

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG —Academy 27—

A Mrs. Ichinose Date Night

By Andrew Davis



“It’s date night, it’s the weekend, I’m not talking about work.”

Sakura raises an eyebrow. “You’re gonna talk about work, aren’t you?”

“...yes.”

Leaning forward, she kisses me on the cheek, and smiles. “It’s okay, darling. Your eye’s been doing the twitchy thing ever since you got home. You have my permission to vent.”

I sigh. “Thanks. So, you know how the week started. The latest Sang Mi crisis, Li Xiu stressing about her first ever B grade, Ryan struggling to fit in...”

Sakura nods. “Kids are kids, they bring all the dramas to school with them.”

“Yeah. And that’s fine, that’s the deal with this job. You can’t just teach the subject, you’ve got to teach the student too, you’ve got to meet them where they’re at. But then you add the marking and the lesson planning-”

“Which has snowed you under this week-”

“Because of the curriculum changes they sprung on us at the last minute, yeah - I’m already more wiped out by the normal stuff than usual, and then I have the meeting with-”

And then I’ve stopped talking. Because I can see *him* there, just two tables behind Sakura, In his pinstripe suit, flashing those blinding teeth at the pretty young woman sitting opposite him.

Sakura turns slightly, in a way she thinks is subtle but *really* isn’t, and says “ah.”

Thankfully, he’s too distracted by his date to notice her staring.

She gets up. “I don’t like the vibe here. Does takeaway sound good to you, dear?”

“Takeaway sounds *wonderful*. Noodles?”

“Perfect. Let’s get out of here.”

Seven Hours Earlier

I've never seen Mr. Mori wearing anything other than the same pinstripe suit, but it's always immaculately pressed and perfectly clean. It makes me wonder if he has a full week's worth of the same suit, each folded and pressed into a pile on the weekend, each ready for a new day.

"Mrs Ichinose? Do I have your attention?"

"I- sorry. Yes, Mr. Mori." How the chair of the governors makes me feel like I'm still a pupil is beyond me.

He flashes his brilliant white teeth. "Wonderful." Now he returns to addressing the room at large. "Now, with the new curriculum changes there are going to be a few additional responsibilities for all of you..."

"So," says Sakura after I finish my story, "more paperwork, less time to help the students?"

"That's about the sum of it, yeah."

She squeezes my hand. “That sucks. I’m so sorry, babe.”

I fill my chopsticks with a mouthful of noodles and eat as the street around our bench bustles and chatters. “It’s okay. I knew what I was getting into. I’m glad I didn’t let Dad push me into accounting, but I can’t pretend he was wrong about the downsides of teaching.”

Digging the chopsticks into her noodle box, Sakuri grabs a chunk of tofu, and munches it. “I’d rather you did something you cared about, though. I’m still glad you didn’t run screaming when I said I was a writer. Other girls did. They were afraid I’d write about them.”

I bump her shoulder playfully. “To be fair, you did write about them.”

“Yeah, but only because they broke my heart! If they’d stayed, they’d have had nothing to worry about.”

“Well, I’m sorry for your heartbreak, but I’m glad they left,” I say, trying out the eyebrow-arch I’ve been working on for weeks. “Meant I got a shot with the best girl on Gongen.”

“I’m glad, too,” she says, before grinning wickedly. “Those were good poems.”

I laugh. “Oh, way to ruin the moment!”

“You love it. Anyway, you’re safe now, I promise. You don’t have to deal with any overzealous governors, or do any more paperwork, or worry about students-”

“Mrs. Ichnose!”

I close my eyes. “You had to say it, didn’t you?”

Sakura mouths the word “sorry” as Li Xiu approaches us, footsteps sharp and insistent, the crowd almost instinctively parting around her.

“I need to talk.”

Her arms are folded, and she bites her lip after she’s finished speaking. A few feet behind her, I see a

cluster of teenagers, shuffling awkwardly, watching us. Friends from school; I've seen them together at breaktimes. Doubtlessly wondering why she's made a beeline for a teacher on their Friday night out.

"Can it wait?" I tilt my head towards Sakura in an attempt to indicate that, like her, I have my own plans for this evening.

She shakes her head.

"Is it still about the grades?"

She nods.

"I thought we agreed you had nothing to worry about?"

"No, we didn't. You said it, I never agreed."

Sighing, I fix her with my best compassionate-but firm-stare. "Maybe we should?"

"I can't! Not while my grades are slipping!"

I exchange glances with Sakura, who's looking at me as if to say "wait, this is what you deal with?" I turn back to Li Xiu.

“They’re not slipping. You had one ‘B’. Welcome to the club literally everyone else is a part of. You’re still easily top of your class. You’re still more than on track to get into all of the best universities on Gongen. *You’ll be okay, I promise.*”

She sways back and forth on the balls of her feet. “But-”

“On Monday, we can look over the results, and see if there’s anything you don’t understand. You want to go to GUSAR¹, right?”

Nodding in response, she stops swaying.

“Then we can go over the grades you need from here to get accepted, and you’ll see just how ahead you are. *On Monday.* Tonight, the best thing you can do is enjoy your Friday night with your friends.”

I wave at her friends. One half-waves back before his hand is swatted down by one of the girls.

“Do we have a deal?” I ask.

¹ Gongen University of Science and Research

Taking a deep breath, she replies, "Deal," and heads back to join her friends.

I've always loved the Shocho plaza. I love trees, and the cherry blossom tree at the centre of the square is my favourite in the city. Sakura and I sit, hand in hand, and watch the blossoms fall. She leans her head against my shoulder, and I lean into her, breathing in the scent of her hair. She's everything soft and warm when I feel cold, hard edges in the world around me.

And then I see them. On the other side of the plaza, two boys sat on a bench, leaning into each other just as we are. Ryan and Jianhong. They're quietly playing video games, tapping away at the buttons on their handheld consoles, presumably using the local network to play together.

I nudge Sakura. "Let's go."

Making a gentle noise of protest, she says "why?"

I nod at the boys.

“Oh.”

I feel like we've stumbled in on something private. It would be wrong to stay.

“They're nice boys. Good for them.”

We walk hand-in-hand down a side street, stopping as Sakura stoops to pick up a discarded glass bottle. We move to a recycling can and she drops it inside, when a “beeping” noise, getting louder with every moment, draws nearer and nearer.

Turning, I catch a flash of a dark ponytail and hoodie before the breath is knocked out of me. Sakura, our accidental assailant and the recycling can are all thrown to the floor, glass and cardboard scattered across the street.

“Sang Mi?”

“M-Mrs Ichinose! What are you doing here?” She starts pawing at the ground, searching for an unseen something.

“Heading home. You?”

Continuing her search, she says “Oh, nothing important.”

“Looking for this?” Sakura holds a device shaped like a video-game controller, with a little screen with dots on. It persistently beeps the beeping sound that I heard moments ago.

“You know, if I was writing a story, this is exactly how I’d describe a tracker,” she says.

“Interesting, darling. What are you tracking, Sang Mi?”

“What? I - Nothing. It’s just a little gizmo I made, for funsies,” says Sang Mi, her eyes darting in the direction she’d been running-but-definitely-not-tracking-anything, as the beeping gets fainter. “And give it back. You can’t keep it from me.”

I sigh. “No, I can’t.”

The beeping continues.

I can't prove she's up to something. I can't prove she's putting herself in danger. But I know Sang Mi. She's definitely getting into danger.

Without proof, there's nothing I can do to keep her safe. Except for one thing.

"But I can ask, as your teacher, that you show some civic pride and help keep your streets clean. Come on, let's clear up this trash."

She makes a noise of protest, which cuts off as soon as I give her my best teacher stare.

The beeping starts to fade. Picking ourselves up, we gather the bottles, cups, and containers, righting the bin before placing them inside. By the time we've finished, the device has quietened.

After I nod to confirm her questioning glance, Sakura hands the device back to Sang Mi. When she makes a disappointed pouty face and starts walking away in the direction she arrived, I'm satisfied.

"Sang Mi?"

She turns to face me. "Yes?"

"I'll see you on Monday."

"Yes, Mrs. Ichinose."

Cuddles on the sofa are, on reflection, easier to arrange than a peaceful night in town. Tilting my head, I whisper into her ear. "Sorry."

"What for?"

"Ruining our date with my life."

Sakura shuffles back and turns her head to look me in the eye. "Don't be silly, it's not your fault."

"I still think you should have married someone who's capable of being normal."

"Tough. I choose you."

We just lie there for a while, and I feel the rise and fall of her slow, steady breathing.

"When you were a kid, did you think the teachers slept in the school? And, like, had your mind blown

your mind when you properly realised they had lives of their own, in the real world?"

She nods. "Of course I did. When I was fourteen, I saw Mr. Tanaka in the cinema. I only recognised him when he said 'hello', he looked completely different in normal-person clothes."

"Exactly. Every kid thinks that way. But what no-one tells you is that if you work as a teacher, you do the same thing in reverse. Put the kids in the 'school' box. Forget they live in the same world as you the rest of the time, too."

She smiles. "Yeah, that tracks."

My eyes blink repeatedly until I stop fighting and let them close. I just need to rest them a moment. "We need to go to bed soon."

"Yep."

I nuzzle into her shoulder. "Shall we get up?"

"No."

"Good."

She's warm, and she's home. Home is us. And right now, that's all I need.