



Let's do the timewarp again... The thing about having no backlog of current releases to pick through, is that you get to trawl the archives. So here we have **Ai Yori Aoshi**, well-known harem comedy with large doses of heartrending romance. Or was that the other way around..?

1 - Fate

When they were young children, the families of Kaoru Hanabishi and Aoi Sakuraba decided that their children would one day marry each other - as a way of strengthening two powerful families. Events since then have separated the two, and Kaoru no longer even remembers the promise, or the girl who was promised to him - but Aoi remembers him. An innocent act of kindness many years ago has left Kaoru dear in her heart ever since, and now she's decided it's time to track down her lost love. Arriving in Tokyo to look for him, she's overwhelmed by the place and soon finds herself lost. By chance, the first person to stop and help her is Kaoru himself - but it takes a little while for her to realise this...



2 - Supper

With Aoi determined to stay with Kaoru and having no way of getting home anyway, Kaoru makes arrangements for her to stay the night - although with his small apartment, sleeping arrangements that don't involve getting too close for decency are hard to come by. Kaoru's still assuming that she'll go home soon - even if he did like her, her talk of marriage means that the whole situation is just moving too quickly for his liking - but Aoi seems to have other ideas. The more time he spends with her, though, the more Kaoru comes to appreciate Aoi's charms...



3 - Separation

Just as they're locked in an accidental compromising situation (darn that bar of soap), Aoi's minder Miyabi arrives at Kaoru's apartment, with orders to bring her home. After she's thumped Kaoru for groping Aoi, of course. Contrary to what Aoi had told him, she'd left the family home without telling anyone where she was going - very inappropriate behaviour for the daughter of a powerful family. They also don't feel under any obligation to the arrangement for Aoi and Kaoru to marry, now that Kaoru has turned his back on his family - and so Aoi is to go home, never to see Kaoru again. Is this the end of her dream..?



4 - Living Together

Recent events have taken their toll on Kaoru, and he's fallen ill. Running a high temperature and feeling very weak, he's in no condition to look after himself, but Aoi's only too happy to take on that job - but while tending to him, she sees first-hand the scars the Hanabishi family inflicted on him. Meanwhile, with Aoi clearly determined to stay with Kaoru, Miyabi decides it's time to wheel out the heavy guns in the form of Aoi's mother - and with Aoi having already decided that she's prepared to turn her back on her family to stay with Kaoru, that's a battle of wills that's not to be missed.



5 - Old Friend

So much for happy life together - Miyabi is running the house with a rod of iron, and making sure the landlord (Aoi) and servant (Kaoru) don't spend any more time together than strictly necessary. Better than a kick in the teeth, but not really what either had planned. Having such a large house on hand does prove useful, though, when Kaoru's childhood friend Tina returns from her world tour, all set to turn his life upside down - she's got no place to stay, see, but after seeing Kaoru's place decides it would be a great place for her to lodge...



Ai Yori Aoshi is as good an example of a schizophrenic show as you could ever find - and that's not really a compliment. Episodes 1-4 are the show at its very best - small doses of humour, but mostly it's about two young people coming to terms with their respective pasts and discovering their feelings for each other. Kaoru has had a difficult past, suffering abuse for a family who were only interested in his ability to maintain their position - eventually he broke contact and went his own way, and there's no way in the world he's going back, not even for Aoi. Aoi is perhaps the most warm-hearted, caring young woman ever and the embodiment of the ideal Japanese woman - to the point where the character is often criticised for being too subservient for these modern, politically-correct times. That criticism has a point, but it also *misses*

the point - I don't think Aoi's being set up as a role model for modern women, she's just presented as being different from the rest of the girls that eventually show up.

Which brings us neatly to *The Harem™*, which is also the point where things begin to go

Ai Yori Aoshi #1: Faithfully Yours

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wrong. Once Aoi and Kaoru move into their Sakuraba-sponsored mansion, there's a steady stream of women who arrive, both to create a little bit of conflict between our happy couple, and to ramp up the comic relief - and suddenly we go from touching romance to slapstick comedy, complete with a mental clashing of gears as you try to adjust to the change. It ain't pretty.

The first new girl to appear is Tina Foster - from an American family but born and raised in Japan, she ticks all the boxes of the stereotypical American in anime. She's brash, outspoken, fun-loving and heavy-drinking. She's also a long-standing friend of Kaoru's who harbours deeper feelings for him. As the series goes on Tina gets a lot of character development to make her an intriguing character, but here she's just annoying, with her antics quickly dispelling the warm & fuzzy feeling I got from watching the opening episodes. If I didn't already know that there's more to her than you see here, I'd be ready to stop watching.

The comic / harem side of *Ai Yori Aoshi* isn't bad in itself, it's just out of place beside the opening four episodes. The series wants to be two different things that really don't sit well together - separate them out, and you would have two very enjoyable series, but put them together and that mental gear clashing means dropped points for the release. From here there's more of a focus on the comedy than the romance, too, which is another missed trick. Overall, though, despite its one glaring flaw, this volume manages to still be enjoyable. Worth getting, if you can find it anywhere...

Title Ai Yori Aoshi #1: Faithfully Yours	Studio 
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