. “Sure, there are those who view the opposite sex in that way, but there are also those who view the same sex that way too!”

“You should try to focus more on people’s personalities, rather than their bodies,” I quipped.

Right now, all Yume and I could do was try to ride this out. If we didn’t, there’d be no way that we could keep things the way they were between us.

Rejecting a Woman’s Advances Warps the Mind

Joji Haba

My specialty—or maybe my natural ability—is observing others. Melting into the back of the crowd is the perfect place to see the people around you. After

all, what else can you do back there? Nobody notices you, and thus nobody talks to you. Before I knew it, I found myself making internal profiles of people by observing the various information I got from their expressions, their movements, and their tones of voice.

Because doing that had practically become second nature to me, it was as clear as day that Kurenai-san was avoiding me. The reason behind that was also very clear. It had to do with what'd transpired last night when she'd gotten on top of me while wearing that bunny suit, whispered sweetly into my ear, and I...

But who could blame me?! I'm a normal guy. It'd be weirder if I *hadn't* reacted like that. If anything, I deserved praise for hanging on as long as I'd had. Still, though, Kurenai-san had felt a foreign object on her butt and immediately fled the scene at top speed. I thought she'd had some nerve running away despite being the one who'd seduced me. That being said, in her defense, she'd seen me as harmless, like a cute little animal. But then, I suddenly bared my fangs. She went into fight-or-flight mode, and the flight response won out. Simply put, as a girl, it was unpleasant for her.

If she was going to continue avoiding me and eventually leave me alone entirely, that'd be fine in my book. After all, it was weird in the first place that she paid any attention to me. In a sense, this would just be the natural order of things returning.

But even so...I wanted to at least apologize. I wasn't so worthless a person that I couldn't take responsibility for my actions. Even if I was going to be disappearing from her world, that's the least I could do.

The entire day, I'd been looking for a chance to do just that, and it seemed like the time had finally come. A little bit after entering the Kobe Maritime Museum by the wharf, Asuhain-san stopped in place.

"Sorry, I need to use the restroom," she said before walking off, leaving me and Kurenai-san alone.

There was no better chance than now.

"Joe—"

Right as she turned around to face me, I bowed my head. "I'm really sorry," I

said, making sure to keep my voice down since we were inside a museum.

"Huh?" She sounded confused.

"I'm really sorry for pushing something so gross against you. If you'd like, I'll quit the student council, and—"

"W-Wait!" she accidentally exclaimed. She nervously looked around before continuing in a more subdued voice. "I-I was the one who initiated last night. Why would *you* apologize?!"

"Haven't you been avoiding me because you were grossed out by what happened?"

"N-No! I-I just..." Kurenai-san seemed to be stumbling over her words, but then she forcefully grabbed my head and pulled it upwards. "In any case, what happened last night wasn't your fault at all! I didn't think it was gross or anything whatsoever! If anything, I found it quite endearing!"

"Huh?"

"No. Wait, sorry. That was a slip of the tongue. Anyway, there's no need for you to quit the student council!"

"So then why have you been avoiding me?"

"W-Well..." Suddenly, her porcelain skin began turning red. Her emerald eyes began darting around as if looking for help. After a while, she glanced up at me. "It's just that...it felt very real... Once I realized what *that* was, you know, *that*, I got a little shaken and...scared..." *Shaken? Scared?* The *Kurenai-san felt those emotions?* "I know how that must seem after I've tried to seduce you so many times, but still!" She was starting to grow defensive. "It's not my fault! I'm a bona fide pure-hearted maiden! I only have superficial knowledge about *those* things! Of course I'm going to get a little freaked out when I'm in a situation with the real deal!"

"I'm almost impressed by how proud you are about your patheticness."

"Oh, shut it! This is *your* fault for not immediately rejecting my advances!" *She's...not wrong, I guess.* Kurenai-san exhaled heavily. "I'd come up with all kinds of excuses for my actions, but now they've all gone to waste."

“I feel...kinda bad.”

“It’s fine. I’ve made up my mind,” she said looking up at me with a determined look in her eyes. It was as if there was a light coming out of them that was shining onto me too. “Next time, I won’t freak out. I won’t be scared. I’ll be *prepared*.”

“What do you mean by ‘prepared’?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just remember this: the next time you get an erection in front of me will be the time you lose your virginity.”

I had no words. How could she say such vulgar things with a straight face? But then again, maybe her expression was precisely *because* she was talking about something vulgar. Either way, the case had been solved.

“By the way,” she said in an even softer voice. “What did you do...after?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well...when guys get like *that*, don’t they need to take care of it to get it to go back down?”

I paused before responding. “Kurenai-san, please throw away whatever materials you’ve been referencing.”

“What?! How did you know I gleaned this from my research materials?!”

“Because you’re wrong.”

Please, someone give this girl proper sex ed. I don’t think I have the confidence to do it.

I Fell in Love Like a Regular Person on a Regular Day

Aisa Aso

At first, I only felt hostility towards him. It pissed me off every time he looked down on me. So as a way of getting back at him, I decided to show him what it was like when I got serious. I’d steal away the same eyes that had called my actions “cheap.” With that in mind, I began teasing him.

But when did that turn into affection? I’m not entirely sure, but I think it all

happened because of something very minor on a day like any other.

I was in the middle of looking for some documents on a shelf in the student council room when I suddenly heard Senpai call out to me.

“Hey!”

I turned around and I heard a clatter from above me. By the time I looked up, a cardboard box that’d been on the top shelf had begun tipping over. I couldn’t react. All I could do was watch in a daze until Senpai came running and used both his hands to catch the box before it fell completely.

“Ah.” It took me a bit before I processed what’d happened, but when I did, I finally remembered the words I was supposed to say. “Thank you...very much.”

“Be more careful.”

Yeah, I know how cliché this all sounds. But this *wasn’t what did it for me. I’m not that easy.* If someone saving me from getting hurt was enough to make me fall for them, I would’ve had my first crush way earlier than this. What really made my heart start fluttering was the expression on his face as he sighed with relief.

Whether he’d been relieved, surprised, confused, hesitant—even now I wasn’t entirely sure what expression he was making. But I knew that it was soft and incredibly frail.

“Oh... You can make faces like that?”

The very same infallible student council president who was always aloof, who always shrugged off everything I did to him, the brazen senpai I knew looked just as frail and weak as me, if not only for a split moment.

This isn’t fair... This isn’t fair at all, Senpai. How am I ever going to get that out of my head? Girls are weak to this sort of disparity. I’d been trying to make it so that you’d never be able to get me out of your head, so what was I supposed to do when I couldn’t get *you* out of my head?

Before I knew it, it became normal for some part inside of me to want to try getting him to make that expression again. Because of that, I couldn’t stop looking at his face, and it became a part of my everyday life.

Nothing special had happened to cause this change in me. I didn't care where we were—we could've been in the student council room or a random café. I didn't care what we did. We could've been talking about a mobile game, showing each other funny videos, or just be chatting about nothing. We'd spend time together without doing anything of value. These moments we spent together were the most important moments to me.

That's why I didn't plan anything special today. I might've put a little extra effort into my outfit, and we might've been hanging out in a place neither of us had been to before, but those were the only bits of spice sprinkled into today's plans. Otherwise, all I wanted was for us to pass the day as usual. *In order to keep these days going, I want to become the most important girl to you, Senpai. Let's have fun today. Let's have an ordinary, completely normal, fun day. Then, at the end, when I'm being serious, will you lend me your ear?*

"Senpai?" The time had flown by and the sun had already begun to set. "Before we head back, do you...want to ride the ferris wheel?"

You Reap What You Sow

Akatsuki Minami

"Wow, it's already this late?"

I looked up at the sky, which was now stained red. Checking my phone's clock, I saw that it was a little past four. It really sucked how it got dark so quickly this late into November. We pretty much had to start thinking about going home like we were children with a curfew.

Oh, right. Back then, around this time, he'd say we should go home. But since we were neighbors, he'd grab me by the hand as if I was his little sister, thinking that even if we went home, we could still play. *Hm, what is this called? I feel like I've read about this in a manga or something.*

"What's that phrase again, Kawanami?"

But he couldn't reply. I glanced over and saw that he was blue in the face, his lips pursed. *Sheesh. All I did was lean my head on your shoulder as we sat down on the bench. Can't even handle something as simple as this, huh?*

My chest hurt. Was it because I was sad? Or because I pitied him? *Maybe I should start thinking about calling it off. No. I won't let my treatment of his condition be so half-assed. But this isn't good. I don't want to hurt him more than I already have. Don't be a baby. These are wounds* I *inflicted on him.* I *need to look after him. I'm just reaping what I sowed.*

Finally, though, I found the words that I was looking for that reflected my situation. Everything that had happened in middle school was my fault. Though I couldn't get over how he'd yelled at me when I visited him in the hospital, I knew that I'd just reaping what I sowed. I might've deserved worse for treating him like a doll, like a toy—selfishly playing with him as I wished without any concern for what he wanted.

The worst part was that that part of me still existed inside me. I could feel lustful desires burning inside me. I wanted to lie him down when he felt sick, take off his clothes, and wipe him down all over. I wanted to make him rice porridge, blow on it to cool it down, and then feed it to him. After that, I wanted to say good night, kissing him over and over again. All of these were probably parts of my hopeless fetish. In all likelihood, it was probably best if I never got into a relationship again. Either I'd ruin them, they'd ruin me, or we'd ruin each other. I could easily envision this. That's why if Ko-kun got a new girlfriend, I thought that'd be for the best.

At the very least though, I hoped he'd let us remain childhood friends. Our memories were precious to the both of us. That's why I hoped that we could at least maintain that relationship of ours.

I was okay if this was the last time that we held hands, that I could lean my head on his shoulder, that we could walk with our arms linked. It was only common courtesy for one to clean up the mess they made. I needed to clear out all the negative memories bogging him down so that I could give this spot I occupied in his heart to someone else.

"'Time flies.' That's what you're looking for." I looked up at him as he practically groaned these words out. "I'm pretty sure it means that time can pass you by in an instant, so you shouldn't waste a single second...or something."

“Are you...okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. Thanks to you...I’ve gotten kinda used to this.”

Though he was still blue in the face, he forcefully bent his lips into a smile.

“Oh.” I couldn’t bring myself to say I was glad to hear that. Most likely, those words would’ve carried just enough affection to tip him over the edge. “You know, you’re pretty knowledgeable despite being an idiot.”

“How am *I* an idiot?! Just being accepted to Rakuro proves I’m not an idiot. Don’t base intelligence levels off of people like Irido.”

“Hm... Don’t waste a single second because time can pass you by in an instant, huh?” *Wow, that really hits home.* I looked up at the sun as it set.

I’m not gonna waste a second. I promise. Not when I’m causing him so much pain. There’s no way—absolutely no way—I’ll let that happen.

What’d Broken

Tohdo Hoshibe

Do it if you don’t have anything else to do. That’s how I’d been invited onto the student council. I had, to put it simply, been going with the flow. I’d stopped playing basketball and had nothing to do. During this period of limbo, someone conveniently came to me and told me to give it a try.

It was a chance for me to discover a new side of myself, and it’d conveniently fallen in my lap. I immediately jumped on the opportunity. That’s all there is to the story.

Never in my wildest dreams did I think that I’d end up being the student council president. I just kept doing whatever came my way and I ended up becoming president. It hadn’t been a part of some grand plan of mine or any calculations—I had just been going with the flow.

Trading the basketball team for the student council was pretty even, honestly. Getting over my guilt for not rejoining the basketball club after all the nice things my upperclassmen told me when I busted my shoulder started to get easier.

I thought about that quite a bit. After all, because I skipped out on my rehab, my left shoulder still hadn't really healed, so there was no real chance I could return to playing on the team. All that was left was for me to find a place that I could work in. It was better than not doing anything at all, right?

I was okay telling myself that this was for the best—repeating the same flimsy excuse in my head. But then, there was an incident.

"Hey!"

Aso turned around, startled. But that's not what she should've done. *Don't you see it?! There's a box about to fall on you!* In that instant, I extended both of my hands above her to just barely stop the box from falling.

She looked above her and gaped at the box. "Thank you...very much," she'd said.

"Be more careful."

It took me a bit to move past the sense of relief and realize that a chill had run down my spine. Finally, I realized that both my arms were fully raised above my head and there was no pain.

Oh... I realized that my shoulder had been healed for a while now. *I'd* been the one that'd yet to heal. I had been the one who couldn't even seriously face myself.

I Won't Wish for Anything as Lofty as Cinderella Did

Aisa Aso

After standing in line for some time, we finally got into the round gondola. It'd already started to get dark when we lined up. So when the door shut and the gondola shook slightly as we moved upwards, we began going towards the night sky.

"I forget. You good with heights?" Senpai asked across from me.

"Yep. No problem! When I went to Tokyo, I stood on the glass floor at the top of the Skytree!"

“For real? I don’t think I could do that.”

“Really? But your head’s always so high up.”

“Literally nobody factors their own height into whether or not someone’s good with heights or not.”

I giggled. We were interacting with each other as we normally did. That’s probably why he didn’t notice the almost paralyzing nervousness across my body. I decided that this would be where I’d do it. At first, I thought that asking him out with the Kobe night sky as a backdrop would be a little much, but honestly, the cliched aspect of it worked in my favor. I was thinking that I could put my feelings in the form of a slight joke.

But things weren’t going exactly according to plan. I hadn’t expected to be *this* nervous. I wasn’t sure I could say what I wanted to without getting tongue-tied. I’d practiced saying these words over and over, but it felt like they were slipping through my fingers and falling to the ground below.

Senpai, do you remember how we weren’t friends at first? Do you remember how even before that, we barely even talked to each other? I doubt we cared about each other at all. Senpai, I’m honestly surprised that despite our relationship being like that, you told me off so pompously. You were such a backseat gamer. But you learned that sticking your nose into other people’s business isn’t always a good idea, right? After all, thanks to that, you have me sticking around you practically wherever you go.

Senpai, I was surprised how much of an otaku you are, but I was honestly kinda happy because I didn’t account for us having the same interests. Yeah, I know how easy that makes me seem. It’s like how introverts flock to gyarus who treat them nicely. But I hope you understand that it’s normal to feel a stronger closeness to someone who you weren’t exactly on good terms with when you find out that you have the same interests.

Senpai. Senpai. Senpai!

The gondola approached the sky. There was a cruise ship going by in the ocean. The city buildings stretched towards the horizon. The sparkling, almost treasurelike night view of Kobe stretched out as far as the eye could see.

I was hoping that the beautiful night view would make me look beautiful too. Even if it cast its magic on me just for this moment. All I asked was for five minutes—no, three minutes. *No, wait, it can just literally be an instant. I won't wish for anything as lofty as Cinderella did.* I just wanted to be the most beautiful girl in the world for this short instant to tell him my serious feelings.

"Senpai..." I'd left all the words I'd prepared back on the ground, but as we reached the apex of the ferris wheel, the words naturally spilled out. "Please look at me for the rest of your life." Because I was serious, I didn't say this with any extra emotion. My wishes and desires were formed into words. "I can't see anyone other than you for the rest of my life." The sparkle from the night view made his eyes sparkle like a kaleidoscope. "I like you. Please be my boyfriend."

As I said these decisive words, the gondola slightly shook. But even so, neither of us moved nor spoke. The beauty from the sparkle of the stars and the night sky made the cramped, dark gondola almost feel like a stage. It was like a spotlight that only we could see was being shined on our silence. The only two people on this stage were us.

After being frozen for a little, Senpai finally deeply exhaled and fixed his posture. Then, he looked right at me, not with an aloof expression or a tired one, but a serious one.

"Aso, I—" he began to reply.

His Reply

Yume Irido

The early setting sun was a herald for winter. I lightly rubbed my shoulders. This season was meant for jackets. Daytime was still okay for lighter clothing, but wearing fall-appropriate clothes at night was a little chilly. Of course, Higashira-san and I, who'd both been wearing gyaru outfits due to playing along with the antics of the girl group, had gotten cold and had changed back to our normal outfits a while ago.

"Aisa's late..." President Kurenai mumbled while checking her phone.

She'd shared the meeting time and place via LINE—4:30 in front of the giraffe.

Staying true to how we were as student council members, we'd arrived on time, and naturally the girls huddled together while looking towards the direction of the street with the gas lamps where Aso-senpai was supposed to be coming from.

The street had gas lamps at set intervals, each emitting an orange light—it almost gave a Christmassy feel. There were tons of couples walking around, illuminated by the lights, and we were waiting to see Aso-senpai and Hoshibe-senpai walking side by side among them.

She should've told him by this point. Though I hadn't asked her about the specifics of her plan, she planned to get back here around this time. So she'd surely asked him out by now, at five o'clock, thirty minutes past our planned meeting time. But even so, none of us said a single word of complaint. We just continued to patiently wait.

"Oh," President Kurenai said softly.

It took me a bit to see her. In the midst of the crowd, I saw a single head above them. *Hoshibe-senpai!* Next to him was Aso-senpai, still in the clothes we'd helped pick out for her.

"Phew..." President Kurenai smiled and exhaled slightly.

My heart felt lighter too. After all, their faces, which were lit up by the gas lamps, showed no trace of any awkwardness. They were walking so close to each other that their arms almost touched. They were almost indistinguishable from the couples around them.

"Senpai!" We waved at them to call them over.

Hoshibe-senpai glanced at us before walking over to Mizuto and the rest of the guys without saying a word. *Huh?* Just as I was thinking that he was acting strange, I finally realized.

"Senpai..."

I looked at Aso-senpai's face as she looked at us. She was softly smiling. "Thanks, everyone." She was forcing a smile despite crying.

We didn't need to ask what'd happened. Her face told the whole story.



Show Me Your Serious Self

Love Can Be a Curse with a Single Word

Yume Irido

“Wahhh!” Aso-senpai wailed while rubbing Asuhain-san’s breasts in the bath. “He said no! Hic. Wh-Why?!”

I really wanted to ask *her* “why” in regards to her current actions, but she was crying so hard that it didn’t feel right. Asuhain-san must’ve felt bad for her because she remained in Aso-senpai’s arms without fighting. But she did occasionally softly squeal and moan as if she was being tickled.

“I thought I had it in the bag! Senpai, you stupidhead!”

Despite how much she was crying now, she hadn’t shed a single tear the entire way back here. I was sure she’d held back not only because of the other people around but because Hoshibe-senpai had been there. But as soon as she fled into the bath, she broke down.

It’d been a while since I’d seen anyone cry this much. I couldn’t help but wonder just how Isana Higashira managed not to fall into this state when she’d been turned down. A broken heart is usually painful, like it was for Aso-senpai.The more serious you are about someone, the deeper the wound inflicted on you is when they turn you down. The life you had just a day ago starts to feel like a distant memory. Unlike Aso-senpai, I’d had a lot of time to prepare for my broken heart, so seeing her like this didn’t change how I felt about her, but...seeing my usual dependable upperclassman with tears streaming down her face—albeit while fondling someone else’s breasts—really tugged at my heartstrings.

“How strange...” President Kurenai said slightly sadly while narrowing her eyes. “Despite acting that friendly with you, he had no intentions of taking you as his girlfriend? The hearts of men are quite enigmatic. Just what about you was he unsatisfied with?”

“I don’t knooow! Hic. I-I asked him to be my boyfriend and then he said, ‘Sorry, I can’t be your boyfriend.’ Wahhh!”

“Eek! S-Senpai, don’t be so rough!” Asuhain-san let out a moan as Aso-senpai’s fondling became more intense.

It seemed that the only thing that could soothe Aso-senpai was the sensation of her underclassman’s boobs which she loved so much.

President Kurenai furrowed her brows, slightly peeved. “He said that, huh? If he had no intention of dating you in the first place, he should’ve made that clearer from his behavior.”

“I mean, Aso-senpai’s been coming onto him, so...”

“I know, I’m so lame! A-After acting like a femme fatale, I can’t even...”

I completely understood that her shame made her want to bury her head in the sand. If I were in her position, there was no chance I’d ever be able to look Hoshibe-senpai in the face again.

President Kurenai splashed through the water as she moved towards Aso-senpai and then lightly gripped her shoulders. “You’re gonna get dehydrated if you keep bawling like that. I’ll listen to you vent, so try lightening up on the crying.”

“Wahh... Hic.”

“Agh! H-Hey! Don’t rub my breasts too!”

I wryly smiled at the scene of Aso-senpai with the breasts of two different people in each of her hands. I had to be sure to keep my distance or else I’d become her prey too.

“This development feels familiar...” Higashira-san said softly next to me. “It’s best not to believe that there is or isn’t some kind of mutual romantic feeling... Otherwise, when you reveal that you thought they felt something for you, you end up being humiliated because they don’t...”

“Higashira-san...”

Despite seeming perfectly unbothered the day after she’d had her heart broken, she’d most likely cried like this the day Mizuto turned her down. It was

hard for me to comfort her the same way that President Kurenai had done to Aso-senpai. After all, I'd been the reason Mizuto had rejected Higashira-san.

"I'm really sorry that I irresponsibly pushed you into asking him out."

"There's no need to apologize. Ultimately, I was the one who thought that I had a chance. There's no way to know what's inside for sure until you open the lid. But that's precisely what's so frightening—the unknown..."

I got what I wanted when I opened the lid, but both Higashira-san and Aso-senpai didn't. What separated my attempt from theirs? What could I do to ensure that I didn't get turned down this time? *I don't know.* Not knowing made it all the scarier. It was so frightening that it almost made me not want to ever open that lid.

"Hic, hic!" Aso-senpai wailed. "I-I can't... Senpaiii, I still love you even though you rejected me!"

Despite knowing that he didn't want to date her, she couldn't help but love him. It was almost like she was cursed.

How much heartbreak could a person endure? How much could two people endure living under the same roof? Would I end up hating Mizuto again like when we first started living together?

Argh. Even though this is all just pure speculation and purely hypothetical, I seriously envy Higashira-san. I almost feared how easy she'd been able to bounce back to how she used to act around Mizuto after he rejected her. All we could do was say stereotypical words to comfort Aso-senpai.

I did notice, however, that Akatsuki-san was simply watching us, a pained look in her eyes.

Boys and Girls

Kogure Kawanami

Akatsuki☆: aso-senpai got shot down

I couldn't believe my eyes at the message Akatsuki had sent me. *Aso-senpai*

got rejected by Hoshibe-san?!

K_KOGURE: fr?

Akatsuki☆: frfr. we're all tryin' to console her

Looks like it's confirmed then. Akatsuki has more than a few screws loose, but she's not the type to lie about something like this. I looked up from my phone to survey the room.

"Whoa! You're not too bad, Haba!"

"I play ranked."

"Gah! Hey, stop! Get away from the ledge!"

Hoshibe-san was playing against Haba-senpai in a fighting game that I'd brought. He didn't seem any different from usual. If Akatsuki hadn't said anything, there's no way I would've guessed he'd just turned someone down. It didn't seem that either Haba-senpai or Irido had any clue of what had transpired either. The former was focused on his match with Hoshibe-senpai while the latter was reading a book by the wall.

Had turning Aso-senpai down not been a big deal for him? *Nah. There's no way. They actually know each other. His underclassman who he's been hanging around for over a year asked him out. I don't think he's so cold-blooded that turning her down isn't weighing on his mind.*

Akatsuki☆: Can you come out for a bit?

In the midst of my thoughts, Akatsuki messaged me. I only wanted to see joyous romance. I derived no pleasure from witnessing rejection. At any rate, I doubted that Akatsuki would explain the entirety of the events to me, but being with her was a lot better than having to be in this room and pretend like I didn't know what'd happened.

"I'm gonna grab somethin' to drink," I called out.

"Got it," Hoshibe-san shortly replied before I left the room.

I walked down the hallway and to the stairs. Akatsuki was waiting there. As soon as she saw me, she said, “Let’s go downstairs,” and began leading me downwards.

I followed her without saying a word. We slowly got further and further away from the front desk and salon where most of the guests were before, finally, Akatsuki stopped and rested her back against the wall in a deserted hallway. Her eyes fell towards the now darkened Japanese-style garden, but it felt as if she was actually looking at something else.

I leaned back against the wall right next to her, and looked in the same direction as her. After a while, Akatsuki finally spoke.

“Aso-senpai cried...a lot.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She’s always so cheerful, so it was a bit of a shock. Although the *way* she cried was kinda fun, I guess.” Akatsuki weakly chuckled. “Not gonna ask why she got turned down?”

“What’s the point? From what I can tell, there’s nothing I can do. I only really met her yesterday anyway.”

“True. Then again, I don’t really know the reason why anyway. Seriously, there are a lotta weird guys out there like Irido-kun. Every girl I cheer for gets rejected.”

Though I’d been kept out of the picture, I knew that she’d tried to help Higashira ask Irido out. But it didn’t work out. Irido took her carefully laid plans and threw them back in her face by saying no to Higashira. *Does she feel responsible for that?*

“Am I a bad luck charm or something? All the girls around me are gettin’ shot down...and I doubt *you’re* ever gonna get into a relationship. I feel kinda down, to be honest...”

“Don’t be so superstitious. It’s not your fault things turned out that way.”

“Yeah, I know...but I had a certain thought as I watched Aso-senpai cry. All the girls that fall for you are gonna cry like that too...”

I couldn’t say anything. As long as my body was like this, there was no way I could say yes to anyone asking me out. Worst-case scenario, I might barf right in front of them, and that would be horrendous.

I had a feeling Akatsuki was blaming herself for my inability to date anyone. *I know you are, aren’t you?*

“It’d be nice if they only got mad at me when you say no, but there’s no way that any of them are gonna know that I’m the reason why they’re getting turned down. With how popular you probably are, there’re gonna be a lotta girls who ask you out. That also means that there’re gonna be a lotta girls you make cry. That’s why I... I...” Akatsuki almost sounded like she was pleading. “I don’t want to make you into someone who everyone thinks is horrible!”

So that’s why you’re so desperate to cure me? You wanna force a cure on me for random people who might not even ask me out?

“I—”

“Come with me,” she commanded, grabbing me by the arm. “There’s somewhere I wanna go. Did you know there’s an outdoor bath with semi-mixed bathing?”

From what I could tell from the changing room, we’d come at the perfect time. It didn’t seem like there was anyone inside. As I entered into the bath, I was taken aback by its shape, which stretched out straight like a narrow hallway.

I splashed through the water, making my way to the back. As I did, the water gradually got deeper and deeper. By the time the murky, brown bathwater covered the majority of my body, I could see outside.

Though this was advertised as an outdoor bath, in reality, you could only see the outside through the window, so it was more of a half-outdoor bath. But the thing I was more concerned with was there was another bath on the other side of me. It was separated by stones that were stacked higher than the level of the water.

“Oh, there you are.”

Akatsuki was on the other side. She was acting like her usual self and was leaning both her arms on the stone divider while looking over to me. Though the men's and women's baths converged here, the brown water was opaque, so it was impossible to see any submerged body parts—thus, it was considered a "semi-mixed" bath. "Heh heh... Doesn't it kinda feel weird that we can't see each other's bodies even though we're both naked?"

"Yeah..."

I was the only one on my side, and it seemed she was alone too. I wasn't sure if we'd come here too early or late. Perhaps people just didn't come here at this time.

"Hey, stop looking for other girls," she said, glaring at me. "Even if there were any, it's not like you could see them naked anyway."

"Shaddup. Even if I can't see, I'm still curious."

"Y'know, it's amazing how dirty your mind is despite the fact that you barf the instant a girl shows any affection for you. So unfair."

And who exactly do you think is to blame for that? I kept myself from saying this out loud. She was more aware than anyone who exactly was to blame.

Akatsuki rested her face into her hands and smiled teasingly. "When was the last time we took a bath together? Oh, I guess it wasn't too long ago. You know, at your place."

"That was you barging in. The last time we *consensually* took a bath together was..."

...When we were still together. I stopped myself before I could dredge up those memories. There was no way I could stay calm if I went any further.

"Bathing together was so normal for us when we were in elementary school."

"That's just how kids are, isn't it?," I said, shrugging.

"How old were you again when you asked where girls pee from?"

"Stop! Don't air out my embarrassing past!"

"Aha ha ha! I was so shocked I bawled. Your parents got *pissed* at you!"

I was ignorant about a lot of things back then, especially when it came to differences between guys and girls. I didn't know about romance either or what would happen with us.

"Why did we stop taking baths together again? Was it because you touched my boobs?"

"Don't make shit up! There wasn't any one event that started it off. We just got older and naturally stopped taking baths together."

Yeah, there wasn't any reason. It just happened. Everything just kinda happened. We stopped taking baths together, we stopped going to school together, we stopped talking to each other in the classroom, and then we just so happened to start dating.

There wasn't any sense of determination, responsibility, or anything else involved. Middle school boys are just like that. When a girl comes onto them, they pounce. Seriously, they're as dumb as monkeys. But then when things end up going differently than expected, they start complaining. I'm still getting my just deserts for that.

"Hey, are you turned on?" Akatsuki asked with a devilish smile. "Tell me what you're feeling now that you're bathing with me as a high school girl."

"Hmph," I snorted. "We just took a little walk down memory lane. Are you really so stupid that you think I'd get hot from taking a bath with you *now*?"

I was no longer as ignorant as I had been back then. I was painfully aware about guys and girls, about romance, determination, regret, and tact. Romance wasn't meant to be experienced—but observed. My answer hadn't changed.

"Uh huh..." Akatsuki nodded, but there was something strange about her intonation.

As soon as I realized that she was going to do something, she waded towards the window between us. Then she put her hands on the stone formation connected to it, and....

"Oof." There was a splash of water and out of the brown, cloudy bath emerged the pale back of a girl, and then her waist, and then her butt.

I stared, dumbfounded as Akatsuki turned to face me. Completely naked. She sat on the edge of the bath with the darkened window against her back. Her body sparkled from the droplets of water. She smiled as she did so.

She tilted her head and repeated herself. “Are you *sure* you’re not turned on?”

Her small frame hadn’t changed too much from when she was in middle school. But it seemed that the parts of her that her clothes usually kept hidden had grown a decent amount. The lines around her hips and butt had begun to curve. Overall, the lines of her body had become much more distinctly womanlike than before.

While her body was immature and her face was innocent, she was absolutely captivating. Or at least I thought so.

“Why...” I groaned, feeling myself break out into hives and a sense of nausea. “Why are you going so far?” I wasn’t sure if I was genuinely asking or pleading with her to stop. My fried lizard brain couldn’t keep this question inside me. “I would’ve been fine with how things are... We got back to a good point as friends... We were able to go back to being like-minded childhood friends... I was okay with that!” Though I didn’t mean to, I nearly cried that out, almost like a kid breaking down into tears. “So why are you trying to throw that all away?!”

It’s ending. This comfortable time that we had is ending. Thinking about that made me sad, angry, and my head a mess.

Akatsuki lowered her eyebrows a bit as if she wasn’t sure what to do. “*Am* I throwing it all away?”

“You are! Of course you are! Because if you do this...” *If you show you me your naked body...* “I can’t see you as just my friend anymore. I’ll see you as a girl!”

Inside my head it felt like sparks were flying. They began burning the insides of my brain, burning away and shreds of self control I had. All that was left were the animalistic instincts that they’d covered. *I hate this. I’m so done! I absolutely hate retreading old territory! I feel sick. So, so, so sick! Why can’t you just let me believe that guys, girls, and humans aren’t such dirty beings?! Just let me think that they’re precious, cute, beautiful, pure beings! Let me keep this impression I*

had as a kid!

"I'm sorry, Ko-kun." *This is ruthless.* "Hearing you say that makes me so...*so* happy."

Seeing her sheepish smile made me cover my mouth. I couldn't say anything. I couldn't even raise my head. All I could do was splash away in the bath to get back to the entrance.

"Dammit..." Even after leaving, I couldn't get it out of my head. The image of A-chan's naked body had been seared into it. "God dammit! Shit!"

It felt like my head had become my heart with how hard it was beating. My throat felt uncomfortably dry, and I couldn't catch my breath at all.

I didn't want to get like this. I wanted to stay innocent like a child. I wanted us to stay as just *childhood friends. But it won't go away. It's stuck there clear as day. Her slightly flushed skin. The gentle slopes on her chest. Her tight thighs, and then the gap in between them where I could get a glance of her...*

"*God* dammit!!!"

I've remembered. I can't help but remember. This was proof that we couldn't go back to how we used to be anymore.

Reward for Being Serious

Yume Irido

I watched Aso-senpai as she slept, buried in her futon. I could hear her soft breathing.

"She tired herself out from crying."

"She screamed, made a lot of noise, ate a lot, and then slept. She's like a kid," Asuhain-san said, unimpressed.

Aso-senpai did look cute while she slept, and that made her seem younger.

"No, she's like a baby especially with how obsessed with boobs she is."

"At the end of it she was screaming like a baby too..."

“Romance really makes people like this, huh?”

I glanced at Asuhain-san as she muttered this. “Hard to believe?” I asked.

“Well...I suppose at the very least, I didn’t think it was something to get so worked up over.”

“You won’t find many people who get as worked up over things as Aso-senpai...” I wryly smiled.

You also wouldn’t find as many people who could wolf down an entire dinner. Source: the dinner we had after our bath.

“However...I’m surprised that I’m slightly...angry.”

“At who?”

“Hoshibe-senpai. What possible reason could he have had to turn down Aso-senpai and make her cry like that?”

“I see...”

President Kurenai’s reaction had been the same. Maybe that was the normal thing to do if you were close to Aso-senpai. Maybe it was because I’d been broken-hearted myself, but I couldn’t help but think that Hoshibe-senpai had his reasons.

“It’s really strange...” Asuhain-san said, looking down at Aso-senpai, who was sleeping like a kid. “I thought that romance was pointless, but now that I saw someone cry that much over it, I feel kind of moved. I’ve started wondering if romance is as desperately important to her as studying is to me.”

“I get where you’re coming from. When you see someone desperately trying to give it their all—being serious—you can’t help but want to support them.”

“Serious...” Asuhain-san repeated that word under her breath as if to confirm it’d been said. “How serious was Hoshibe-senpai being?”

“Huh?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen him take anything seriously. I’m sure he’s an exceptional individual given that he served as the student council president, but...”

“Well...”

I knew about Hoshibe-senpai’s shoulder. I didn’t know the details about what’d happened, but he had likely gotten injured and was forced to give up basketball.

“Aso-senpai kept asking ‘why’ too.” Like a mother to their child, Asuhain-san gently rubbed the face of the upperclassman that’d brought her onto the student council. “Did he not tell her? How couldn’t he when Aso-senpai was this serious?”

“Why?” Aso-senpai had cried over and over. He’d told her that he couldn’t be her boyfriend, but she hadn’t mentioned anything about him explaining why he couldn’t. Was it possible that he hadn’t told anyone—not even Aso-senpai—why he was turning her down?

“I might...be a little pissed too now.”

If Mizuto hadn’t given a reason to Higashira-san when he’d turned her down, I would’ve gotten extremely mad at him, even if I’d been the reason he’d said no. Sure, one might think that it was the rejectee’s choice to fall in love and then ask them out—it might not make sense to the person being asked out in the moment—but it wouldn’t hurt for them to take a little bit of responsibility. If they wanted the other person to shut down those feelings that they’d had all this time, then they at least owed them an explanation. Isn’t it only natural to return someone’s seriousness with seriousness of your own?

“You two,” President Kurenai suddenly spoke up. “Before you get pitchforks, let me just say that you shouldn’t press Hoshibe-senpai on this. It’ll just cause Aisa more anguish.”

“I...know that.”

“This is strictly between them. It’s wrong for any outsiders to butt their heads in.”

She was right. President Kurenai—the person who was closest to Aso-senpai and probably the angriest person in the room about this situation—was coolheaded. But then, what could we do?

“If it’s their problem, wouldn’t it be best to have them talk it out?” a voice

suddenly said. However, it didn't belong to me, Asuhain-san, or President Kurenai. It was Higashira-san. "Just because he turned her down, it doesn't mean that they can't associate with each other anymore," Higashira-san elaborated. "Fortunately, there's still one more day of this trip, so it may be perfect timing...perhaps. Heh heh..." she chuckled embarrassedly. "At least from my experience, asking someone out gets easier after you do it once."

Though Higashira-san should've been the one most removed from the situation, she had the most convincing argument. *Seriously, I can't win with her. It feels like a distant memory for her to come to* me *for advice.*

"I see... Heh heh... I see..." President Kurenai began to shake with laughter, amused. "You're right. There's no reason to give up just yet. Besides, this is Aisa we're talking about. She's the in-your-face type who doesn't get discouraged even if you treat her like she's an annoyance. Heh heh... Ha ha ha! That's true!"

She must've found this very funny, because she was now practically dying of laughter.

"Um...are you sure?" Asuhain-san asked, shooting a confused look at President Kurenai, then Higashira-san, and then me.

"Yeah...why not?"

Just as persistent guys were hated, persistent girls might've been hated as well. Although, in Aso-senpai's case, she already was, by default, a lot to deal with.

"Okay, now that we have that decided, let's have a strategy meeting," President Kurenai said, sitting crossed legged on her futon.

"We're going to have Aisa ask him out one more time when we're at Mount Rokko tomorrow. We're gonna drag his true feelings right out of that blockhead loser's mouth."

"You're a lot more pissed off than I thought President Kurenai..."

And that's how the night in the girls' room ended.

The Status of the Last Day

Joji Haba

The next morning, we awoke to our trip's third and final day. After finishing checking out of the inn, we sent our belongings back ahead of us, and then started heading towards the station. Well, it was called a station, but it was actually a ropeway.

There was a ropeway that connected Arima Hot Springs to the peak of Mount Rokko. Our plan was to take it to do some sightseeing there, then take a different cable car down the mountain, and then go to a nearby train station and return to Kyoto.

"I really wanted to take you guys to the Takeda Castle ruins, but it's a fair distance from here. It'll be at least half an hour of climbing a mountain, so I decided to hold off this time since we're a large group," the organizer of this trip, Kurenai-san, explained. Then she covertly added, "Would you like to take a trip there, just the two of us, next time?"

"Sure, as long as I'm just carrying the bags," I replied.

If I wasn't careful with how I turned her down, all I would accomplish was, conversely, invigorating her.

We looked down at Mount Rokko from the sky. It'd turned a shade of crimson from the fall season. I almost felt like it was worth the effort for the experience of practically walking through the almost burning looking mountainside.

Most likely, this would've been around the time that Aso-san would cling to Hoshibe-senpai and begin fussing. But in reality, the two of them were looking down at the mountain separately from different windows. She wasn't her usual boisterous self. She was just silently nodding along to whatever Irido-san and Minami-san were talking about.

I didn't have to have great observation skills to know what was going on. In Aso-san's mind, this should've been the day that they'd have their first date as a couple. It must've hurt more with how beautiful the scenery was. She couldn't enjoy this at all.

On the other hand, I was more interested in a different pair. Kawanami-kun was speaking with Hoshibe-senpai while Minami-san was speaking with Aso-

san. The two of them had not exchanged a single word today, though it felt more like Kawanami-kun was avoiding Minami-san.

I held back a sigh. I didn't think this would be a leisurely trip, but this was not within my expectations. Girls and guys really shouldn't go on trips together.

What I Want to Touch Can't be That

Yume Irido

Aso-senpai was wholeheartedly fluffing the wool of a sheep. After arriving at the peak of Mount Rokko, we first looked around at the scenery, looked at gift shops, and looked out from the terraces with good views.

I bought gifts for Sakamizu-san and Nasuka-san as well as mom and Mineaki-ojisan. I was satisfied with having been able to do that, but I could tell that Aso-senpai was still down in the dumps.

After looking at the scenery from the terrace, she'd suddenly said, "I wanna go to a farm."

There was a farm on Mount Rokko. It was a little closer than twenty minutes away on a rickety bus. After arriving, we were met by a farm that almost resembled a theme park with various fenced enclosures where sheep, goats, cows, and other animals roamed free.

I'd heard once that when animals sense that a human is distressed, they'll go up to them and try to cheer them up. Aso-senpai, seeing a sheep after wandering around, staggered over to it and began petting it.

"Heh heh... You're so soft. Not like me, who's all broken and jagged."

Uh, isn't this supposed to help you feel better? She was smiling, but it was in a creepy way. She didn't stop at petting the sheep. Next, she found a Holstein cow and crouched next to it.

"Heh heh... You got big tits... Maybe if I'd been more like you, things would've worked out."

Then she found cute bunnies and she stared at them through thin eyes. "Heh heh... Maybe if I'd been cute like you guys..."

I couldn't watch this anymore. There was no way that the combination of a high school girl and animals should've been this painful. Aso-senpai creepily laughed while petting the round Angora Rabbits. "Oh... So soft. So warm... I wanna have a pet... Maybe I'll ask my mom if I can have a cat or something."

"No!" Akatsuki-san, President Kurenai, and I screamed out in unison.

I've heard of this! Once someone gets a pet, they'll never get married! She didn't seem to have heard us and just continued to creepily laugh while petting the rabbits. *She's really hurting...*

"Aisa..." President Kurenai put her hand on Aso-senpai's shoulder like a manager telling someone they're gonna be fired. "We talked amongst ourselves and came up with an idea. Want to hear it?"

"Huh? What?"

"The plan right now is to go back to the station, have lunch, and then take a cable car back down the mountain and go right back to Kyoto. But I'm thinking of adding one thing into the mix."

It would've hurt Aso-senpai more if we interfered with her. The best we could do was give her time.

"I was looking around, but there's a garden terrace not too far from here with a small tower. There's an observation deck where you can look at the scenery from, but it's not very large and can't fit that many people on it."

"Uh... So?"

"Go there with Hoshibe-senpai."

"Huh?!" she practically squeaked. Her eyes turned to dots.

"Leave convincing Hoshibe-senpai to me. The important thing is for you to go to the tower and then talk to him."

"What do you mean? I already asked him out, and I got my answer!" She yelled so loudly that the rabbits ran away. "I can't even look at him right now. How am I supposed to *talk* to him? There's nothing I want to say!"

"You kept asking 'why' yesterday, didn't you?" Asuhain-san interjected. "Don't you want to know why Hoshibe-senpai doesn't think he can be in a

relationship with you?”

“W-Well...”

Even if she couldn’t date him, knowing what’s on his mind would at least help her come to terms with things.

“Don’t be scared, Aso Aisa. Not now,” President Kurenai said, grabbing Aso-senpai strongly by the shoulders. “If he was going to hate you over something as trivial as this, then he would’ve hated you a while ago. Am I wrong?”

“No, but...”

“The guy you fell in love with isn’t the type of scumbag who wouldn’t at least tell the girl he rejected why. Am I wrong?”

“No, but...”

“Well, even if we’re both wrong about that,” President Kurenai said, laughing as usual, “we’ll be there to pick up the pieces. Ran-kun will let you fondle her as much as you like.”

“What?! President Kurenai?!” Asuhain-san yelped.

We all laughed. *She’s right. A broken heart doesn’t mean death. I know that there are some people who can smile even after having their heart broken.*

Aso-senpai groaned a little, tears beginning to fill her eyes. “I-Is it really okay? Can I really keep fighting?”

“Don’t be stupid. Don’t you remember?” President Kurenai lightly poked Aso-senpai in the cheek. “There’s nobody who would willingly stay with your annoying antics.”

That’s why she shouldn’t have cared so much. She shouldn’t have been scared. She already had the courage to press on inside her.

Something Precious

Kogure Kawanami

“Phew...”

Despite the air being so clean and pure up here, it was hard for me to breathe. Irido flashed me a glance but kept walking without a word.

“Come on, Irido, say something!”

“Like what?”

“You’ve noticed, haven’t you? You can tell how much of a funk I’m in, right? Aren’t you worried about me at all as my friend?!”

“Nope. Not really.”

“Have a heart!”

Sheesh, it’s really hard to be his friend sometimes. How can he act like this towards me, but be so overprotective of Higashira? Then again, even if he’d asked what was going on with me, I wouldn’t have really given him an answer. At best, I would’ve answered with “nothing.” If someone was acting like something was bothering them and reacted like that, I’d get pissed. It’s like, act normal if you don’t want somebody to ask you if you’re okay.

At any rate, the problem I had wasn’t something I could ask for advice on. How was I supposed to get someone to sympathize with me when my problem was hating myself for seeing my childhood friend as a girl? Plus, recounting what had happened would just make it sound like I was bragging about my own romantic success. With that said, if someone were to try and give me fake sympathy, I’d be pissed.

Irido probably had probably been able to sense that and decided not to say anything. Or at least, that’s what I wanted to believe. *But also, when was the last time I ever asked somebody for advice?* Though I’d given advice to others, I’d never received it. Was that because I didn’t let anyone in? Was it because even though I acted friendly, I drew a line between me and other people?

Akatsuki might’ve been the same in that regard. I had never seen her seek advice from anyone. As proof, no one else knew about my condition. If anything, we were more like siblings than childhood friends. Thinking about it like that, the conflicted feelings inside of me were completely justified. Of course I felt disgusted by the fact that I felt horny for my sister.

The only caveat was that there was a time where we weren’t siblings—a time

where it was normal for her to turn me on. Even if I wanted to forget this happened, there was a time when I'd even brutally rejected her.

"Senpai, you got a second?" the student council president called out to Hoshibe-san.

Why is she on her own? Shouldn't she be with the girls? I thought it was strange, but then I found out why she was here from the next thing she said. "I'm here with a message from Aisa." *Oh, she hasn't given up?* "She says she'll be waiting at the Lookout Tower, and you should definitely go there."

"*Definitely*"? How much determination did she have to add that one word to her request? It might've been a little impudent of me to guess the inner workings of a woman's heart, but I was sure that she hadn't said that word lightly. She hadn't been wishy-washy with her phrasing so that she had a fallback. It was easy to make it seem that it wasn't that big of a deal to her. That'd be the easiest way to go about things.

Finish what's in front of you right now and then take a break to cool off, and then put off the almost wall-like task, and slip past it later. It should've been possible. They could've kept talking to each other tomorrow, the day after, and so on while pretending nothing had happened. At the very least, on the surface, you could return to the life you had before you asked them out. But that cheap temptation didn't exist in Aso-senpai's world. She'd kicked that option to the curb. Instead, she'd chosen to keep fighting and tackle the wall in front of her. She could do that, whereas, last night, I just ran away.

Romance isn't meant to be experienced. All you get out of romance is pain and annoyance. It's full of uncertainty, confusion, and self-hatred, and in the end, nothing turns out right. That's why watching romance is so, *so* much more fun. That's exactly why I found people who actually fought to experience romance were precious.

"Oh..." Hoshibe-san looked away. "Sorry, but...can you tell her no for me? There's nothin' left for me to say," he said, trying to brush past this.

No. No, that's not right. I know this is wrong. It can't be right. It has to be wrong. You're not supposed to say that.

"President Kurenai..." It was at this moment that I stopped being on the

sidelines as a ROM expert. “Don’t worry. I will definitely get Hoshibe-san there.” Before I knew it, I was behind Hoshibe-san, grabbing him by the arm.

“Wait, Kawanami. What’re you sayin’?”

“Sorry, but I’m the type of person who can’t accept anything other than a happy ending.”

“Huh?”

“Hoshibe-san, when someone’s being serious with you, you should be serious with them too.”

Like I’m one to talk. Boldly, brazenly, shamelessly, calmly. Why must I make other people do the things I can’t? How many boomerangs do I have to throw until I’m satisfied? I...

“Hoshibe-san, didn’t you say that you really admired the courage of that girl who asked you out in middle school?”

“Well...”

“What’s more admirable in your mind: someone who has no relationship with you asking you out or someone who has to consider whether they’re willing to lose their current relationship with you by asking you out? Who has more courage?”

She *had to have a lot of courage.* She’d *risked ten years of being childhood friends in order to try and become a couple.*

“If you really admire that courage, you should listen to her as many times as necessary.” *Don’t be scared. Don’t run. Don’t stay complacent.* “Show us how it’s done, Senpai!” Turning your back on a girl being serious with you is honestly the most uncool thing out there.

President Kurenai, who’d been silently listening, chuckled and looked up at Hoshibe-san. “You should set an an example for your underclassmen, President Hoshibe.”

“I’m not the president anymore...” he said in a low voice. “Argh. Dammit. Fine! I’ll go. Happy?! I’m not such a wuss that I’ll run away now after you said all that. Shit. Why are my underclassmen such busybodies?!”

“Don’t you think they learned it from watching their upperclassmen?” President Kurenai giggled.

It’s true. Hoshibe-san is just as much of a busybody. Then he deeply exhaled and looked at our group.

“Well, there you guys have it. I’ll be back later. Haba, as the oldest, make sure you watch over the first years.”

“Huh? Wait, President Hoshibe—”

“Ugh. I’m not the president anymore. Remember that,” he said, not allowing for any responses as he walked off towards the bus station with his long legs.

For some reason his back seemed slightly bigger than it usually did.

“Aren’t you a ROM expert?” Irido asked, unimpressed.

I shrugged. “Something came over me.”

Romance isn’t meant to be experienced. But once you do...there’s no helping it.

Seriousness

Tohdo Hoshibe

My shoulder throbbed in pain. Usually I didn't need to pay too much attention to it. After all, it was my left shoulder, not my dominant one. I could live my life without any real complications. If anything, getting shots bothered me more than the pain I felt in my shoulder.

Even so, it'd throb with pain sometimes, and when it did, my attempted layup always flashed through my mind. I could see myself reaching out to the hoop, with it getting farther and farther away. I envisioned my upperclassmen who were forced out of the tournament. I was like one of Pavlov's dogs—every time I felt the pain, an extremely deep sense of helplessness was sure to follow. It was as if I was being reminded that no matter what I'd done, the outcome wouldn't have changed.

Everyone has limits. If someone believes they could do something beyond their means and pushes themselves too far, they'll end up in a world of hurt, unless they're some sort of prodigy like Kurenai.

That's why it's important to always leave yourself some leeway. No matter what happens, you have to make some space for yourself so that you can back out if things get dangerous. You need to give yourself leeway, maintain it, and keep as much of it for yourself as possible. I mean, taking things seriously will just blow up in your face.

"Hey..." I hesitantly called out.

She was waiting at the end of the narrow spiral staircase. Unlike yesterday, she was wearing a thin, long skirt that fluttered in the wind—her usual frilly, childish style. That being said, the usual cringey aspect was nowhere to be seen. Maybe it was because she didn't have any accessories on, but I got the feeling that she wasn't dressing in a way that had the objective of attracting attention.

Aso turned around, gently holding her hair down so it didn't get messed up by the wind. Behind her, I could see Kobe. It was so small it looked like a grain of sand. I was sure that after sunset, it would look like a beautiful sea of lights, just

like the scenery we'd seen last night on the ferris wheel.

It was just the two of us. No one else was around, perhaps because it was lunchtime. If we weren't alone, I was certain Aso would've waited until we were. Her expression told me just how determined she was.

"You really came, Senpai."

"Yeah, well, I was practically threatened by Kurenai and one other person."

Kawanami's words replayed in my head. I hadn't been able to respond to him. It was as if I'd accepted how lame I was. W*hat's wrong with being lame, though?* But maybe I was just pretending like it didn't bother me—putting on airs, as I usually did.

"Let me just say this first," I started, my heavy feelings pushing me to talk. "My answer won't change no matter how many times you ask me out."

Aso weakly smiled at me. "That's okay. I don't think you're the type of person who changes his mind so easily. I mean, now that I think about it, you've practically been rejecting me this entire time, so this isn't all that different."

"Up until now, you've only jokingly asked me out."

"That's true... I guess I was serious this time." *Serious, huh?* "Senpai, you've stuck by me no matter how annoying I've been."

"If I hadn't, you'd find an even more annoying way to stick around me."

"So then, I want you to answer this: why won't you date me? Do you really hate the idea of being my...boyfriend that much?"

I exhaled. Even though we were so high up above Kobe, the blue autumn sky was still so far away.

"I don't...*hate* the idea..." I couldn't come up with excuses anymore. "I don't hate how annoying you are. I don't get exhausted from bein' around you either. That's how it feels when I hang with you. Of course...there are fun times too."

"But still...your answer's no?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it is." As soon as I said these words, I felt a bitter taste in my mouth. "It's not you. Honestly...there's probably something wrong with me.

Even if someone I got along with even more than you asked me out, I bet I'd reject them too. I...can't date anyone. I'm not trying to say that you don't match up to me or somethin' like that. I'm sayin' that I'm incapable of being in a relationship." *I can't date you because I'm not capable of it. I'm incapable of being a boyfriend.* "A relationship is way beyond me. It's more than I can handle. Even if we did go out, I'd never be the kinda boyfriend you want." *Things''ll end up just like it did with that girl in middle school. We'd date and then you'd realize that I'm not the guy you thought I was.* "That's why I can't date anyone—especially you. The last thing I wanna do is hurt you. So that's why before I do, I figured that I should say all this."

I was a little surprised by what'd come out of my mouth. "*Especially you*"? This underclassman of mine was more important to me than I thought. I couldn't believe I was only realizing this now. But it didn't change anything. No matter who asked me out, I was incapable of dating them.

Suddenly I heard her mumble something under her breath.

"Hm?" *What did she say?* I tilted my ear towards her to catch what she'd said as it was blown away by the mountain wind.

"Are you freaking kidding me?!"

She'd screamed this so loudly, her words echoed in the mountains. I wouldn't have been surprised if she caused a landslide. Startled, I recoiled, nearly falling off the tower. As I clutched my ringing ears, still a little shook, my underclassman stood there, shoulders heaving, panting angrily.

"Wh-What'd you do that for?! That's dangerous!"

"I don't give a crap! Maybe you *should* just fall off since you're such a wuss, Senpai!" she yelled, getting so close that she could poke me with her nails. "I was wondering what kinda reason you had, but it's because you're *'incapable'* of being in a relationship?!" She glared at me. "Did you say that you'll never be the kind of boyfriend I want?! Do you have crap for brains? How the hell did you misunderstand it that badly, you virgin?!"

"Huh?!"

"I don't want *you* to *become* my boyfriend! I want my boyfriend to be *you*!"

“Uh...huh?” *What’s the difference?*

I didn’t even have the time to stay confused, though, because she immediately let out an exasperated sigh.

“Listen, Senpai, even if we dated, I wouldn’t want you to act any differently than you have been. We’ll talk, play games, and sometimes I’ll make you food. It’ll be exactly the same as it has been.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess...”

“I like who you are *normally*! I like how even when I’m all in your face, you still stick around and genuinely talk with me. I like that ‘oh crap’ face you make when we’re playing games together. I like how you’re blunt about my cooking, but still eat all of it anyway. I like all of that about you!”

“O-Oh... How can you say all of that without being embarrassed?”

“All my cards are on the table! That’s my new strategy, now that things have come to this! Like hell am I gonna play the femme fatale right now!” *Oh, so it really is just an act of yours.* “Do you understand now?! I’m hopelessly in love with *you*, not the *idea* of you being my boyfriend! I want *you* as my boyfriend! I want *you* right by my side—a special seat that’s closer to me than anyone!”

She doesn’t want a boyfriend, she wants...me. “That makes me happy, but...”

“Is that it?”

“Do you need more?”

“Yeah. I want to hear what you really think. I want to hear your serious thoughts.” *My serious...thoughts, huh?* “Senpai,” Aso put her hand against her chest and looked into my eyes. “How much do you like me?”

I fixed my gaze onto hers. That’s all I could do. It was as though my eyes had been captured by hers, now locked into place.

“You sure I *like* you?”

“You did just say that you don’t hate me.”

“There are more ways to feel than liking and hating someone, y’know.”

“Well, it’s not like you feel indifferent, right?”

“I guess not...”

“At the very least, there have to be a few things you like about me. Can you tell me what those are? List them out like I just did.”

I couldn’t run away. I was surrounded by mountains. The only route of escape was the sky, but I couldn’t fly.

“Maybe...like how you’re surprisingly good at taking care of your underclassmen?”

“What else?”

“Uh...you make good food.”

“What else?”

“Y-You got a cute face.”

“What else?!”

“Huh? Uh...you can be a pretty hard worker when you put your mind to it.”

After squeezing this out of me, Aso grinned. “That’s *four* things. That’s one more than I said, Senpai.”

“You’re the one who forced me to keep going!”

“Either way, I guess there *are* parts of me that you like, aren’t there?” *Yeah...true. None of these ever occurred to me before.* “I bet there are about the same number of things you hate about me, though. But all I have to do is fix them as we go. After all, I’m serious about you, and I’m more than ready to change myself to become your ideal girlfriend.”

“So, what? If I said I liked gyarus, you’d become a gyaru?”

“With ease.”

“What if I’m possessive?”

“I’ll delete all the contacts in my phone except for you.”

“What if I like guys?”

“I’ll go through surgery and become a guy.”

You’re joking...right? But the fact that I couldn’t really count her out on doing

that was just a testament to the force of nature that Aso was.

Aso slightly tilted her head. “Still no?”

I had to think. I had to think about things I’d never thought about before. I had to go past who I was as a person—I had to go deeper.

“Yeah.” Ultimately, I still came to the same conclusion. “No matter how you match yourself to fit what I want, I won’t know what to do. Even if you don’t want anything from me, I’m incapable of wanting anything from you.”

What was I supposed to want? Her body? Her approval? Nothing felt right. If I couldn’t think of anything, then what made it different from our current relationship?

“What *do* you want, Senpai?”

Good question. “No clue. I haven’t known for a long time...”

“Oh, really? I think I do, though.” Aso walked around me and lined up beside me, leisurely looking out at the mountain peak. “I played the heroine in my elementary school’s play and ended up learning how great it was to have everyone’s eyes on me. After that, I wanted someone to look at me. That’s how I’ve lived my life this entire time.”

“If it’s that ingrained inside you, couldn’t you try becoming an actress or something?”

“Yeah, seriously. I had the same thought back then. But...I could never get serious about becoming one.” She softly giggled, as if laughing at herself. “It’s fun having people watch you, but not to the point that I want to devote my entire life to it. It’s something I want—but not something I have enough passion or talent for. Though, it is a little sad that I wrote myself off like that when I was that young. It’s a kid’s job to dream.” Aso looked up at the clear blue sky. “I’ve always wanted something I could get serious about—something that didn’t involve my desire to have someone looking at me.”

Suddenly, bright memories flashed through my head where I’d just single-mindedly chase the ball and aim for the hoop.

“Senpai, I’ve said this a lot of times already: I’ve found what I’ve been looking

for.” *Aso’s told me a lot of times how serious she is.* “Shouldn’t you get serious too?”

The autumn sky was blue. So, so blue. There wasn’t a single cloud. *You’re amazing, Aso. You haven’t broken or given up at all. You haven’t made any excuses or tried to hide behind something. You brought me out this far, being as straightforward as a layup and as powerful as a dunk. You’re amazing. Seriously. You’re amazing. How am* I *your upperclassman?*

I slowly lifted my left hand and stretched it out before raising it. I felt a throbbing pain, but my arm’s movement wasn’t dulled at all. I’d known for a while that the pain wasn’t real. It came from my memories. It couldn’t hold me back.

I stretched out my hand as far as I could to the sky—above the mountain and above the tower. The sky felt so close, but it was so out of reach. *Oh, right. Compared to the sky, the basketball hoop is a lot closer.*

“Ha ha...” The phantom pain disappeared. *It’s so close, but so far...*

“Senpai?” Aso said, rife with curiosity.

I closed my hand as if to catch her words. “I can’t keep acting this pathetic.” I brought my fist down to my chest and opened it. Of course, there was nothing there, but I felt like there was something I could grab almost immediately after.

“Aso...thanks.”

“Huh?”

“Thanks to you, my eyes are open.” I knew exactly what I wanted to grab. I put my hands on her shoulders and pulled her into my arms.

“H-Huh?!”

“You told me I should get serious too, right?” As I felt the warmth from her slender, soft body, I whispered into her ear. “Listen close, okay? Otherwise the wind might drown me out. I’m...pretty into you.”

“Wh-What?!”

Looking at her like this, I could easily tell that I didn’t feel that way because she’d saved me. I’d thought I needed to watch over her to make sure she didn’t

trip over her own two feet, but she was actually quite strong. I really admired that about her, but I was a lazy slacker who never looked at anyone else besides myself. But then, before I knew it, I was only looking at her.

That's why I knew my answer from the start. "I won't look at anyone else but you for the rest of my life."

But honestly, "for the rest of my life" is kinda heavy. There's no wiggle room. There's no break. There's no escape. It didn't matter, though. I wanted to say that to her. I was so enthralled by her that I couldn't help but be straightforward.

"H-Huh?" Aso's eyes widened to the size of dinner plates. Her mouth quivered as she looked up at me. "D-Did you just—"

"What? Be happy. You stole victory from the jaws of defeat." I was serious now, so there was no need to be roundabout with my words and hide how I really felt. *I'll say this once more for you.* "I'll be your boyfriend. So...be my girlfriend."

Aso started trembling. "Hyaaaaaah!" Her cheer echoed and then faded into the mountains.

Your Actions Reveal Your True Feelings

Yume Irido

Out of the blue I heard a mysterious scream from the top of the tower. Then a few minutes later, Aso-senpai and Hoshibe-senpai came down. For some reason, she was using his shoulder as a crutch, her legs unsteady.

"A-Are you okay, Senpai?" I called out, worried that she might've hurt herself.

Aso-senpai clung harder to his shoulder. "M-My legs gave out..."

"Huh? Why?"

"Apparently, when humans are confronted with something extremely surprising, they get like this."

Hoshibe-senpai snickered. His expression was much softer than before.

Actually, it seemed like he was looking at Aso-senpai much more endearingly than usual too. *Wait. Are they possibly?!*

“Aisa... Did you...?” President Kurenai nervously started.

A wide smile spread across Aso-senpai’s face. “Ehe heh heh heh!”

“Cut the gross laugh and give it to me straight!”

“Aw, fine. I can tell you’re just *dying* to hear what happened. Okay, okay, calm down. I get it.” Aso-senpai finally stood on her own two feet. Then, she squeezed Hoshibe-senpai’s hand and lifted it high in the air as if she was a referee. “Allow me to introduce you. This is Tohdo Hoshibe-senpai, Aso Aisa’s boyfriend!”

“What kinda introduction is that?” Hoshibe-senpai sounded annoyed, but...he didn’t deny it.

She’d pulled off a complete reversal. One could say that this had been her last chance. She’d shot her shot in our last hour here and came back victorious. But also, there was something else that both me and President Kurenai were surprised by.

“President Hoshibe...”

“Is your shoulder...okay?”

Despite Aso-senpai lifting Hoshibe-senpai’s left arm above his head, he didn’t seem bothered by it at all. *Huh? Was it the other shoulder?*

“Oh, right.” Hoshibe-senpai said, looking at his shoulder. “Well yeah, you know, this and that happened. So yeah, this is kinda how it is.”

“Huh? What’s that about your shoulder, Senpai?” Aso-senpai asked, curious.

President Kurenai and I were both stunned by her response. “Wait. Aisa, you don’t know about his shoulder?”

“Huh? What about it? I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Hoshibe-senpai’s shoulder’s injured and he can’t raise it above his head!”

“Huh?!” Aso-senpai’s eyes widened and she frantically let go of his hand. “Wait, wait. You’re kidding right?! Really?! So it hurts? But back then...”

Hoshibe-senpai looked right into Aso-senpai's eyes and lightly touched his shoulder. "You've already helped it heal."

"Huh? What?"

Then, in her confusion, Hoshibe-senpai took Aso-senpai's hand back in his and began walking with her. "Let's get lunch. I'm starvin'."

"Oh, now that you mention it. Me too..."

"'Me'?" Hoshibe-senpai said, surprised. "Hey, Ms. Femme Fatale, what happened to your little act of using 'Aisa' when speaking?"

"D-Don't tease me like that! I don't have to say my name anymore because...you remember it, right?"

"That's true, *Aisa*."

Aso-senpai squealed. "P-Please don't use my first name out of the blue like that!"

They were now a couple and brazenly flirting with each other. We looked back at them as they did. *Aso-senpai was the only one who didn't know about his shoulder? Does that mean...?*

"I guess he didn't want to show any weakness around the girl he liked," President Kurenai muttered.

Hearing her say that made me smile. *Aso-senpai and Hoshibe-senpai really are a perfect match.*

Courage

Kogure Kawanami

You did it. You really showed me how it's done, Senpai. Now, as the underclassman who egged you on, it's my turn to follow your example.

"Hey," Akatsuki said, casually waving her hand at me, sitting on the steps. "Whatcha doin' here all by yourself?" she asked, skipping up the short stairs, curved like an amphitheater's.

Seriously, I'm always the one running away. Last night in the hot spring, when

I broke up with her in my hospital room, even when I'd collapsed from the ulcer—it was all because I'd kept everything bottled up inside.

"I'm just watching over the conclusion of things. Look, you can see the top of the tower from here, right?" Then, I turned around to the white brick tower where Hoshibe-senpai and Aso-senpai had just been. From here, I'd been able to get a slight peek of what had transpired.

"Wow, you're not kidding," she said, slightly standing on her tippy toes while looking at the tower. "How do you even find places like this? You're basically a stalker."

"That hurts, coming from you of all people. Anyway, I was just wandering around and happened to stumble upon this spot."

I hadn't heard the exact words exchanged by Aso-senpai and Hoshibe-senpai, but every now and then, I heard her scream out. From that, I got a rough idea of how things had gone. It'd been more than enough. They'd had a serious talk and hashed things out. *Heh, a serious talk... Sheesh.* After seeing that, I couldn't help but think about having one myself.

Was I really okay with how things were? Was I okay living the rest of my life in fear and terror—turning a blind eye to my love allergy and to the scars of the past? Akatsuki had taken the initiative and resolved to face our past. Was it okay for me to brush things off and make a safe space I could run away to?

Don't think about anything extra. What's wrong with running away? What's wrong with brushing things off? Only kids think that's not okay. But look at me now. I hadn't changed a bit since I failed to speak up for myself and tell Akatsuki how much pain she was causing me, and ended up in the hospital.

If she was trying to move forward, then I had to be right there with her. After all, this was a pain that we both shared. It wasn't her cross to bear alone.

"Hey, lemme ask you somethin' again," I said. A-chan looked straight at me. There was no difference between our heights with her standing on the step below me, and me sitting one above her. "Why are you...trying to cure me?"

It was a serious question that I asked in a serious voice. I hadn't been sure how difficult it would be to ask such a question. If I knew, I was sure that I

wouldn't be able to go back to how things were. Once I started, I wouldn't be able to stop.

I decided to take a step into A-chan's intentions, her heart, her territory. There was no turning back. I couldn't play the fool anymore. I'd chosen the option where we were now on the same page. More than anything, my allergy wasn't something I could control. The wounds on my heart were screaming that they were frightened.

A-chan might make me do something again. She might make me her pet again. I might end up hating her again. I needed serious determination to overcome the fear, terror, anxiety, and rejection inside me. I most likely needed serious determination to overcome all that and press on anyway. That determination was most likely called courage.

"Mm..." A-chan began playing with her ponytail, looking away as if conflicted, possibly affected by the courage I'd squeezed out. "Well, I already told you that if I leave you like this, you're gonna make a lotta girls cry, didn't I?"

"Yeah, and I told you that it's *my* responsibility to ensure that doesn't happen, didn't I?"

"Yeah...I guess there's one more thing—just one more." A-chan observed me as my heart tightened with anxiety. "Actually wait, do you have a barf bag on you?"

"Huh? No...I don't get motion sickness or anything."

"Got it. Well, I brought one just in case." A-chan rummaged around in her bag and brought out a barf bag. "Here. Open it and hold it tight. You know how to use it, right?"

I couldn't even get a word in before she'd made me open the bag and hold it under my face. *What's going on? We're not in a car or anything...*

"So, the other thing is..." A-chan's face turned so red that it could've melted ice. "I want one more chance to boldly say that I like you, Ko-kun."

Boldly. One more time? "Urp." I felt a strong wave of nausea from the bottom of my stomach.

I inadvertently arched my back and shoved my face into the bag. Hives erupted across my body. It felt like a fire had been lit across my body. My brain had abandoned logical thought and resorted to spread all sorts of unpleasant feelings across my body. But...even so...

“Rrgh... Agh!” I raised my head from the bag, holding back my vomit. I gritted my teeth, stuffing the nausea back down. I cleared my head, trying to fight off the unpleasant feeling across my body.

A-chan looked at me, surprised. “Did you...swallow it?”

“We shoulda...done this before lunch. Heh heh...”

The back of my throat felt a little acidic, but that was it. I’d beaten out my stupid allergy. *Heh, so I* can *do it.*

“Oh yeah, it’s really hitting me now.” I thrust the bag back at Akatsuki and forced a smile. “It’s pretty hard to deal with this condition of mine as-is. You keep getting the leg up on me.”

“That’s it? You know I technically just confessed to you, right?”

“Old news. If being an extremely clingy girl with lingering feelings was a sport, you’d take home gold.”

Akatsuki frowned, seemingly dissatisfied. “What, you *don’t* have lingering feelings? Can you really say that after getting all hot and bothered seeing me in the bath last night?”

“Yeah, I’ll admit it. Your body is surprisingly sexy!”

“I...can’t believe it...”

Romance wasn’t always pure and innocent. It often was intertwined with desires and instincts. In order to overcome this condition of mine, I had to be able to at least control those instincts. I couldn’t let myself drown in desire or lose to my instincts. I needed to take in the good with the bad and face this head on—courageously.

“I’m sorry about yesterday. I shouldn’t have run off. Next time you do that, I’ll look at every nook and cranny of yours, don’t worry.”

“Don’t go on the offensive, you loser! Don’t forget that *I’m* the one with the

upper hand here!”

“Yeah, I’m apologizing! Gimme a break! I can’t hold on much longer.”

I’m gonna barf. I’m definitely *gonna barf. It’s gonna spew everywhere.*

“Hmm.” Akatsuki lightly grinned. Just as I was starting to get a bad feeling, Akatsuki went up one more step and looked down at me like a king. “Don’t worry, I’m not gonna be careless and make you feel worse. Relax, okay?”

“Th-Thanks... Then why are you getting closer to me?”

“By the way,” Akatsuki said, bending over to look right in my eyes. The collar of her shirt hung down, allowing me to catch a glimpse of her modest cleavage. “Judging from the results of this experiment, it seems that you’re able to handle having feelings for me.” Akatsuki shot me a devilish grin. “Am I right about that?”

Rrgh, why’s she gotta be so annoying? I could feel my heart beating out of my chest, but I didn’t feel the usual nausea or hives.



A Nice Dream

Joji Haba

Contrary to my prediction, it seemed that we were going back home without any drama. After going down the mountain in the cable car, we were now heading to a nearby bus station. Aso-senpai, who'd accomplished the underdog victory in asking Hoshibe-senpai out, was now clinging to him more than a cat would cling to you when it was in a good mood.

Hoshibe-senpai usually would brush her off, but he was now simply teasing her for her femme fatale act. Perhaps not being used to being on the receiving end, Aso-san seemed unsure what to do.

Kawanami-kun and Minami-san were also now talking to each other like nothing had happened despite having avoided each other not too long ago. Though they weren't as blatant with their flirting as Aso-san and Hoshibe-senpai, the way they were talking to each other and rubbing against one another was obviously much less reserved than they'd been before.

It seemed that there were no problems between Irido-san, Higashira-san, and Mizuto Irido either. As Higashira-san and Mizuto Irido chatted between each other, Irido-san was trying to put on a brave face and join their conversation. I wasn't sure what happened, but although she still seemed a little hesitant, Irido-san had brushed off whatever had been hanging over her.

I watched all of them from my spot at the very back of the group. Over the past three days, they'd each had their own drama. I hadn't involved myself in any of it, though. I didn't think I had any need to. I was fine simply watching them from the background.

I think that's my role. That's the job that was bestowed upon me by a higher power. Being in the background wasn't frightening, nor was it wasn't terrifying. I truly felt that it was comfortable.

"Joe." Despite that, the person who the spotlight shone on the most—the main character—called out to me in the background. "Thoughts on the trip?"

“Not bad. It more or less ended peacefully.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Aisa and President Hoshibe finally got together too.”

Kurenai-san smiled with satisfaction as she lined up next to me. After all, she’d been the one to support Aso-san the most.

“There’s finally a couple in my student council. It’s a strange feeling. Having someone with a boyfriend so close to me is both great, but also enviable.”

“Wait. *You’re* envious?”

“Of course.” Kurenai-san looked up at me and began giggling cryptically. “I’d *love* to have a cute boyfriend in the very near future.”

“Are you imitating Aso-san? That femme fatale act doesn’t suit you, you know?”

“Are you not envious at all?”

“I...haven’t thought about wanting a girlfriend at all.”

If someone chose me, it’d mean that I wouldn’t be a background character anymore. I wasn’t like Aso-san—if anything, I was the exact opposite. I didn’t want anyone looking at me. I wanted to stay as the person who watched, not one that was watched. I was okay staying as an observer, a rubbernecker, someone who lacked individuality.

“I want to stay in the background,” I continued.

It was there that I could truly be useful to others. *Push all the annoying things onto me. Leave all the trifling miscellaneous tasks to me.* That way, everyone could focus on the things that only they could do. They should just use me like a stagehand who disappears into the shadows on the stage. That’s the only value I had to everyone.

“I see.” She smiled, saying those two words, understanding everything I was trying to say. *She’s perceptive as usual.* “Then, how about this...?” Suddenly, something soft touched my cheek.

“Huh?”

As soon as I turned around, Kurenai-san retracted. Then she put her finger in

front of her pink lips.

“Shh,” she whispered, grinning. “If you refuse to leave the background, then I’ll just have to come back here with you.”

I stood there, stunned, as she left me with those words before moving back to the front of the stage where everyone was. I continued lightly touching my cheek where the sensation she’d left still lingered, continuing to look at her back from the background.

That’s... That’s not... You’re a person who shines more than anyone, so why? You’re the person I want to watch the most, so why? I fell silent. *Urgh, dammit. For a split second, that made me happy.* I began sinking into a creepy, improper fantasy where the actress, who had the spotlight on her, smiled at the stagehand in the dark.

Seriously. Stop. You can become anyone you want to. Don’t become a nobody just for my sake. Don’t show me such a nice dream.

Life Goal

Mizuto Irido

On the train ride home, Isana’s eyes were glued to her tablet. I wasn’t sure if the stylus was too annoying for her to use or not, but she was using her finger to select different paint tools and draw. I tried not to look at what she was working on since it was kinda rude, but my curiosity got the better of me, and I watched for the moment her hands stopped moving to talk to her.

“What’re you drawing?”

“Just a rough sketch.”

Isana rotated the tablet and tilted her head before using her fingers to edit something.

“Getting the hang of drawing backgrounds?”

“Oh, I’m not working on a background.”

“You’re not?”

Didn't I bring you on this trip because you said you wanted to get better at drawing backgrounds?

"I took a fair amount of pictures, so I can practice backgrounds as much as I want whenever I feel so inclined to. However, right now, there's something else I want to draw..."

"What is it?"

"Would you like to see? I'm more or less done with it."

"If you're really okay, then yeah. I'm interested."

She offered the tablet to me. I wondered what could've been inspiring her so much to draw that she didn't want to work on backgrounds. As soon as I lay eyes on her drawing, I immediately regretted not being more excited to see it. A chill ran up my spine.

I wasn't an expert on art, especially sketches. I had no clue what made them good or bad...or at least in most cases. It was clear as day that she'd gotten better. No, it wasn't that she'd gotten better, her style had changed. It was as if her entire approach to drawing had changed. This drawing had a soul.

This had nothing to do with spiritualism or a gut feeling. I was being realistic. Though this was just a rough sketch of some beautiful girl, she felt *alive*. It really felt like behind this thin screen, she existed. Comparing this to her past drawings made it clear what separated this one from the rest. It was the expression.

Up until now, she'd typically drawn stereotypical smiles for each of the beautiful girl characters she depicted. There'd been no soul to any of them. It'd been as if she'd simply put a smile on them because she thought it was cute. That'd been the entirety of the thought behind her decision. But the expression in this sketch was different.

The area around the girl's eyes seemed sunken and contorted with frustration. Her eyes welled with tears, and her fist was clenched—but she was still forcing a smile. The sketch was a side profile. Her clothes fluttered in the wind. The tips of her hair were messy from being blown around. Nothing about this picture had to be explained. It spoke to me. This was a scene where her

heart had been broken.

“Th-This...” I stammered.

“After watching Aso-senpai cry her heart out, this popped into my head! I began thinking about how nice this might be to draw as well! What do you think? Does it not tug at your heart strings?”

She hadn’t merely leveled up her skills. After reading a lot of light novels, I could confidently say that I’d rarely ever seen any illustrations with drawings as expressive as this. *All she needed was to watch someone have their heart broken to have this pop into her head? That’s all it took for her to realize where her talents lie?*

I couldn’t help but shiver, not just physically, but mentally as well. This shook me to my core. I’d experienced something similar in the past. It was when I first read the *Siberian Dancer Girl* in my great-grandfather’s study.

Through his words, it’d felt as if I’d physically experienced his life. What I was feeling now was the same as that—no, I felt even more moved. Somehow, Isana Higashira made me incredibly emotional.

Yeah, I can’t lie to myself anymore. I could feel that I wanted to know more about her life. I wanted to be closer to her than anyone and be the first person in the world to read the book titled *Isana Higashira*.

It felt like my future with all its vast possibilities had been narrowed down. Once someone is moved by another’s talent, they naturally want to help nurture it. I honestly felt like I wouldn’t mind devoting my entire life to doing that.

A Little Bit of Courage and a Lot of Desire

Yume Irido

“Well then, everyone, thanks for the awesome trip! See you all back at school!” Aso-senpai said, grinning from ear to ear as she waved at us while walking away with Hoshibe-senpai.

I’m seriously so happy for her. I wasn’t sure why I felt this way *now*, but my

chest felt tight as I watched her. She'd made up her mind, mustered up all her courage, and kept going even though she was turned down once. *So...what about me?* Could I do the same thing as Aso-senpai? Could I face my fears and tell him how I felt?

To be honest, I thought it might be okay if things didn't change. After all, we weren't *just* a guy and a girl. We lived together. We were stepsiblings. I couldn't be so reckless and confess to him. We weren't like our other normal classmates. Even if we got back together, we might break up again. And if we did, it wouldn't be pretty.

I couldn't stay ignorant. I couldn't be reckless either. I needed to be realistic. If we'd *just* been stepsiblings, then maybe we would've let our emotions control us. It was thanks to our middle school past that grounded me in reality, whether I wanted it to or not.

Couples break up sooner or later. The only people who don't need to think about what happens after they break up are those who started off as strangers.

I didn't have enough determination to do anything about these accelerated feelings of mine, so all I could do was ignore them. I didn't have to force myself to try and date him. If anything, our current relationship was best. In fact, it was completely possible that we could've kept going on as just siblings with nothing changed between us.

I knew that a thought like that had been somewhere in my head. Even so, I couldn't help but think about how the crush I'd been yearning for might bear fruit. How all these years of feelings would be rewarded. I couldn't lie to myself. I found myself thinking about how happy I'd be walking side by side with the person I loved just like Aso-senpai.

I was envious. I wanted to be like her too. Everything was definitely in place in order for me to do that. Aso-senpai had ended up teaching me that if I was serious, I'd get seriousness in return. As long as I was courageous, there was happiness to be gained.

I felt like a fire had been lit within me, which spread like wildfire across me. The fire's name was courage, and the wildfire's was desire. My small courage reached out towards my huge desires.

“We’re home!” I opened our front door and directed my voice towards the living room.

Since the light was on, I was sure that mom and Mineaki-ojisan were there. *I wonder if they were able to spend these three days like a proper married couple without us around.* Though Mizuto had come home at the same time, he hadn’t said anything, and instead went right upstairs. *You’ve been gone for three days, you know?* What a cold guy. I made a mental reminder to give him a stern talking to.

That being said, I’d make sure not to be too naggy about it. I wouldn’t want things to be awkward around us when I asked him out. *Oh, right. My mind’s made up. I’m asking him out.* I even gave myself a time limit—I had until the end of the year.

Until then, I’d use every method at my disposal to make him fall in love with me. If by doing that he ended up asking me out instead, that’d be perfect. Once next year started, we’d return to being in a relationship.

If we didn’t, then I’d take a page out of Higashira-san’s book and go back to being plain old stepsiblings. Of course, I didn’t want to imagine that future, but I needed a plan just in case it did come about. In this last one month and change of the year, I needed to figure out how I was going to ask him out, and—

“Welcome back, Yume.” Mom came out of the living room to greet me.

But for some reason, she seemed a little down or...conflicted?

“What’s wrong, mom? Did...Good Couple’s Day not work out?”

“No, it was great. Thanks, Yume. I really appreciate your consideration towards us. It’s just that...I got a call today.”

“A call?”

“I wasn’t sure if I should tell you or not, but...after confiding with Mine-kun, he told me I should. He’s such a softie,” she lightly smiled.

I was slightly distracted by how lovey-dovey she was getting but not enough to deviate from the call that she’d brought up. What kind of call could she have

gotten that would have anything to do with me?

“So,” mom reluctantly started, “your dad wants to meet you...and Mizuto-kun.”

Afterword

This'll be my eighth time writing an afterword, and now that it's gotten to this point, I'm honestly out of ideas. What should I write about now? I usually add commentary about the contents of the book, but there's not all that much to break down this time around.

The only thought I had in my head while I was writing this was about how I wanted to put an illustration in the front of the book with the girls just waking up.

You know, in the first place, I'm the type of author who thinks afterwords are unnecessary. I think using how many pages people use to write about what's essentially tantamount to pointless graffiti is a waste of space. Honestly, the only published series I have that has an afterword is *StepExes*.

On a whim, I wrote one for Volume 1, and I was forced to continue doing them for seven more volumes. It's such a pain. Can't I just write them on Twitter or something?

Looking back, even back when I was a student I was like this—just continuing things out of force of habit for sixteen years. Honestly, I think I got bored of school around middle school. I pretty much only went to high school in order to gather materials for my books. Of course, college too.

Thinking about it that way, maybe I was fortunate since I found what I wanted to get serious about pretty early in life. The price I paid in return is that I don't remember the names or faces of any of my classmates. But I read and wrote so many books that it didn't matter. In my head, there was no other choice. I guess I wasn't nearly as anxious or frightened as Aisa or Yume.

That being said, I think I've lived quite a unique life. Though I can't say everyone should just jump on their passions without any fear at all—I can't be irresponsible like that—I can say that I think it's pretty fun to get serious about something, whether that be novels, manga, games, or romance.

It would seem that the main characters of *StepExes* have begun to figure out

what they want to be serious about, and that makes me so happy as the author! But, y'know, just because you're serious about romance, that doesn't mean you'll be successful in it.

In Volume 9, we'll be picking up a story line that was introduced in Volume 6. What, you might ask? Well, why don't you go back and read it very carefully. Wasn't there a mysterious old guy who came into the story and then disappeared?

The production of the anime is going smoothly, but as the author of the source material, I have to start thinking of where this story is going. Oh, don't tell me you think this series will happily end with Mizuto and Yume getting back together?

Anyway, this has been Kyosuke Kamishiro's *My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex Volume 8: Time to Get Serious.* The punchline of this volume is that the person who got the most serious was Isana Higashira.