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# My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"You Wouldn't Get It"



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# Prologue: A Familiar Face before Our Departure

## The Kind of Person I Like

### Yume Irido

“I like you, Irido-san! Please go out with me!” a guy exclaimed, bowing his head, acting much more seriously than he needed to.

I couldn’t help but find it cute. This was the third time a guy had asked me out in the first month or so since the start of the new school year. When I was a freshman, people had told me left and right that I was popular, but I’d never been asked out once. But now, it was as if the dam had burst, and I was being flooded with dating requests.

I had an idea as to why I’d suddenly become a hot commodity. Right after the new school year had begun, Akatsuki-san asked me if I knew how to turn people down. Confused, I told her I more or less knew what to do, which led her to saying she “got it” before leaving. Not even a minute later, a guy came to ask me out.

I’d already had a faint idea that, behind the scenes, Akatsuki-san had been acting as a wall, blocking any guys from asking me out. But now that we were second-years and things had settled between me and Mizuto, she’d determined that she didn’t need to play bodyguard anymore.

It was true that if I got asked out at the same rate I was now as a first-year, I would’ve been at a complete loss. I might’ve turned them down in less than gentle ways, which might have led to bad rumors being spread about me. I was no longer the girl that I used to be. Of course, I still got nervous, but I felt a lot calmer and could respond much more confidently now.

“Sorry, but I already have a boyfriend,” I replied.

The guy looked up. “Y-You do? Who? What’s he like?!” he pressed, unable to hide his surprise.



This was the third time I was turning someone down, so I already had an answer prepared.

As I thought about *him*, my lips curled into a wide smile that wouldn't have been possible if I were thinking of anyone else. "The smartest guy in school, I guess?"

## All Mine

### Mizuto Irido

It was now night, and our parents had gone to sleep in preparation for work in the morning. Yume had quietly come to my room and was currently lying on my bed.

"Can you stop making things more difficult for me?" I asked. "Every time you turn someone down, weird rumors blow things more and more out of proportion. Apparently, you're dating some guy that's Harvard-bound, a Mensa member, *and* a young entrepreneur."

Yume giggled. "Maybe they'll start calling you a famous detective or something."

"You're making it sound like this is my problem, but it affects you too, y'know." I exhaled while sitting next to Yume.

Yume Irido was steadily becoming the most popular girl at Rakuro High School, but she had a boyfriend who was shrouded in mystery. I, Mizuto Irido, was not only her stepbrother, but also her ex from middle school, and said mysterious boyfriend. Though other people our age might've loved the over-the-top rumors about the identity of her boyfriend, it went without saying that I had no plans to go to Harvard, wasn't a member of Mensa, and had no history of founding any companies.

"Can't you say something else when you turn them down? Why do you have to say that the guy you're dating's the smartest person in the school? You make it sound like they're even smarter than the genius student council president."

"Yeah, that's the point. If I say something noncommittal like I'm dating someone nice or handsome, then people'll get the wrong idea for sure. These

guys can't compete with the smartest person in school, so they won't press any further."

"Wow, worrying about people getting the wrong idea? You've grown."

"Yep. Aren't you a proud boyfriend?" I looked down at her as she flashed a proud smile at me. In the next moment, I suddenly extended my hand towards her head. "Huh? What?"

I ignored her confusion and began rubbing her earlobes with the back of my fingers as if I was tracing them. "Wasn't the guy who asked you out today the baseball team's ace?" I asked.

"Yeah, apparently. I heard that our school isn't typically strong in the sports department, but this year, they're quite—"

Before she could say anything further, I put my body over hers. I put my hand next to her, covering her with my shadow. She blinked, confused, while I stared into her eyes—my girlfriend's eyes.

Eventually, to my annoyance, a teasing smile crept across her face. "Jealous?"

I didn't reply. All I could do was stare into her eyes with a pleading look. She began giggling as if she was enjoying my reaction.

"That's okay," she said with an alluring smile. "I'm all yours."

Just like a dog hearing the command to go after being told to wait, I sprang into action, embracing Yume and putting my lips on hers. This kiss was much more ravenous than usual, as if I'd been starved. I could hear Yume's seductive gasps and moans as our tongues intertwined with one another. I kept going until I felt satisfied. When I finally pulled away, Yume smiled at me, her face flushed.

"Wow, getting the hottest girl in our grade all to yourself? You've grown," she teased.

"If your head gets any bigger, I'm gonna have to give you a hickey."

"Stop! Don't do that! Sheesh, don't be such a baby. You can't expect me not to tease you when you're finally acting cute for once."

My arms were starting to get tired from holding myself up over Yume, so



instead, I lay next to her, and we cuddled.





We lightly bumped our foreheads against one another's before whispering to each other.

"I know you're getting to be an expert on rejecting people, but...my turn's coming up," I said.

"Huh? Really? Why's that?"

"Someone put a note in my desk."

"What if it's a prank?" Yume asked.

"I mean, most people think I'm dating Isana. Would someone really play a prank like that on a guy with a girlfriend?"

"Hm... Fair point."

"You're not prying? That's surprising."

"That would be in poor taste, no? Especially while we're fooling around like this."

"I guess it'd be like laughing behind their back, huh?"

"Yeah, and I know how much confidence it takes to ask someone out. Make sure you take them seriously, okay?"

*You're such a softie.* "I know."

"Also, we're not doing any more than just kissing today."

"Huh?"

"That much should be obvious. If I were in that girl's position, I wouldn't want to use all my courage to ask you out right after you've done a bunch of things with someone else."

*You're the one who baited me this far, and now you're pulling the rug out from under me?!* Just as I regretted having said anything, Yume began saying something in an even lower voice as if she were embarrassed.

"I'll...let you do anything you want with me, as much as you want, right before the school trip, okay?"

Seeing her furiously trying not to meet my eyes, I couldn't help but get a

closer look at my girlfriend's face. It was as if emotions as hot as magma were overflowing from my heart. "Just kissing is okay, right?"

"Huh? Mmff!"

There wasn't going to be any time for us to do this during the school trip. The only ones who knew our secret were our closest friends. That's why I needed to charge up before the cheat day came. I'd make her rue the day she said such a thoughtless statement. But before that, there was something else I needed to take care of. *I have no idea who you are, girl trying to ask me out, but I'm going to make sure you know there's zero chance of us ever getting together.*

"I like you. Please go out with me."

I was speechless. I was too stunned by the words uttered to me without any nerves or emotion by a girl with the stature of a middle schooler but a curvy, glamorous body. It was Ran Asuhain—the very same girl who worked with Yume on the student council and was known as the biggest man-hater in our school. *I'm getting déjà vu.*



# Day One of Getting Closer

## Six-Person Group

### Yume Irido

After an hour and change on a bus from the school, we, the students of Rakuro High School, were now all gathered on the first floor of the Osaka Airport's monorail station. It was an open space, consisting of just pillars and a ceiling, kind of like a parking garage. We could see the terminal for the Osaka International Airport (aka Itami Airport), across the street.

The weather on this mid-May day was cloudy. The destination for Rakuro High School's trip this year was Okinawa. It was a four-day, three-night trip very befitting of a private school, consisting of peace studies, exploring the ocean, sightseeing in groups, and staying at a resort hotel with a pool. As the student council's secretary, I'd been the one to make the itinerary, and was thus the most familiar with it.

Back when we went on a school trip in middle school, I didn't have many friends, so it was a very sad affair, but this year would be different. I'd already figured out my six-person group of guys and girls, and fortunately, they were all people that I'd gotten close with.

"Yume-chan! Did you bring your own shampoo? Let's swap tonight!"

"Sure...but is that a thing people do?"

"I wanna bathe myself in your scent!"

The girl whose eyes were sparkling as she mouthed off her desires was Akatsuki Minami-san. On the surface, she was a cute, compact, energetic girl with a signature ponytail. Recently, though, I'd been starting to notice more and more the occasional instances when she showed her dangerous side.

Next to her was a guy with brightly dyed hair, trying to hold back a yawn.

"So frickin' tired... Why'd we have to meet up so early?"

This complaint came from the third member of our group, Kogure Kawanami-kun. He was childhood friends with Akatsuki-san, but apparently they were closer to each other behind closed doors. That being said, he claimed he was a romantic ROM expert; essentially, he was a weirdo that did not aspire to have a romantic relationship of his own. That being said, he apparently loved hearing about other people's romances.

He was always the cheerful guy that set the vibes, but it was early enough in the day that he wasn't his normal self. But there was someone who was even worse off, who was threatening to pass out entirely.

"Zzz..."

"Isana, wake up," Mizuto said, lightly tapping our fourth member on the shoulder.

"Ack! My deadline!" she reacted, frantically looking around as if someone were chasing her.

Her name was Isana Higashira-san. She was a shy otaku with a bit of an unusual personality, with breasts much larger than those of the average high school girl. She'd started with Mizuto as her only friend, but through him, she later became friends with both Akatsuki-san and me. When we'd first met, though, she'd been my romantic rival.

After a series of events, she became not only Mizuto's best friend but also an illustrator he helped to manage. The amount of time they talked to each other was essentially equal to how much he and I talked, and we were dating *and* stepsiblings. *No biggie. We've talked about it, and they're gonna work on that.*

Our fifth member was Mizuto Irido, whom I just mentioned. The only people who knew that he and I were dating were Akatsuki-san, Kawanami-kun, and Higashira-san, but it was easy to get Mizuto in our group by using the fact we were stepsiblings.

Plus, he was close enough with Higashira-san that our classmates and even our own parents thought they were dating. It was pretty much inevitable that the two of them would end up in the same group.

After waking Higashira-san up, Mizuto walked over to the edge of the group

where I was standing.

“Look like we’ll leave on time, group leader?” he asked.

“It’s not a question of if—we *will*. We can’t stop the plane from leaving without us, after all.”

Currently, the teachers were doing roll call. After they finished, we’d finally head to the airport and board the plane. To be honest, this was my first time flying, so I was a little nervous.

“Are you sure you’re okay with *that*?” Mizuto asked in a low voice.

Though it might not have been immediately obvious to others what he was talking about, I could guess that he was referring to our sixth member. She was currently behind Higashira-san, who was once again beginning to doze off. The girl wasn’t doing anything in particular; she was simply quietly sitting by herself.

Ran Asuhain-san was a fellow member of the Rakuro High School student council. Incidentally, she had recently asked my boyfriend out. Mizuto had already told me what happened. Given my close working relationship with her, Mizuto had deemed it necessary to reveal his secret admirer to me immediately.

Of course, he turned her down, saying that he already had a girlfriend, but...even after hearing that, she had given him a surprising response.

*“It’s okay if I keep my feelings for you, though, right?”*

I never thought I’d live to see the day that such admirable words would come out of the mouth of Asuhain-san—our resident man-hater. After I’d spent a half a year with her on the student council, it was really hard to believe she’d even asked a guy out.

That day, I had stared at him in shock and asked how the heck such a situation had unfolded. I was in utter disbelief at how much of a plain-girl magnet my boyfriend was.

*Okay, she’s not exactly a plain girl.* Asuhain-san was a straitlaced honor student who might not have stood out, but at the minimum, she had a voluptuous body that guys liked and a cute, doll-like face. She had too many



standout features to be written off as plain.

Even so, she hated men. Because of that, she avoided them entirely, making some think she was out of their league, stopping them from even thinking about asking her out. It was hard to believe that the very same girl had fallen for Mizuto. *We already had the whole Higashira-san incident—does he exude some kind of pheromone that attracts these kinds of girls to him?*

“That’s what I want to know,” he’d replied, furrowing his brows. “The last time I interacted with Asuhain at all was during the trip to Kobe last year. I have no memory of doing anything to make her fall for me.”

“Are you sure? Maybe you did it without realizing. Like, maybe you got her away from guys who were persistently hitting on her.”

“I don’t think there’s anybody out there who could do that without realizing it.”

“I mean, President Kurenai’s done it.”

“Don’t compare me to her.”

Asuhain-san typically didn’t involve herself with anyone too deeply. The only person she seemed to admire and let her guard down around was the president of the student council, Suzuri Kurenai. From what I could remember, the reason Asuhain-san had become so enamored with her was because she’d driven away guys who’d been persistently hitting on her.

“Besides, it didn’t seem like she was super into me. I didn’t feel any emotion from her words, nor did she seem particularly nervous. I thought that she’d been forced after losing some kind of wager or something, but I didn’t see anyone around...”

“I think you’re a bit too big a target for that kind of dare...”

It seemed that he had no awareness that he was actually secretly popular—and that wasn’t just me trying to gas him up since he was my boyfriend. Mizuto was the silent, stoic type at school, and had great grades to boot. He seemed really mature and cool from the standpoint of all the girls at our school with high grades.

Even so, people thought that he was dating Higashira-san who was, at first glance, a plain-looking girl, which only fed the dreams of girls who were plain-looking themselves. Thinking about how he'd been nothing more than a loner in middle school, I couldn't help but marvel at how far he'd come.

Also, though there were girls interested in Mizuto, there was a surprising lack of jealousy. Instead, his fans tended to just watch the "couple" fondly. I never asked her directly, but I could only assume that this had been the work of Akatsuki-san.

Either way, Asuhain-san asking him out didn't make me jealous—just confused. I still had trouble believing it'd even happened because it didn't make any sense. Well, that, or maybe I was trying to avoid the reality of a beautiful girl asking out my boyfriend.

But also...even if Mizuto wasn't sure why she'd asked him out, I had a slight inkling. Ever since we'd started our second year, I'd gotten the feeling that Asuhain-san had been avoiding me. Of course, we talked normally while we were doing our student council work, but I got a feeling from her words and actions that there was a sort of...distance she was keeping. Or at least, that's how it came across to me.

It wasn't as if her attitude really showed this, but I got the feeling that she was acting the same way as when you're walking by someone with their dog, and the dog takes a step away from you. But what if the way she was acting *wasn't* all in my head?

It would make sense that she'd keep her distance from me if she'd fallen for Mizuto, aka my stepsibling. Or maybe she somehow knew that Mizuto and I were dating. Whatever. Anyway, it's impossible to pinpoint how someone falls in love. Asuhain-san might've hated guys up until just recently, and then woken up and fallen in love. Anything was possible, and I had no right to criticize her for it.

If I didn't want her getting close to Mizuto, I could publicly state we were dating. But Mizuto and I didn't want our family to find out, so that wasn't a real option. Since we were keeping our relationship under wraps, I couldn't blame Asuhain-san for her feelings since she didn't know better.

The reason I'd invited Asuhain-san to join our group also lay with that. She was already the type of person who didn't try to fit in with the class, like Mizuto and Higashira-san. I was the only person who actually knew her in our class, and though she was avoiding me, she had nowhere else to go.

I hadn't wanted to force her to join us, but I did hope I could help her fit in, even just a little bit. And then she'd asked Mizuto out. So I had a lot to consider here.

Of course, it'd be awkward being in the same group as the person who turned you down, but ultimately I thought it'd be better than being in a group of complete strangers. With that, I'd brought her into our group.

"Well...as long as you're okay with everything," Mizuto said. "If she has some kind of ulterior motive, she'll definitely make some kind of move during this trip. I'll tell you if anything happens."

"You don't have to. If anything, can you treat her kindly? I wanna make sure she enjoys this trip."

"Wow, you've gotten a lot calmer. It's hard to believe you're the same girl who'd flip her top whenever I talked to other girls."

"It's only a problem if a certain someone leads her on."

"I would never."

"Really?"

"You're cuter than she is."

He'd said that so plainly that it caught me off guard. "Jeez..." I said after a brief pause.

I lightly tapped him on the shoulder as a way to mask my embarrassment. *How can you say that with such confidence when a rare, natural beauty like Asuhain-san is right over there?*

"Everyone quiet down!" one of our teachers yelled after finishing roll call.

It seemed that the explanation from the travel agent was going to begin. We needed to get back to the rest of our group, but just as I began walking, Mizuto came close and quickly whispered something into my ear.



“Let’s get some time alone together.”

Most of the time during the school trip would be spent with our classmates, which meant that there wasn’t much time for us to be by ourselves as a couple. And now Mizuto of all people was asking me to make time for the two of us to be together.

“Yeah. I’ll figure it out,” I replied, smiling.

I wished I could’ve shown our middle school selves what we’d become. *This* was what a couple looked like.

## **A Gyaru Who’s Kind to Isana**

### **Mizuto Irido**

There was a ding and with it, the seat belt light went out, allowing Isana to heave a long sigh.

“F-Finally...” she said, relieved.

“You love to exaggerate. You do know we’re still in the air, right? Wanna look out the window?”

“No way! Absolutely not! Do you wish to kill me?!”

We’d gotten on the plane without any problems and were currently in the air. It was apparently Isana’s first time on a plane, so she was still stiff as a board in her seat.

“Isn’t this your first time on a plane as well?” Isana asked, a dissatisfied look on her face. “You need not put on a brave face. I welcome you to cling to me for comfort.”

“It’s said all the time, but the chance of a plane crashing is much lower than the chance of being in a car crash. I believe in the cold, hard stats.”

“You’re a literary type to your core, but you have the nerve to possess logical thought?”

There’d been some turbulence when we took off, but it was much more pleasant to ride in a plane than a bus once we were actually in the air. We could

even watch movies if we wanted to on the monitors in front of our seats. *Planes aren't too shabby.*

"I can't calm down... I don't even have my tablet with me..." Isana complained.

"Not much you can do, since we aren't allowed to bring our phones and tablets on this trip. At least you brought a sketchbook."

"These restrictions are behind the times! What are we to do when we wish to contact someone?!"

"Our group leader has a phone for the sole use of communication. We have physical maps too, if you're worried about getting lost."

"We're cut off from the internet for four whole days... I'm going to lose my mind!"

"Sheesh, you got any more complaints? Did you even wanna come on the school trip?"

"Well..." Isana shrank her shoulders. "You know how we have snorkeling on the second day?"

"I told you already. You don't have to know how to swim to snorkel. You literally can't sink if you're wearing a life jacket."

"But I'll need to wear a swimsuit! I thought I'd never have to wear one ever again in my entire life!"

"We talked about this too. You're gonna be wearing a wet suit on top, so it won't matter."

"But I had to go on a diet for this!"

I smiled at her indignant emphasis on that point. "I'd say it came at the perfect time. You've gotten really unhealthy recently, y'know?"

"Rrghh," Isana groaned through gritted teeth.

As part of our ocean experience course on the second day, we were scheduled to go snorkeling in the afternoon. One of the reasons I'd picked snorkeling for my best friend, Isana, despite her being so against it, had to do

with her incredible lack of any semblance of athleticism.

By involving Yume and Minami-san in this plan, they'd help Isana get into shape. From what I heard from Yume, Isana had unsurprisingly gotten a little plump around her stomach.

Of course, the reason for her going snorkeling didn't center around that entirely. I'd thought that being able to see life under the sea would provide some good inspiration for her as an illustrator. Snorkeling wasn't something that you could do willy-nilly outside of a school trip. She might not have another chance to experience this.

"You're trying to act cool, but in reality, you want to see me in a swimsuit, don't you?" Isana dirtily grinned, teasing me. To reiterate, Isana was *just* a friend. "You're such a shy boy. You need only ask, and I'll grant your desire even though I shouldn't. My mother even said, 'If a girl like you wears a swimsuit on a school trip, guys are gonna drop dead from havin' to hold back their lust.'"

"Sorry to interrupt you when you're in the middle of satisfying your need for approval, but I'm already satisfied on that front," I said.

"Do tell more! There's something out there that can put up a fight against my H cups?"

"She's pretty big too, y'know?"

"Do say more!" Isana made a flat-out gross sound of excitement before leaning close to me and lowering her voice. "She's well-endowed despite that slender body of hers, you say? Exactly where is she gifted and to what extent? This can be our little secret!"

"How do I say this... You're more of a guy than most guys."

I'd let my guard down a little because—at least biologically—Isana was a girl, but she showed much more interest in someone else's girlfriend than regular guys did.

"Hee hee. I wonder if it's true that fondling breasts stimulates growth. If so, then it's a good thing I was turned down. By now, I probably wouldn't even be able to walk properly."

“Yeah, be thankful for my excellent decision-making.”

“Well, on the flip side, there’s no time like the present,” she said.

“I’ll pass. I need you to be able to draw unfettered.”

“Impressive! You are the spitting image of a manager who does not give in to their lust!”

“No, that’s normal for people in general, not just managers.”

I really wanted her to think that the default for regular people was to not give in to their desires.

As Isana and I continued our usual conversations, we heard a bright voice from the seat in front of us interrupt.

“What’s goin’ on? You two talkin’ about dirty stuff?”

Peeking over the headrest of the seat in front of us was a girl with flashy, wavy hair, most likely done using a curling iron or something. From the look of her, there was no way she was the silent type.





I looked up at her and searched my memory for her name. “Uh... Yoshino, right?”

“You don’t know my name?! Sheesh, we’ve been in the same class for a month already. Yako Yoshino! The ‘Ya’ is the same character used to write the ‘Yayoi period’ and ‘ko’ is the same character used to write ‘Ono no Imoko’! It’s got a pretty good gyaru vibe, right? So keep me in your memories, Mizuto-kun!”

Our new class of 2-7 was even more boisterous than before, and the reason for that could mostly be attributed to the singularity of our prep school, Yako Yoshino.

She dyed and styled her hair as if it were the normal thing to do and didn’t wear her uniform properly. It went without saying that the teachers had their eyes on her, but the thing was, she had surprisingly good grades, plus she was extremely friendly, making her the type who could bring the class together. Because of all the above, the teachers just barely turned a blind eye to her.

I’d heard a ridiculous rumor from Kawanami that she’d had relations with all the guys in her class, but after spending a month with her, my only impression was that she was a sociable, flashy, loud girl that could have been found in any class.

The reason I could actually remember her was because she tried to talk to Isana a lot. Apparently, they’d been in the same class last year. According to Isana, she was a real-life example of the “gyaru being kind to an otaku” trope. But also, I got the feeling that she was just kind to anyone, not just otaku specifically.

Isana had once tried to imitate the gyaru lifestyle, and this girl had apparently been her model for her behavior. Curiously, however, this girl didn’t say “like” as much as your average gyaru.

“Not really a fan of someone I don’t know calling me by my first name. We’re not even friends,” I said as I looked up at Yoshino’s kind and innocent face.

“Aw, what’s the big deal? If I call you Irido-kun, it’ll get confusing with Yume-chan around. Plus, Isana-chan’s always saying your name, so it’s kinda burned into my brain. Or wait...” Yoshino grinned like a cat. “Is your girlfriend the only

one who can call you by your first name?” she teased. “Whew, what a show-off!”

For the record, she was also the only one in our class who teased me and Isana about our relationship. We’d tried explaining that we were just friends, but the more we did that, the more excited she got, so we’d given up.

“Fine, whatever,” I relented. “Just make sure that you’re careful as to not lead guys on and get yourself hurt.”

“Thankies for the warning! But s’all good. I’m used to it.”

“Yoshino! Stay in your seat unless you’re going to the bathroom!” a teacher yelled out to Yoshino, who had her knees on the seat to turn around to face us.

“Okies! My bad!” she said before disappearing behind her headrest.

Thinking about how Isana had been pretty much stuck with her for an entire year made me realize how hard Isana had it. Or well, maybe from Isana’s perspective she’d been a saving grace.

Those thoughts in mind, I looked at Isana. Her head fell on my shoulder at that exact moment, softly breathing as she slept. *Oh right, she woke up way earlier than she’s usually capable of doing. It’s been one thing after another, I completely forgot.* We wouldn’t have any time to sleep until night, so it was best for her to sleep as much as she could until we reached Okinawa.

I thought I could sense a sharp glare from the direction of where I heard Minami-san—where Yume was sitting, that is—but I decided to pretend I didn’t notice.

## Arrival in Okinawa

### Yume Irido

“It’s so hot...”

As soon as we exited the Naha Airport, my body was enveloped in humidity. Though there were supposed to be plenty of pleasant days left in Kyoto, it’d been summer temperatures here for a while now and was threatening to hit thirty degrees Celsius. I’d hoped it would at least be a dry heat, but it was

straight-up muggy.

Our schedule for this first day of the trip had us wearing our school uniforms until we got to the hotel in the evening. And of course we hadn't switched to our summer uniforms yet, so we were stuck wearing long sleeves. Even though Rakuro students endured the hellishly hot summers of Kyoto, every time one of us exited the airport, there was a cry and an immediate rolling up of sleeves.

"Oof. So hot... Good thing I brought a fan..." Akatsuki-san said while pointing a handheld fan at her face. "You okay, Yume-chan? Wanna borrow it?"

"I brought a hat, so I'll be okay. It would've been nice to have a parasol, but it's too bulky to travel with."

"Ooh, a parasol?! I bet you'd look so good with one!" Akatsuki-san's eyes sparkled.

"Barely any time has passed since I woke up, yet I must deal with this heat?" Higashira-san complained with a disheartened expression, exiting the airport after Akatsuki-san.

"You should've come more prepared. Here. Water," Mizuto said, following behind her.

Mizuto seemed to be taking very good care of her. On the plane, he'd even let her sleep on his shoulder. No wonder everyone thought they were dating. *I've gotten used to this now that I've known Higashira-san for almost an entire year, but as Mizuto's actual girlfriend, I definitely have the right to ask for compensation.* The only problem was trying to figure out when exactly the two of us could be alone together.

"Group leaders, meet up over here!" the teacher called out.

I jogged over. They gave me a flip phone just for making calls. It had so many buttons, it reminded me of a calculator.

"Hoo boy! For real? This is one of those old-school phones, right? This might be my first time seeing one of these IRL!" Yoshino-san exclaimed from next to me.

She was one of the five group leaders in our class, 2-7. She began clacking



around on the phone. I noticed she was wearing an expensive-looking watch.

“Hey, teach? Can I check Insta on this?” Yoshino-san asked.

“Of course not. That’s the entire point of you all getting these phones. You can only make calls and take pictures. Well, it does have a map feature, but that’s the most you can do. It’s a rental, so don’t break it.”

“What’re you supposed to do with a phone that can’t go on Insta or TikTok? Right, Yume-chan?”

I was a little surprised by Yoshino-san suddenly calling out to me, but I managed to give a tactful smile of agreement.

“Yeah, that’s about all I ever use my phone for,” I said.

“I know, right?! But I guess it’s all good if we can use the camera!” Then she skipped back to her group, lightly waving at me.

Yoshino-san had a different kind of cheerfulness than Akatsuki-san. I was always really surprised by how friendly she could be with anyone. My middle school self never could’ve brought herself to get close to her, but maybe due to my own growth or Yoshino-san’s amazing friend-making skills, I could converse with her normally, even though we ran in different circles.

When I returned to our group, Akatsuki-san’s eyes locked onto the phone I was holding.

“Whoa, that’s a flip phone! I’ve never seen one before! Gimme, gimme!”

“Okay, but be careful,” I cautioned her.

Kawanami-kun joined her and watched as Akatsuki-san played around with the phone with wonder. *Are they into tech?* As usual, Mizuto was still looking after Higashira-san, and the last person of our group, Asuhain-san, was standing a short distance away, simply staring at the blue Okinawan sky.

Her seat had been close to mine on the plane, but we ultimately hadn’t even exchanged a single word. I wanted to ask about her asking Mizuto out, but I had no clue how to even bring it up. There was an invisible wall between us. It was to the point where I couldn’t even imagine her being in love unless someone came up to me and told me flat out. But this wasn’t the time to hesitate. The

school trip had already begun. I needed to talk to her, even if I had to force a conversation. With a newfound determination, I began walking towards her.

“Asuhain-san, are you okay? Do you have a hat or something with you?”

She glanced at me before immediately looking away. “I put on sunscreen. I’m okay.”

“Oh...”

And our conversation ended before it even began. I’d had this thought before, but I’d make a horrible detective.

## **Imitation**

### **Mizuto Irido**

After lunch, our tour bus took us to the Okinawa Senseki Quasi-National Park. The two primary reasons Okinawa was frequently chosen as a destination for school field trips had to do with the museum dedicated to the Battle of Okinawa during the Pacific War and the Cornerstone of Peace, which had the names of the deceased engraved in the cenotaphs on the memorial grounds.

There were tens of rectangular cenotaphs neatly organized in a pattern that radiated outwards. Between each of them were white stone paths. While we walked through the memorial, I found myself staying silent and solemn, even though I wasn’t the type to easily grow emotional.

After that, we went to the museum and sat through a ceremony during which they said stuff about how we, the youth, shouldered the future. At the end of it all, we were left with a little time before the bus was scheduled to depart.

While most of our other classmates took advantage of this free time and went to look at the nearby plaza geared towards children, I decided to get away from all the chatter and the sun by sitting on the bus and reading the book I’d brought with me.

It was times like this that people who derived fun from their phones were at a loss. Even though the school banned the use of our personal phones on this trip, they hadn’t banned us from reading physical books.

I'd also thought that this might've been a chance for Yume and me to be alone, but she'd already been whisked away somewhere by Akatsuki-san before I'd been able to get to her. I couldn't help but think at times like this that it'd be more convenient if we were both nobodies in our class like we'd been in middle school.

While I read my book, someone else came onto the bus. I paid her no mind and continued to read, but for some reason, she decided to sit next to me. After she went out of her way to do that, I couldn't exactly ignore her. It was Ran Asuhain.

Out of all the empty seats, she'd chosen the one next to mine. As she did, she kept her gaze focused on the headrest in front of her, staying silent with her hands on her lap.

Her actions made it seem as if she wanted to say something, but her expression made it seem like she was going to stay quiet. I had the option to continue ignoring her, but if I didn't understand her intentions here, there was a possibility that it might cause trouble down the road for Yume's interpersonal connections. I didn't have much of a choice, so I closed my book, using my finger as a bookmark, and looked at Asuhain.

"What're you up to?" I asked.

"Is there something wrong with wanting to sit next to the person I like?"

It was as if she'd come with that answer loaded.

"So you really intend to keep this up?" I asked, trying to hold back a sigh.

"I said as much."

"Does that mean you're trying to hit on me right now?"

"I guess so."

"Whatever... Do what you want."

Thinking that the best option here was to ignore her and go back to reading, I opened my book back up. After a few minutes of nothing but the sound of me turning pages filling the bus, I still saw absolutely no sign of Asuhain trying to strike up a conversation with me. I glanced at her and it seemed that she was

looking away, her body as stiff as a board. Seeing this, even I couldn't help but realize what was happening.

"Let me guess, you don't know *how* to hit on somebody."

Her body shook as a displeased expression filled her face and her ears flushed a light pink. This might've been the cutest reaction I'd seen from her since she had asked me out.

"Listen, Asuhain, I'll be honest, but I don't believe your confession was real. I feel like it was a means to an end, so how about you tell me what's really going on so I can focus on the school trip?"

I'd thought about trying to feel out the situation a little further, but it seemed that neither of us was skilled enough to do that. This meant the only option left to us was being direct.

After about five seconds of silence, Asuhain finally spoke up. "What...do you mean? I have feelings for you, and as such, I'd like to go out with you. That's all there is to it."

"Yeah, right. When did you start having feelings for me?"

"Well..." Then Asuhain went silent for about ten seconds before speaking again. "Ever since I realized you're the most preferable."

"In what regard?"

"All the other guys seem very stupid... I doubt I could successfully converse with them. But then there's you—the person with the highest grades out of all the guys. Plus, you don't seem like the type to focus on the short-term."

"So, pretty much you're saying you chose me by process of elimination."

"Yeah... I guess so."

"Well, I find that strange. It's almost as if there's some reason you have to get a boyfriend." Asuhain pursed her lips in response to my conjecture. "What, did your parents find you a fiancé, and now you need a fake boyfriend to get you out of marriage? If that's it, I don't mind helping."

"Of course that's not what's going on here. My family's completely normal," she answered, taking my joke seriously. She focused her eyes on mine, staring

intensely. "Am I that undesirable? Tell me what I'm lacking."

"I told you already. I'm dating someone."

"Higashira-san? If that's the case, then I'm sure I can fulfill her role," she said, placing her hand on her bountiful chest.

I knit my eyebrows and returned her intense stare right back into her doe-like eyes. "I have three things I wanna say to you."

"Yes?"

"First: Isana is just a friend. Second: don't make it sound like the only good thing about my friend is her chest."

"I have the impression that she herself says that constantly, though."

"Yeah, but only she can say that. Third," I continued. "Based on what I've heard from Yume, you hate being objectified, right?"

Yume'd told me that when Asuhain was young, guys bullied her, leading to her hate of all guys in general. She must've been the kind of person who didn't like the way they looked. But even so, she was trying to get a guy to like her solely based on the value of her body? It was extremely out of character.

As soon as she heard this point, she seemed to become disheartened and began mumbling. "That's...true. You're right."

"I don't know much about you, but I at least know that this is unlike you. Why don't you tell me what's really going on?"

"It's unlike me?" Asuhain practically whispered. "I don't even know what's *like* me anymore." She said this in a passionate yet pleading voice, sounding like a lost child. It felt like this was the first time since she asked me out that I was hearing what was really on her mind. "Do you...mind?"

But before I could answer her, she rested her head on my shoulder. She was using it as a pillow just as Isana had on the plane. It was immediately obvious to me that she was trying to copy her.

"It's said that when you get close to the opposite sex, your heart beats faster," she said from my shoulder.

“Yeah, in most cases,” I said, as I felt the weight of her head on my shoulder.

“Is your heart beating faster?” she asked.

My answer was probably very important to her, so I gave it to her straight.

“Nope. There’s only one girl who makes that happen.”

I’d already gotten used to Isana’s propensity to be up in my personal space. But also, I wasn’t so simple a guy that I’d get flustered by someone whose heart wasn’t even in what they were doing.

“I see...” she mumbled, sounding somewhat disappointed but also somewhat relieved.

I could tell that she was hiding something, but despite how obvious it was, I got the feeling that it was buried so deep down inside that someone like me wouldn’t get close enough to be able to get it out of her.

At that very moment, we heard some loud voices approaching the bus, causing Asuhain to shoot up and move her head off my shoulder. In the next minute, Yako Yoshino and her two friends got onto the bus. As soon as they did, the three of them froze for a second, seeing me and Asuhain.

The first to approach us was Yoshino. “Oh? Hey, Ran-chan, what’s up?!” For some reason, even though she said this in a cheerful tone, I sensed coldness in her voice. “Hm? That’s not *your* seat...is it?”

Their glares were boring holes through Asuhain. She looked up at Yoshino. “You’re right. My apologies.” Then, she stood up and moved to a window seat farther away from me.

Yoshino and her friends resumed their conversation while moving to the seats in the back of the bus. *We don’t have assigned seats, though...* At the very least, I was certain that something was happening behind the scenes that we weren’t aware of.

## **More Comfortable When Guys Aren’t Around**

**Yume Irido**

Our lodgings for the first day were at a luxurious-looking resort hotel. Before



entering, our teacher gave each of the groups their key cards.

We walked into a very spacious foyer, which was connected to a large banquet hall that seemed like it could be used for events such as weddings. Most likely, this would be where we'd be eating dinner. It was now about five in the afternoon, and we needed to put our stuff in our rooms and change out of our school uniforms. I knew this from working in the student council, but students weren't typically allowed to wear their school uniforms inside of hotels.

So with that, we went up to our respective rooms. The girls from our class were on the seventh floor with four girls to a room. Fortunately, there were exactly four girls in our group, so we naturally became roommates, meaning that Akatsuki-san, Higashira-san, Asuhain-san, and I were all together.

I inserted our room key into the card reader, making the lights in the room turn on. Inside, there were two large beds and then an adjoining room with two more beds. In the back of the room, there was a window where you could gaze at the Naha landscape.

"Phew...it was so hot," Higashira-san said, dropping her bag next to a bed and crashing back-first onto it.

As soon as I had unlocked the room, the air conditioning turned on, so she was bathing herself in the cool air.

In comparison, Akatsuki-san was very energetic. "The beds are humongous! Let's decide who's sleeping where! I call the bed next to Yume-chan!"

"Uh... I'll pass. That doesn't feel safe," I said.

"Rude! Okay, then Higashira-san!"

"I...sense some ulterior motives from you, so I will have to pass as well."

"What is this horrible impression you two have of me?!"

I laughed while I put my stuff next to the bed that Higashira-san was currently spread-eagling on. Like this, Akatsuki-san had naturally ended up on the bed next to Asuhain-san. There was probably no worry about Akatsuki-san doing anything to her. She wasn't that uncouth, although...she had fondled her

breasts when meeting her for the first time.

I sat down on the bed and exhaled. Higashira-san rolled over and looked at my body.

“Thinking about how you’ll be sleeping right by me evokes lewd feelings inside,” she said without skipping a beat.

“On second thought, maybe I should sleep next to Asuhain-san,” I said.

“I’m so sorry for sexually harassing you! I do not wish to lose my chastity to Minami-san!”

“How about I do that now, then?!” Akatsuki-san said, pouncing onto Higashira-san with her powerful legs, burying her head into Higashira-san’s bountiful breasts.

“Nooo! You’re going to enlarge them!” she wailed, screaming some kind of nonsense.

“It’s okay to play around, but you two should change first,” I said to Akatsuki-san, who was fully enthralled by being enveloped in the big breasts of Higashira-san, who was writhing around from being fondled.

“You’re gonna get the sheets dirty with your sweat,” I said.

“Oopsie. Good point. I wanna get changed,” Akatsuki-san said, grinning at Higashira-san who she still had pinned on the bed. “Want some help changing?”

“Huh?”

But while she tried to process what was going on, Akatsuki-san had already started unbuttoning Higashira-san’s shirt, revealing her cleavage.

“W-Wait! Time out! Full stop! This is far too perverse!” Higashira-san protested.

“I’m gonna strip you down bare. What kinda bra you got on?”

“It’s erect! You’re at full mast! This would be a perfect stopping point!”

I could feel my face getting red, most likely due to her unexpected vocabulary, unbecoming of girls. *This is what happens immediately when there are no guys around?!*

“Don’t worry, you and your dirty body are in good hands!”

“P-Please at least be gentle.”

“Hey, you two? I get why you’re all hyper, but let’s cut the vulgar language! Asuhain-san’s here too.”

Akatsuki-san and Higashira-san looked at me simultaneously before whispering to each other.

“She acts all prim and proper, but she’s the dirtiest one out of all of us.”

“Indeed! I’m so jealous of how she does *it* every day.”

“Hey, I can hear you two!” I yelled, throwing a pillow at them.

Upon getting hit, the two of them began laughing loudly, amused. I glanced at Asuhain-san to see how she was doing, but it seemed that she hadn’t heard anything. She’d taken off her shirt and was wiping her cleavage with a handkerchief.

“Ooh, I understand that feeling,” Higashira-san said as she sat up. “Sweat really builds up there, doesn’t it? It gets itchy if you don’t do anything.”

Asuhain-san reacted, looking at Higashira-san. “True... Summer is very troublesome.”

“Bras become easier to see through our summer uniform as well.”

“But then, wearing thick clothes makes you too hot...”

“Precisely! And that in turn only makes the sweat worse!”

Akatsuki-san began to tremble in fear, hearing their conversation. “Th-The tiddies...they’re mutually understanding each other! Sweat builds up?! Where?! That’s never happened to me! You’re with me, right, Yume-chan?!”

“Sorry, Akatsuki-san... I kinda get what they mean.”

“Ack! There’s nothin’ but big tits here! Wait...am I in heaven?”

Akatsuki-san didn’t actually have a complex about breast size, but was simply in love with big boobs. But also...Asuhain-san was talking normally to Higashira-san. Either she was happy she’d found someone she could relate to, or I was right about her ignoring me.

I pulled out my change of clothes from my luggage, laid it on the bed, and then took off my shirt. Higashira-san had been right when she said that bras were easier to see through the thinner fabric of our summer uniform. But even in regard to that, I'd come prepared. I was sure to wear a bra that wasn't easy to see through our clothes. I'd already picked out my underwear for April based on what wouldn't show through. I'd chosen simple designs so that I wouldn't be teased by other girls. I did have some that weren't as simple, but yeah, those were...uh-huh.

"Whoa! Come over here!"

Around when I was changing into a beige blouse and a long white skirt, Akatsuki-san, still in her underwear, beckoned me over to the window.

I passed by Higashira-san as she was changing to approach Akatsuki-san. "You really shouldn't be standing by the window in just your underwear."

"We're super high up—nobody's lookin'! But anyway, look down there!" she said.

I stood next to her and looked down. About four floors down, there was a pool with water that sparkled blue. It seemed that next to it, there was a terrace installed with a barbecue restaurant.

"It's a pool! Totally gives resort vibes!"

"We can't use it, though. Don't you remember what they told us?" I reminded her.

"Isn't that kinda stingy of them? We even brought our swimsuits!"

"Yeah, but just the people who selected the marine course."

The only people who'd needed to bring swimsuits were other students like us who'd elected to participate in the marine experience course. None of the other students had theirs with them.

"What a waste! The night scenery from the pool's definitely super pretty!"

"Yeah, I'd love to go on a date there." But since this was a school trip, there wouldn't be a chance to get close to that pool...unless. "Oh."

"Yume-chan?"

“N-Nothing.”

Since this was a school trip, we weren't allowed to use the pool. In other words, nobody would be going near it, meaning that it might be a good place to meet up with Mizuto.

## **What I Couldn't See until Now**

### **Mizuto Irido**

My room assignment was me, Kawanami, and two other guys from our class that I'd never really talked to. They were people that Kawanami had personally selected.

When I asked him what reasoning he'd used to select them, he said the following: “Well, of course it's 'cause they have girlfriends. Isn't it easier to be in the same room with people like that? There's more flexibility when certain situations arise.”

Instinctually, I thought he was being gross, but I couldn't say much because I kind of agreed. At seven, we went down for dinner. The banquet tables were crammed with dishes. We were seated in our groups and had some meat, fish, rice, and various steamed dishes.

It came as no surprise that the biggest eater at our table was Kawanami, but surprisingly, Minami-san ate about the same amount. Yume said something to the effect that it was a mystery as to how that small body of hers got rid of all the energy from the food, and Minami-san quipped back that that's what she wanted to know.

After dinner, there wasn't anything left to do except take a bath. We had free time until lights out at ten. We took turns taking baths in our room, so I didn't have to worry too much about getting back to the room in time.

That being said, it felt like a waste to hole up in a hotel room after coming all the way to Okinawa. So, I decided to go look for a place where Yume and I could secretly meet. As I did, I heard a conversation between girls near the elevator near the banquet hall.

“Right?”

From a distance, I could see that a familiar girl, Ran Asuhain, was surrounded by three girls. Looking closer, I recognized another one of them: Yako Yoshino. She was wearing a camisole and short shorts that almost looked like underwear. Her stomach and thighs were laid bare for the world to see—a fashion sense that only she was sporting. The other girls were ones I saw hanging around Yoshino frequently. Putting it nicely, they were her friends. Not so nicely, her cronies.

It seemed that Yoshino's group was talking one-sidedly to Asuhain. Their thorny words reached my ears.

"Like seriously, take a hint. We're all waitin' our turn."

"Seriously not cool, tryin' to cut in line. Or what, did you think that you're a better match for him? That's messed up."

From what I could gather, it wasn't a very friendly conversation. Yoshino's group was essentially lecturing Asuhain as a boss would an employee, and she was just standing in silence, listening. It wasn't the most palatable of situations, but unfortunately, my sense of justice wasn't so strong that I'd butt in to save her. Plus, I had no way of knowing what they were talking about. Fortunately, I didn't have to lift a finger because Yoshino stepped in.

"Aw, c'mon, no need to be so harsh, you two. Ran-chan's emotions just got the best of her."

"It's such a dick move, though. Think about how poor Higashira-san must feel."

*Higashira? Wait...are they talking about us?*

"Well yeah, trying to get the jump on everyone's not cool, but I'm sure she'll be more careful in the future, right, Ran-chan?" Yoshino put her hand on Asuhain's shoulder and smiled, but as she did, she leaned in and whispered something into her ear.

From where the other girls were standing, they might not have seen, but I clearly saw that she'd whispered something in her ear. As she did, Asuhain's eyebrows rose in surprise. But Yoshino walked away, simply wearing a smile and beckoning at her two friends to follow her.



“C’mon, let’s go upstairs. The convenience store awaits!”

Then she pressed the button to the elevator and the three of them disappeared into it shortly after. After they were gone, Asuhain got onto the other elevator and left.

From what I could piece together, they were getting aggressive with Asuhain because they thought she was trying to hit on me despite me supposedly dating Isana. It was the kind of pack mentality from girls that I’d heard of.

I couldn’t get the spiteful image out of my head, but it was essentially the same thing that Kawanami and Minami-san had been doing behind the scenes to anyone who had tried to put the moves on me or Yume. It made me realize that Asuhain had gone through the effort of taking a big risk asking me out. But also I couldn’t help but wonder about what Yoshino had said to make Asuhain freak out that much.

Up until last year, I didn’t have the mental capacity to think about anyone else besides Yume and Isana. But now that all of the stuff with them had been squared away, it seemed I was able to take in other situations. It seemed that school was a more complex place than I’d thought.

“Oh, there you are.”

I turned around and saw Yume jogging towards me from the banquet hall. She’d changed out of her uniform and was wearing a sand-colored blouse and a long skirt that went down to her ankles. The exact opposite of Yoshino, Yume looked prim and proper.

“You just love disappearing whenever you get a chance, don’t you?” She pouted.

“I didn’t wanna sit on my hands and wait. It’s all about using time efficiently.” Waiting around the banquet hall for too long would also only earn me a warning from our teachers.

“Sheesh. You really need to remember your promises.”

“What are you talking about?”

But right as I tried to question her further, she leaned in towards me and

whispered in a cheerful voice. “Nine o’clock at the pool on the third floor.”

As soon as she said this, I knew what she was talking about. We weren’t allowed to *use* the pool, but there wasn’t any rule about us going near it. At nine o’clock, there’d only be an hour before we were supposed to be in our rooms, so most of the students would be in their rooms getting ready for bed. That meant we didn’t have to worry about anyone finding us.

“Got it. Nine o’clock.”

Yume nodded, smiling before moving away from me. “Good night,” she said, waving at me before returning to the banquet hall.

*It’s hard to believe how the straitlaced Ayai has become so cunning.* I returned to my room, genuinely happy that there was one more thing to look forward to.

## **Discerning Ulterior Motives Is Easier Than You’d Think**

**Yume Irido**

For the time being, my group returned to our room, and as we did, I asked a question.

“Any order you wanna take baths in?”

Higashira-san, who’d sat down on her bed, tilted her head. “Are we getting in already? There’s still ample time before we’re required to slumber, is there not?”

“Uh...” Akatsuki-san began bringing out her own itinerary to look at. “It’s lights out at ten, so we still have over two hours.”

“That’s true, but with four people taking turns using the bath, we’re gonna be cutting it close.”

If each person were to take thirty minutes, it would amount to two hours exactly. If we planned to take baths now, everyone would be done right before lights out.

Akatsuki-san loudly clicked her tongue. “Hmph. Here I thought I’d make sure we ran out of time so we’d have to take baths in pairs.”

“The bath *is* pretty big, but you clearly have ulterior motives, so hard pass,” I said.

The toilet and bath were in separate rooms, possibly because we were in a room for four. There was even a separate spot for showering.

Then suddenly, Higashira-san’s hand shot into the air as if we were in a classroom. “Can we take baths together if we have no ulterior motives?!”

“Asking that question in and of itself already makes it obvious that you do,” I quipped.

“Oh...” she trailed off, disappointed.

Also, in Higashira-san’s case, if we were to bathe together, there was no guarantee that *I* wouldn’t have ulterior motives towards her. *Those amazing boobs live rent-free in my head.*

“I’m fine with going last,” Asuhain-san said. “I don’t take long baths, and my hair dries quickly.”

*That’s true. She does have the shortest hair out of all of us.* It was a pain for people with long hair to take a bath right before bed. In that regard, it’d make the most sense if Asuhain-san was last.

“Then would it be okay if I went first?” Riding the momentum, I proposed this. “‘Cause, you know, having long hair like this means it takes a while to dry. If I bathe after nine, I might not be done by the time we’re supposed to sleep.”

*This is why I brought this topic up right after we got back to the room.* If I wanted to meet up with Mizuto by the pool at nine, then I needed to take a bath as soon as possible. But I was hesitant about being forthcoming about this, so that’s why I’d opted for starting the conversation and naturally leading things this way. This had all gone according to plan. Nobody would be suspicious of me. Just as I was internally grinning about my success, Akatsuki-san and Higashira-san, both looking apathetic, turned to face me.

“Sure, I guess...” Akatsuki-san grumbled.

“I can’t help but wonder if you’ve some other reason you’d like to take your bath as quickly as possible,” Higashira-san said.

*Why are they so perceptive?!*

Akatsuki-san sighed, relenting. “Well, whatever. If you happen to have plans around nine, then so be it. I guess I’ll go hang out with some of my friends from other classes while you take your bath. What about you two?”

“I... I think I’ll wander around the hotel. It’s very beautiful, so there may be some locations I’ll be able to use in my art.”

“I...” Asuhain-san started. “I think I’ll stay here. I have my study materials with me.”

“Whew. You’re studying even on the school trip?” Akatsuki-san remarked.

I smiled as I watched Asuhain-san pull out her studying materials. “No wonder you’re the top of our class,” I said.

“Thanks...”

*Looks like Asuhain-san really doesn’t want to talk to me, just as I thought.*

## **The Face I Only Show When We’re Alone**

**Mizuto Irido**

After passing through the locker room to get to the pool, I was met with a wide view of the night sky, all to myself. There’d been a flyer posted on the entrance of the pool that said swimming past nine was prohibited, and it seemed that the barbecue restaurant on the terrace had already closed for the night. As a result, presently, at nine o’clock, there wasn’t a single soul in sight.

However, there was a trace of someone having passed by, judging by the two trails of water that went between the pool and the wooden deck. I walked around it to move beneath a parasol over one of the white deck chairs next to the pool. I sat down and gazed at the pool as it seamlessly melted into the night scenery.

The pool jutted off from the side of the hotel, in a way that obscured the dividing line between the sky and the pool. The scenery and the water melded together thanks to that. It reminded me of Marina Bay Sands in Singapore. I’d only seen pictures of that insane hotel with the huge boat or something on top

of it, but I got the feeling that it also had a pool like this.

The pool was lit up, and the night sky reflecting off the water made me realize how atmospheric it was here. As long as we stayed beneath the parasol, there was no chance of being seen from any of the higher floors from the hotel at our backs. Though we'd been told we couldn't use the pool, we hadn't been told that it wasn't okay to be *by* the pool.

"She's started using her smarts for evil, huh?"

"And *who* might you be referring to?"

I heard a voice call out from behind me, catching me off guard. When I turned to look over my shoulder, I saw Yume walking up.

"You're here already?" I asked.

"I'm the type who's always on time. I'm surprised you're early, though. Were you just that excited?" she asked with a teasing grin.

"Of course," I boldly declared. "I couldn't wait."

Hearing this, Yume frowned, disappointed by my frankness. "It sounds like a lie when you're the one saying it."

"Where's the trust? How could you say that to your boyfriend who's trying to convey his sincerity and love?"

"A tiger can't change his stripes. Anyway, move over."

I scooted over on the long beach chair I was sitting on to make space for Yume. She squeezed in next to me, our shoulders pressing against one another.

It was incredibly uncomfortable, so I put my arm behind her, resting my hand around her lower half. With me holding her waist, we were the spitting image of a couple secretly rendezvousing at night. Yume leaned into me and stared out at the pool as it melted into the night sky.

"So beautiful..." I said.

There was a clear, starry sky above us and a glittering cityscape beneath us, and then the pool reflected both at the same time. The scenery that sparkled like gems was reflected in Yume's doe-like eyes. I silently gazed at this sight for

a while before her gaze turned towards me.

“You’re not setting up something stupid, are you?” she asked.

Her eyes were reflecting doubt in my words. But who was I to go against her expectations?

“You’re more beautiful, though,” I said.

“I knew it! I *knew* you were gonna say that!”

“I’m not lying.” I tried to stifle a chuckle.

It was true that I’d been thinking it, but even I thought saying it out loud would sound insincere. After calming down from laughing, I looked again at the sea of lights and began talking as if starting a soliloquy.

“But seriously...I never thought there’d be a day when I genuinely enjoyed my school trip.”

“You’re having fun? You keep disappearing to read, so I couldn’t tell,” she said, narrowing her eyes.

“It’s because you’re here,” I said, answering her seriously. “Even if we don’t have many chances to talk, it’s really nice knowing that you’re not too far away.”

Yume’s cheeks slightly flushed and she began looking around as if she wasn’t sure how to respond. “Wh-Where’s this coming from even? When did you get so pretentious?”

“I’m a new person after reflecting on who I was in middle school. No matter how real my affection for you is, we won’t last if I don’t try to convey that to you. I’ve come to realize that my communication’s been severely lacking.”

*But honestly, this applies to last year as well.* It is nice to be in a relationship where no words are required to understand one another, but it can’t last forever. If I wanted this relationship to last, then I needed to make sure that I regularly communicated with her. I’d realized this during our deep discussion when we’d decided to get back together. That was why I resolved to stop trying to put on airs and beat around the bush. Consequently, if there was a stage in my life when I’d been acting pretentious, it was definitely the previous year, not

now.

“Sheesh... We’ve really changed. Right around this time last year, I was thinking about how I’d never want to be in love again and anyone who wanted to be in love was an idiot.”

“Yeah...” Yume said, smiling nostalgically. “Despite looking down on people with love-addled brains...I’m right back where I started.”

“That’s gotta be why people continuously engage in the cycle of breaking up and getting back together.”

“True...but I don’t have any intention of repeating the breaking up part again.”

“Does anybody?”

“In that case, what makes us different from the rest? We’re repeating this despite knowing the risks. Aren’t we just like everyone else?”

“I don’t wanna think that I’m *that* much of an idiot,” I said.

I had a certain amount of determination, and I’m sure Yume did too. We weren’t going to repeat the same mistakes of the past. Getting back together showed that determination.

Yume softly giggled. “Mm, I personally think that you’re the smartest person in school.”

“Now *that* sounds like a lie.”

“There are times when I especially think that. Times on the streets, and times *off* the streets. You’re quite adorable, you know?” She giggled.

“Well, this is rare... A dirty joke from *you*?”

“From that reaction, it looks like you have some self-awareness about it all.”

“Look who’s talking.”

“Aw, don’t worry, you’re the coolest at times too,” she said with a soft expression as she snuggled against me, looking up at me with an expression that showed she was up to no good. She softly giggled again as I slightly pulled her thin waist closer.



“I really never would’ve known how dirty you are without having become your girlfriend,” she said.

“That goes for you too. Never would’ve known that about you if I wasn’t your boyfriend.”

“Are you sure I didn’t *become* this way because of a certain someone?”

“Be honest—you’ve been like this for a while.”

“I’ve always been prim and proper! You don’t even know how rough it is when it’s just the girls. The sheer amount of dirty jokes, I swear...”

I surmised that this was mostly referring to Isana, but I decided that this might not have been the best time to bring up another girl’s name.

“Prim and proper, you say? I have no recollection of you being like that before we got back together.”

“We’re even, then, because I don’t remember you having a cool demeanor either.”

“I don’t remember ever claiming I did.”

“That right there is what I mean! *That’s* acting cool! You’re such a simple creature. You can’t even hold yourself back after something small like kissing,” Yume teased, grinning, knowing that her words had struck a nerve. “If you’ve got a problem with what I said, why don’t you prove that I’m wrong?”

*So that’s what you’re fishing for? Yeah, you really aren’t prim or proper.*  
“You’re on,” I said, moving my face close to hers.

She closed her eyes, accepting my advance. Then, I pressed my lips to hers, eliciting a familiar sensation. After a few seconds, Yume slowly opened her eyes.

“What do you think...?” she breathed.

I stayed silent for a bit, and then this time I put my lips over hers to shut her up. After finishing a deeper kiss than before, Yume whispered seductively in my ear with a smile.

“Hold on until we get home for the rest, okay?”

At that moment, we heard a rustling from somewhere nearby.

## A Mysterious Shadow

Yume Irido

Both Mizuto and I jumped and turned around towards the source of the sound. It'd come from spherical hedges that'd been planted near the wall of the hotel. Over there at this minute, there was a person's shadow that was quickly fleeing towards the entrance of the pool.

"Wh-Who's there?!"

But while I screamed out in surprise, the mysterious figure had already escaped into the hotel. *S-Somebody saw us? Or were they watching us?! They saw everything that Mizuto and I did together?!* While I stayed in a state of complete shock, Mizuto quickly took action. He ran towards the entrance of the pool. I chased after him a little later.

Once inside, there wasn't any trace of the person around. The long hallway forked into the guys' and girls' changing rooms. Mizuto turned back to me and we silently nodded in agreement on our next move. Mizuto entered the boys' changing room and I entered the girls'.

Inside, there were rows of tall lockers, and a dryer for swimsuits in the corner. *No one's here.* After confirming this, I left the changing room and returned to the hallway. The soft lighting didn't illuminate any mysterious figure or even any sounds of anyone fleeing the scene. The hotel floors weren't carpeted, so there should have been some kind of sound if someone was running away, but it was completely silent in the hallway. *Did they already get away?*

After a little bit, Mizuto came out of the guys' locker room. Like me, he also looked both ways down the hall.

"They got away?" he asked.

"Yeah...looks like it."

"This has turned into a headache..." Mizuto said, slightly knitting his eyebrows. "If they were peeping on purpose, then they're most likely a student

from our school. I have no clue if they could hear our conversation, but it doesn't matter too much when all they had to do was watch..."

"Wh-Wh-What should we do?! Somebody knows about our relationship!"

There was no chance the news wouldn't spread; rumors spread like wildfire. It would only be a matter of time before it got to our parents.

"Calm down. We're not the only ones on this floor."

Hearing his words, I shut my mouth. It was faint, but I could hear other students talking in the distance. *There are other people around here.*

"Let's go back to the pool for now. We need to sit down and talk through the situation we're in."

I nodded at his levelheaded words and went through the girls' changing room once more to go back to the pool. The first thing Mizuto did was to check the bush where we'd seen the person flee from. It was in a row of spherical bushes planted against the wall of the hotel. There was a slight gap between the bushes and the wall, allowing for someone to hide.

"Were they watching from the start?" I asked.

"No clue, but at the very least, I didn't even notice you enter the pool area, so they must've stealthily entered and hidden themselves too." Mizuto crouched around where the person had been hiding while saying this.

*He's so calm. Is he not scared about what'll happen if our secret gets out?*  
Mizuto searched around the ground and then shifted his focus to the bushes.

"Wait..." Mizuto said, noticing something. He moved his face closer to the bush and then began rubbing the back of his neck. This was a habit of his that he'd do when he was thinking. "Take a look at this."

Mizuto moved in farther and pointed at a spot on the bush. I leaned over to look at where he was pointing and saw that the tip of one of the thin branches looked kind of red.

"Is that...blood?" I asked.

"Yeah, and it's still fresh."

Mizuto pinched the tip of the branch, staining his fingertips red. “Most likely whoever was peeping on us cut themselves when they were running away.” *Now that I think about it, I did hear a rustling sound back then. Is that when they hurt themselves?* “Nobody has their phone right now,” Mizuto suddenly said. “In other words, they can’t spread information through social media. Plus, they couldn’t have taken any pictures or videos. Without any conclusive evidence, they can’t spread this as anything more than hearsay.”

“Wh-What does that mean for us?”

“We have a time limit. We have to find this person before the trip ends,” Mizuto said while pointing at the blood traces on the branch. “By then, the wound’ll have healed, and we’ll have no way of tracking them down. What should we do?”

Afterwards, I took the elevator by myself and went straight to my room, going separate ways from Mizuto. *Who was it? And why?* When he asked about what we should do, I couldn’t come up with an answer immediately. Of course, the best option was to find this person and ask them to keep our relationship a secret, but there was also no guarantee that they would.

If push came to shove, we’d probably need to prepare ourselves to come out as a couple. I never thought that we’d be in such a sticky situation on the first day of the trip.

But Mizuto, noticing how uneasy I was, told me that nothing bad would happen to us. After all, we weren’t doing anything wrong. And...he was right. *We weren’t* doing anything wrong. Even so, I couldn’t wipe away this anxiety. After that, Mizuto put his arm around my shoulder and comforted me.

I sighed as I opened the door to my room. When I peeked into the room, I saw Asuhain-san opening study materials.

“I’m back...”

Asuhain-san looked up at me. “Welcome back.”

I was feeling really out of it, so I went straight to my bed and crashed onto it. Though things were kinda awkward with Asuhain-san, I felt comforted by

having someone else in the room. If I'd been by myself, my anxiety would've ballooned out of control.

"Were you studying the entire time?" I asked, trying to hide my anxiety.

"Yes," Asuhain-san said shortly.

"Have you taken your bath yet? You might not have enough time if you don't take one soon..." I said, glancing at the clock which had already turned to half past nine.

There was only a half hour before it was lights out.

"Right... I'll take my bath now, then," she said, looking at the clock and closing her book.

*Ugh...this is such a businessy conversation.*

She returned her study materials to her bag, brought out her change of clothes, and went into the bath. But when she'd gone through her bag, I'd caught sight of an opened pack of bandages.

## **Wound**

### **Ran Asuhain**

I put my change of clothes on the sink counter. I unbuttoned my shirt, took my arms out of the sleeves, and loosened my belt, making my jeans fall to the floor. Left in the mirror was me in nothing but my underwear.

Usually I'd feel nothing but annoyance about my needlessly large breasts, but right now there was something that was occupying my focus, making me feel melancholic.

I silently touched a particular spot on my right thigh. There was a bandage that I'd just put on earlier.



# The Turbulent Second Day

## Morning Loosens One's Moral Judgment

Yume Irido

I sluggishly opened my eyes slightly to the rays of the sun, and also to something soft enveloping my body. *There's a nice smell...and someone's breathing cutely in my ear...* When I slowly opened my eyes fully, I was met with Higashira-san's sleeping face.

"Zzz..."

*Um...she's hugging me like a body pillow.* Of course, I had no memory of going to sleep with Higashira-san in my bed, so she must've moved over here in her sleep and proceeded to cuddle me. After all, the beds were right next to each other.

"Higashira-san...?"

"Zzz..."

*It's no use. She's not waking up. In that case...* I put my hand in between our bodies and gripped the mounds of fat that'd been squishing against me, eliciting a surprised, sluggish cry from her. *Hm...she's not wearing a bra. My fingers are sinking in.*

As soon as she started seductively moaning, her eyes flew open and fell onto me.

"Morning," I said.

"Wha...?"

She blinked her eyes over and over for a bit before she slowly began to realize what had happened, her face growing red.

"D-Did we finally do i—"

“No. Absolutely not,” I quickly said. “You just rolled onto my bed. But also what do you mean ‘finally’?”

“Oh... My apologies. But in that case, why were you fondling me?”

“I figured that’d wake you up.”

“I see...”

But to tell the truth, her breasts were just so huge and soft that I wanted to touch them, so I was merely pretending that waking her up was the real reason.

“M-My apologies. I’ll move away now,” she said.

“It’s okay. I’m not angry. If anything, your body was so soft and warm that I kinda wish I had you in my bed every morning.”

*I might still be half asleep.* I found myself caving to my desires and hugging Higashira-san. Doing so made her face go red and her eyes dart around frantically.

“Y-Yume-san?!”

“Sorry. Do you not like it?”

“Well, no, but...this is a large amount of stimulation first thing in the morning.”

“Heh heh. The way you’re panicking is so cute,” I said sweetly, putting my forehead against hers.

It seemed that this had made her head boil over and she stopped resisting. “I’m okay if it’s you, Yume-san... Please be gentle.”

“Oh? Then I guess I’ll take you up on your offer.”

“Th-This is too sudden...” Higashira-san moaned.

“What time in the morning do you think it is?!” a voice cried, interrupting us.

The sheet that’d been covering us was ripped off, revealing me and Higashira-san underneath. Akatsuki-san looked down at us, anger in her eyes.

I tried making an excuse. “W-We were just playing around a bit.”

“Let me in!” she yelled, diving in between us to try and sandwich her small



body there.

Asuhain-san shot us an exasperated look.

## A Meaningless Event

**Mizuto Irido**

“What’s with you almost getting seduced?” I asked Yume as we got food from the breakfast buffet.

Yume awkwardly turned away as she put pasta onto her plate. “Look, it’s not my fault. Higashira-san kept reacting so cutely, I couldn’t help myself...”

“I can’t believe this, coming from the girl who was worried *I’d* cheat on her.”

“B-But one could call that a form of bonding between girls! We were just playing around!” Yume said, frantically digging her heels in.

Today, she was wearing a camisole over a shirt and tight jeans. She’d elected for an outfit that was easier to move in since there was a lot of walking planned for today.

I exhaled, exasperated. “Even if that was your intention, who’s to say Isana wasn’t taking it seriously?”

“Huh?”

“Isana’s into girls too, y’know.”

“Huh? Really?!”

“I mean, her interest in the female body is higher than the average girl’s, right? Sure, it could be an aesthetic preference, but it could also be a reflection of her real sexual orientation. But that’s something that only she knows...or maybe doesn’t.”

She had never experienced having a crush until she asked me out. I didn’t even know if she was interested in real relationships. I got the feeling that her lust was much more unchecked than normal people’s.

Yume’s cheeks flushed slightly and she began mumbling. “O-Oh... I’ll need to be more careful.”

“What about you? Any girls you’re interested in?”

“No! No, no, no. I’m not into girls like that!” Yume quickly waved her hand in denial.

*It’s not like it’d matter if you were. Or actually, I guess I’d have to spread a wider net of people to worry about...*

Yume tilted her head. “But seriously, why did she react like that today? She was normal yesterday...” she muttered with doubt.

*Probably because she’s backed up from stress and this lust-forbidden lifestyle that doesn’t even give her a chance to draw. At any rate, Yume wasn’t stressing over what happened last night thanks to her run-in with Isana this morning. I thought she’d be freaking out more, but I guess the incident has a silver lining.*

Being seen talking together for too long would draw unwanted suspicion, so after filling up our trays, we went back to our seats where the rest of our six-person group was waiting. They were all wearing clothes suited for Okinawan weather: Kawanami in a plain T-shirt and shorts, Minami-san in an oversized tee with random English on it, Asuhain in a baggy shirt and culottes, and Isana in a long skirt. In particular, Isana looked like a rich lady trying to find shelter from heat. Apparently, Yume and Minami-san had picked out all her clothes for this trip. Though she drew a lot of different clothes in her pictures, she didn’t know how to dress herself. *Then again, she draws school uniforms whenever she sees the opportunity.*

We were supposed to sit down and discuss the plans for today over breakfast as a group, but Kawanami and Minami-san were for some reason tilting their heads and wearing difficult expressions.

“Why the long face, Akatsuki-san?” Yume asked as she brought her tray to the table.

“Well...seems like something weird’s happened,” Minami-san said while stabbing a mini sausage link with her fork then biting it.

“Like what?”

“Well, Yoshino and the others came over earlier,” Kawanami said, putting his elbow on the table. “And they asked something kinda weird. Wanna guess

what?”

“Stop beating around the bush. Spit it out,” I said.

“They asked if we’d seen their guidebooks anywhere,” Kawanami revealed.

*The ones that we all got?*

“Huh? The ones for this trip?” Yume asked.

“Yeah, apparently their copies were stolen.”

“Stolen?” both Yume and I exclaimed at the same time.

“Strange, isn’t it?” Isana commented as she munched on her scrambled eggs.

“What’s the purpose of stealing something so trivial?”

“Yeah, especially since everyone has the same one. Oh, wait, I guess the guidebooks have different seals on them, corresponding to the students’ class numbers,” Yume said.

The guidebooks we’d been given for this trip didn’t have any space for personal notes or anything. They were simple booklets with our itinerary and things to be cautious of. As Yume said, each cover had our class’s seal on them, but other than that, they were all identical. There shouldn’t have been any value in going through all the effort to steal them.

“But in the first place...” After that, I closed my mouth.

Yume shot me a confused look. “What?”

“Never mind. Just my imagination.”

I had a feeling that things were gonna get more annoying from here on out, so I stopped myself from voicing my suspicions. *But how did they know they were stolen?*

## **An Investigation That Looks Perfectly Normal**

### **Yume Irido**

A group might have had their guidebooks stolen, but fortunately it seemed that no news of my secret rendezvous with Mizuto had spread. For the time

being, I put finding the person who'd seen us on the back burner, and instead tried talking to the theft victims.

The teachers had asked me to help address these sorts of things during the school trip; plus, I felt partially responsible for checking on them as a student council member. Since the other student council member here, Asuhain-san, wasn't at the point where she was close enough to casually talk to our classmates, it meant that the task fell to me. But that begged the question...

"Why are *you* coming with me?" I asked Mizuto as he rode the elevator with me to the girls' rooms on the seventh floor.

"Just tagging along. After all, you don't really seem cut out to be a detective," Mizuto said, emotionless, making it hard to tell what he was thinking.

I frowned at his accusation. "I've read a *lot* more mystery novels than you."

"Most mystery novel fans don't ever take the role of Sherlock—they're Watson."

"Rrgh!"

*He's right. I've got nothing. Even I would agree that Mizuto's more suited to play Sherlock.* After all, I hadn't been lying when I'd said that my boyfriend's the smartest person at the school. But even so, I had a duty as a member of the student council to hear out the problems of my fellow students.

"Just keep your mouth shut and stay behind me. They're gonna freak out if they see a guy randomly show up in front of their door."

"Are those three the type to do that?" he questioned.

"If you're worried about me, just be honest and say that you are..."

True, Yoshino-san's group was the flashiest in not just our class but the entire school. They obviously weren't the type I could easily deal with, so Mizuto was probably worried about me going to meet them alone. I wanted to believe in the joyous possibility that he was looking out for me in his own way by tagging along.

I'd tried reaching out to Yoshino-san, the leader of their group, in advance, but I couldn't get through. Since it was possible that her phone was off, I was

left with no other choice than to knock on their door with no advance notice.

“Yeah? Who is it?” she asked before quickly opening the door. “Hm? Heya, what’s up, Yume-chan?”

Fortunately, Yoshino-san was fully clothed when she opened the door. That being said, she was wearing a revealing off-the-shoulder shirt and jean short shorts, leaving nearly nothing to the imagination in regard to her shoulders and thighs. Such an outfit was fairly against public morals. I frantically looked back at Mizuto, but it seemed that he didn’t care too much.

“So anyway,” I said, starting to explain what I was doing there.

After I was done, Yoshino-san nodded and peeked back at Mizuto. “Gotcha. So that’s good and all, but what’s up with Mizuto-kun back there?”

But before I could say anything, Mizuto casually stepped in. “Don’t mind me. I’m just here to make sure my mistake-prone little sister doesn’t trip over her own two feet.”

“Hm? Aren’t you his older sister?” she asked me.

“That’s right,” I said.

“No. *Little* sister,” he shot back.

Mizuto and I glared at each other for a bit. Even though we were back together, we still fought each other over who the older sibling was.

“Aha ha ha!” Yoshino-san cheerfully laughed. “It’s a whole thing bein’ stepsiblings, huh? Why don’t you guys come in? My arm’s kinda gettin’ tired from holdin’ the door open,” she said, beckoning us in.

When we entered, we saw four beds, three of which were occupied. I’d seen two of the girls with Yoshino-san frequently. The third one was someone that had been assigned to this group because she didn’t have one. She was a docile-looking girl with glasses. It kinda hurt my heart seeing her because it was like seeing my middle school self.

“So about the stolen guidebooks... Were they taken out of your room?” I asked.

“Yeah!” Yoshino-san said. “They should’ve been in our bags the entire time,

but when we went to grab 'em this morning, they were gone. Right?"

Yoshino-san's friends nodded in agreement.

"Yeah!"

"Sucks, for real!"

"Not to doubt you," I continued, "but just to be sure, you've already looked in the room, right? Like, under the bed and stuff."

Their room was currently in a state that made it hard to believe that they'd only been here one night. It was very *lived in*. Dirty clothes were strewn over their beds and chairs, and the tables were filled with their makeup products.

For some reason, there was a camisole about the size of a swimsuit and short shorts that resembled underwear drying by the window. It was as if they'd been living in this room for a month. I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd lost their guidebooks in there.

I wasn't sure if Mizuto had gotten annoyed, but he began rubbing the back of his neck and looking at the clothes drying in the window.

"Like we said, we didn't lose them. They were *stolen*!" one of Yoshino-san's friends said, irritated. She had her hair tied into pigtails. Her name was Imayuki-san. "I was goin' through my bag to look for it and I was all like, 'Oh em gee, it's been stolen!' And then, everyone else checked their bags, and none of us had one. How's that possible if they weren't stolen?!"

*If all four are gone, then it does sound more likely that they were stolen.*

"But just in case, want me to help look too? It might be good to have a fresh pair of eyes," I offered.

"Huh? Well..."

"Thanks for the offer, but I think we'll pass, Yume-chan," Yoshino-san jumped in after seeing the girl with the pigtails, Imayuki-san, clam up a little. "We already looked all over, you know? And I don't think anyone wants someone goin' through their stuff."

"Oh, yeah. I get that. Sorry for being inconsiderate," I apologized.

“Nah, it’s all good! But more importantly, do you have any extra guidebooks?”

“I don’t... They only prepared the exact amount for each student. But if you’d like, I can lend you mine... I wrote in it a bit, but if you don’t mind, then—”

“Nah, don’t worry about it! If we really need a guidebook, we could probably snag one from the guys! But instead, could we come to you if we have any problems? Our group and yours are pretty much gonna be goin’ to the same places today!”

*Oh, right. Now that I think about it, they’re doing the ocean experience course in the afternoon today too. I guess we’ll be in the same vicinity for most of the day.*

“Yeah, of course. Let me know if you ever need anything,” I said.

“Thanks! You’re godlike for real!”

After that, we left Yoshino-san’s room and headed towards the elevator.

“So?” I asked, looking at Mizuto as he walked next to me. “What do you think? You didn’t say a word.”

“They blabbed enough that I didn’t need to ask any questions.”

“What do you mean?”

Mizuto began looking up at the ceiling as if he were considering something. Then he grinned at me teasingly.

“Is it really okay if I spill the beans, *Watson*?”

*Wait, seriously? He realized something?* But he knew that I liked mystery novels, so he was taking into account that I would probably want to figure the solution out myself.

“Meanie!”

“I’m just being considerate,” he said.

Though this was a familiar move by detectives to drag out the answer to the mystery, having it done to me in real life was infuriating! *Now I definitely won’t ask you for the answer!* On my honor as a mystery fangirl, I swore not to ask him for the answer.

# The Fourth Problem

## Mizuto Irido

Our destination on the morning of our second day of the school trip was the Mihama American Village. It was a town resort that tried to replicate the feeling of America. In general, it was primarily an area for shopping, but actually seeing it made me think that it was really more of an amusement park that had an American theme to it.

The entire town was colorful like a bag of foreign sweets. Growing up in a place where the signs for McDonald's were brown made me feel like it was too bright here.

The groups would normally stick together, but the guys and girls wanted to check out different places. Ultimately, Kawanami and I mainly focused on the food places here while Yume and the others surprisingly focused on accessories and vintage clothes.

I honestly had no interest in either, but I'd decided to choose the one that seemed the most likely to be fun. I'd also get to eat lunch.

"Ooh! This really hits!" Kawanami said as he bit into a kind of fusion between an onigiri and a sandwich, which had a slice of pork and a rolled omelet sandwiched in between rice and wrapped with dried seaweed.

"Looks like you're having fun," I said as I put my arm on the wooden table that felt like it came from a tavern in a different world, and rested my face in my hand.

"How can anyone *not* have fun? It's Okinawa! What's got you so bummed?"

"Just some things on my mind..."

"You're not talking about the thing with Yoshino's group, are you?"

"That's one of them..."

There were currently three problems I was facing: The first was Ran Asuhain suddenly asking me out. The second was the mysterious individual who'd seen Yume and me together. The third was the case of the stolen guidebooks. Normally, I'd just ignore all of them, but they were bugging Yume, so I couldn't.



“It’d be nice if Yume could let go of things that don’t matter...”

“Don’t you like her precisely because she doesn’t?” Kawanami asked, grinning at me.

Though I’d decided to be honest with Yume about my feelings, I had no obligation to entertain Kawanami.

“Do you know anything, Kawanami? You know people, don’t you?”

“About the guidebook thing?”

“Yeah.”

“At the very least, I don’t think the guys were involved.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Yeah, and you can take that to the bank. I’m not able to get in the loop as easily without my phone, but even so, I’ve been checking in with each of the groups to get a feel for what’s what. If their guidebooks were actually stolen, a girl did it.”

“Figured...”

“You make it sound like you already knew that.”

“Just my guess since in their story, their guidebooks were stolen from their bags.”

“Oh...” Kawanami might not have had the best grades, but he was quick on the uptake. “So whaddya think their objective was?”

“Can’t say for sure yet. At any rate, I don’t wanna sling any false accusations around and ruin the mood of the trip. So I’m gonna take things slowly.”

“Wow, you can actually read the room now. Love really does change people.”

“I’ve *always* been able to read the room.” I gazed at the emerald sea that stretched out boundlessly under the blue sky while eating my pork-and-egg onigiri.

“Hm? Isn’t that Asuhain-san?” Kawanami asked suddenly.

I looked at where he was indicating, and I saw a familiar small-framed girl

walking by herself among the crowd of domestic and foreign tourists.

“What’s she doing by herself? Shouldn’t she be with the others?” Kawanami wondered aloud.

I couldn’t exactly see her expression from here, but from the way she was walking, it felt like she was wandering aimlessly. Suddenly, I remembered the scene on the bus from yesterday. Just as she’d laid her head on my shoulder like a lost child, she was actually wandering around this foreign landscape like one too. I put my pork-and-egg onigiri back in its wrapping and left it on the table.

“Watch this for me, will you?”

“H-Hey!” Kawanami protested.

I got up and jogged through the crowd until I got to Asuhain. Then I lightly tapped on her shoulder.

“Asuhain.”

As soon as she saw my face, she jumped a little. *Did I surprise her? Maybe I should keep an appropriate distance.*

“What’re you doing by yourself? Where are the others?”

But Asuhain just looked at the ground in silence for a bit. “I just am. I felt like walking around alone for a bit.”

“You don’t have your phone on you. You shouldn’t go off on your own—”

“Please stop,” she said firmly, turning her back to me. “I...don’t want to talk to you.”

Then she ran off into the crowd, disappearing. Though I wouldn’t say that she’d opened up to me yesterday, I’d felt like I got a glimpse of her hoping to achieve some kind of understanding with me. But right now, as I watched her disappear, it felt like she wanted nothing to do with me. *Well, it looks like I have another problem to think about. Problem four: why is Asuhain suddenly acting differently?*

## The First Step Forward

## Yume Irido

After going around the store that only sold Christmas-related products, Yoshino and her group appeared.

“What up? Oh, they’ve got some cute stuff here!”

As she’d said earlier, their group was in the same area as ours. While we weren’t always together, they were typically in sight, and sometimes they’d come over to talk to us. When they did, Higashira-san would always clam up and hide behind me.

I’d thought that after being in the same class for a year, Higashira-san would at least be a little bit less shy around Yoshino-san, but it seemed that she still didn’t feel comfortable with gyarus.

“Hm?” Yoshino-san said, looking around as if she was looking for someone. “Where’s Ran-chan? Wasn’t she just with you guys?”

“Huh?” After she mentioned it, I looked behind me, and as she said, Asuhain-san wasn’t there.

She’d been keeping a bit of a distance behind me, so since it was obvious she was trying to avoid me, I didn’t try to approach her aggressively. Instead, I’d used Akatsuki-san to communicate with her as much as possible. *Where did she go? Did we get separated somewhere? It’s crowded here, so it’s not impossible. I didn’t notice because we weren’t talking at all.*

“Oh, there you are!” a voice called out.

At that moment, Mizuto and Kawanami-kun came into the store we were in. It didn’t seem like this was a coincidence, though. Judging by how Kawanami-kun was walking in front, they’d obviously been looking for us.

“What’s up? Did the two boys get lonely? Aw, you delicate flowers.”

“Not at all!” Kawanami-kun said, brushing off Akatsuki-san’s light teasing. “We saw Asuhain-san by herself. Wanted to make sure you guys knew.”

“We were just talking about that!” Minami shouted. “We just realized she wasn’t with us. If you saw her, you shoulda dragged her back here!”

“Irido tried talkin’ to her, but she ran away.”

“She did?”

“Or like...” Kawanami-kun tilted his head as if he was trying to find the words.

“She said she wanted to look around by herself. But judging by your reactions, it doesn’t seem that’s something she discussed with you guys,” Mizuto said, stepping in.

*By herself?* Based on her personality, I wouldn’t be surprised. But after working with her on the student council, I couldn’t imagine her going off on her own without saying a single word. In that regard, she had a very diligent personality.

For some reason, I felt like I shouldn’t ignore her. I got the feeling that the distance between us would become astronomical if I decided to let her be and instead have fun with everyone else here. At the very least, if I were in her shoes, I’d be sad. It’d make me feel as if I were just a third wheel.

“I’m...gonna go look for her,” I said.

“Me too!” Akatsuki-san quickly followed up.

“It’s okay, I’ll go by myself. I’ll be right back. Let’s meet at the, uh...Depot Central.”

If I were Asuhain-san, I’d feel so guilty if a search party came to find me. It’d be best if I went by myself. No, maybe I just wanted to.

“I saw her by the seashore near the barrel-looking chairs,” Mizuto said succinctly. “If you pass between those buildings, it’s your first left. She might still be there.”

“Got it. Thanks!” I said, lightly tapping him on the shoulder before jogging out of the Christmas shop.

I followed Mizuto’s instructions and headed to the seaside near the west of the town. There were chairs that kind of looked like barrels neatly lined up for outdoor seating and, as usual, a huge crowd of tourists along the boardwalk. Separating them and the emerald sea that boundlessly stretched into the distance was a white handrail.

*Where are you, Asuhain-san?* I looked around for any sign of a small-framed girl. There were a lot of tourists, with the majority of them having come as families from out of the country, but I didn't see anybody who looked like Asuhain-san. *But I'm sure if I thoroughly search for her, I'll—*

"There she is!"

Tens of meters away, I saw the figure of a girl leaning against the white railing to look out at the sea. She was wearing familiar clothes—a loose shirt and girly culottes. I'd always thought that despite not being interested in fashion trends, she had a pretty good fashion sense. I followed the railing to her and then called out to her.

"Asuhain-san?"

She silently looked over at me, but then she immediately looked back to the ocean. I wasn't sure what to say for a little while. My first instinct was to express that I'd been looking for her, but that kinda sounded overbearing. Asking her what she was doing here was a little too insincere. That's why, ultimately, I just decided to talk about exactly what I was seeing at that moment.

"The ocean's...pretty, huh?"

"It is..."

Then, silence fell between us again. *This is awkward. It's like we've never talked to each other before.* Despite working together on the student council for half a year, it was like everything we'd built up had been reset. At this rate, we were gonna stay like this forever.

If we kept this up, then we'd probably never see each other again after student council was over. *Wow...how many times have I gone through this? I've let things slip through my fingers and have hesitated to reach out towards the things that I might've been able to obtain.*

Even when I started high school, I relied on my spot at the top of our class as an excuse for people to come to *me* to be friends instead of proactively reaching out to others. Even joining the student council hadn't even been a thought in my mind until President Kurenai invited me. I should've experienced

this all before. Clumsily, thoughtlessly, foolheartedly, and single-mindedly reaching out to what I wanted, what I didn't want to let go of. *I'm done with this annoying cycle.*

"You wanna get some ice cream, Asuhain-san?"

"Huh?" She looked at me with confusion. She was accusing me with her eyes of not being able to read the room.

I decided to pretend like I didn't see that. I knew that if I thought too hard about it, I'd let her run away.

"It's hot, right? Makes me want something cold. Come with me!"

"W-Wait!"

I grabbed Asuhain-san's hand and pulled her away with me. *Thanks for teaching me this forceful method by doing the same thing to me, Akatsuki-san.*

I took her back in the direction of the building where I'd left Mizuto and the others, and we lined up at an ice cream store. When we got to the front, Asuhain-san ordered a soda ice cream that was blue like the ocean, and I got chinsuko-flavored ice cream since I'd never really seen it before.

The inside of the shop itself was pretty crowded, so we took our ice cream outside. Fortunately, there was a free bench next to the trees planted by the sidewalk, so we sat there. Though we had no shade from the sun, it was honestly rather comfortable compared to the summers we got in Kyoto. I stuck my spoon into the cup, scooped out some ice cream, and took a bite. A sweetness filled my mouth and made me forget the heat a little.

"I was wondering what this would taste like, but...I've never even had a regular chinsuko."

It sort of tasted like a kind of cookie and vanilla, so it wasn't as wild a flavor as I'd expected from the name. It was good, but nothing special. Asuhain-san began scooping out bites from her cup that had the blue, wavelike ice cream. When I saw her take a bite, I decided to ask what she thought.

"How is it?"

“It’s...good.”

“Wanna try each other’s? I’m curious what yours tastes like too,” I suggested.

“Huh—”

“Here you go. Open up!”

“Huh? Mmf!”

As soon as she opened her mouth in confusion, I shoved my spoon into her mouth. She looked at me with surprise.

“How is it? Which one do you like more?” I asked, smiling.

“I suppose...yours.”

“Oh, really? Let me try some of yours, then,” I said, opening my mouth.

She then very hesitantly brought her spoon to my mouth. A very refreshing taste spread across my tongue. *Hm. This really is a perfect flavor for the summer.*

“I think I like yours more. Wanna swap?” I asked.

“Sure...I guess.”

Then we switched cups. As we ate our ice cream, I mostly continued our conversation one-sidedly. I brought up what I thought the rest of the student council was doing right about now, some things from class, and so on, and even if she didn’t give me real answers, I kept going. It was as if I was continuously knocking on the door. By the time we both finished our ice cream, Asuhain-san finally started talking herself.

“Why are you...bothering yourself with me?” she asked, her gaze falling to her ice cream cup. “I’m not interesting in the slightest. I thought you were more reserved than this.”

It was as if she’d been carefully picking the words that were circling around in her head. *I’m not sure what kind of answer she’s looking for.* Regardless, I thought about it for a bit, but I had no way of knowing what she wanted, so I had no choice but to be straightforward and honest.

“Honestly, I’m...kinda pushing myself right now. But if I don’t push myself

here, I feel like it'll be over. I feel like this awkwardness is gonna keep going, there's not gonna be any resolution or clear falling out—we'll naturally just drift apart. I can't help but think that's what's in store, and I don't want that..."

"The two of us are just comembers of the student council... We won't be talking to each other once we're off it. Isn't that natural?"

"Maybe? Yeah, maybe..."

I couldn't find the words to outright tell her she was wrong. I felt like we weren't *just* comembers. At the same time, though, could I really say we were friends? I didn't get the sense that I knew her well enough to boldly declare that.

"But...it'd be kinda sad if we drifted apart, don't you think?" *Even if I can't call her my friend, feelings change, don't they?* "When we first met, when we went together to Kobe, when we worked together on the graduation ceremony—all those times are in my head. So it makes me feel kind of sad when you distance yourself."

Asuhain-san silently listened to me. *We have memories together—shared experiences. It can't be wrong for me to want to continue our relationship.*

"I can more or less tell that you've been avoiding me," I said. "Most likely, I did something... I'm not sure what, and I won't force you to tell me. But even so, I don't want to leave you by yourself. That's...what I wanted to convey to you."

Conveying my thoughts to others was something I'd learned from my relationship with Mizuto. Staying silent and trying to guess what the other was thinking was naive. *If the other person refuses to talk, then I'll go talk to them.* It was the complete opposite of how I thought in middle school, but this was my ideal self.

"Thanks for hearing me out, Asuhain-san. Shall we get back to everyone?" I asked, standing up.

Asuhain-san nodded slightly and stood up. Though we hadn't gotten any closer, this was the first step to doing that...or at least that's how I felt.



# The World Underwater

## Mizuto Irido

After checking in to our lodgings in Nago for the second day of our trip, each group headed to their respective courses. Two groups in our class had chosen the snorkeling and banana boat course—mine and Yoshino’s—for a total of twelve people. As such, we all moved to the beach on the resort’s grounds, changed into our swimsuits, and then put wet suits on top.

We sat, lined up on the beach as the instructor explained what we needed to be cautious of. Then, we practiced breathing with a snorkel and learned the hand signs we’d use underwater. Finally, after all of that, each group got onto their respective boat and headed out to sea.

The sky was perfectly blue with no clouds in sight. The surface of the sea reflected the rays of the sun off of it, making it sparkle. Yume and Kawanami simply gazed at it, while Minami-san was freaking out like a kid. Meanwhile, Isana was by herself in the corner of the boat, her face taut from nerves.

“I pray we arrive safely back to shore...”

“Don’t be such a drama queen,” I said, sitting next to my best friend and lightly patting her tense back. “We’re not going anywhere too deep. And I know you’re not thalassophobic.”

If she were actually scared, I wouldn’t tease her, of course. All I knew was that she wasn’t very athletic, nor was she good at swimming. The reason I’d decided on this course was ultimately because I felt this would be the most enjoyable activity for her since it wasn’t competitive.

Ninety percent of the time, people who ended up hating physical activities did so because they involved competing against others—which I related to. Getting immediately eliminated in dodgeball, being deadweight on the soccer field, or getting lapped during a marathon race were all the kinds of experiences that turned people off. But with snorkeling, all you had to do was listen to the instructor and float in the water. Well, to be fair, this is what I assumed, since I’d never gone snorkeling before either.

“Just have fun out there—it’ll be kinda like going to the aquarium,” I said.

“There’s no fear of drowning at the aquarium, though! Or, well...so long as the tanks remain intact...”

“We’re actually going to one tomorrow, so don’t jinx it. But seriously, don’t worry. You have a life jacket. You couldn’t drown even if you wanted to.”

“Precisely!” the female instructor said, leaning over, a bright smile on her face. “We’ve taken the proper safety precautions, so you can enjoy the sea without having to worry about a thing! If there’s anything you’re really concerned about, I’ll help as much as I can!”

“O-Okay...”

*Well, I’m sure Isana’ll be all right. She’s not paralyzed with fear enough to suddenly start talking to new people.*

The boat reached its destination, and it was finally time for us to disembark and begin peering into the world beneath the waves.

To be honest, I was a little nervous myself. After all, this was my first time going in the ocean. We didn’t have swimming classes at Rakuro, and it had been quite a while since I last swam. Maybe even since I learned how.

Seeing how the twinkle of the sunrays made the coral reef sparkle soothed my nerves. I wasn’t the type that was easily moved, but looking into the sea made me realize that it was almost like looking at a different world entirely.

We followed our instructor’s directions and swam around the boat while experiencing the world beneath the waves. Yume was standing with Minami-san and Asuhain, playing with the colorful fish that lived in the coral.

Ever since Yume had brought Asuhain back from Mihama American Village earlier today, the two girls seemed to have gotten closer. Asuhain was still a little hesitant, but Yume made up for that in spades by how aggressively she was trying to interact with her.

I couldn’t help but feel proud of how much Yume had grown. Though she’d had her high school glow up, her base personality hadn’t changed at all, in my eyes. Most likely, effort alone wasn’t enough to change the personality one was born with.

Anyway, regarding Asuhain—Yume was treating her the same way Minami-san had treated Yume when they'd first become friends. Yume was pulling Asuhain along, trying to deepen their friendship. I couldn't help but remember a certain girl from middle school, not one friend to her name, who was even more socially awkward than I, and how I'd tried to involve myself with her despite it not being something I'd typically do. *Then again, both Minami-san and I'd had ulterior motives when we first tried to get close to Yume.*

Meanwhile, I was doing my best to make Isana comfortable while Kawanami, who was aggressively diving in the ocean, led us around. I glanced at Isana, but judging by how wide her eyes were as she enthusiastically gazed at the ocean, it seemed I had nothing to worry about.

By the time I was finally getting used to swimming in the ocean, Yume beckoned for me to come over. I covertly left Isana and Kawanami, and swam to her. I saw what was probably a school of at least ten striped tropical fish that looked like they could fit in our palms.

Yume slowly reached out to them, and a good number of them began pecking at her hand. I imitated her, and the fish began doing the same to me. It really made me realize that they were living beings. It was obvious, but it was something that you couldn't feel through a monitor or the glass of a tank.

Yume and I looked at each other and smiled with our eyes. *Well, what do you know? I'm having a good time on the school trip after all.* I couldn't help but think that my middle school self would be pretty disappointed that I was enjoying a school trip like this.

## **The Mysterious Figure in the Shadows**

### **Yume Irido**

"That was so cool! It was, like, completely blue!"

"I-Indeed! And then the fish were swimming right in front of us!"

"I'm so glad the weather was nice today! No matter where you looked, it was blue! It was like we melted into the ocean!"

After we finished snorkeling, we got back onto the boat, unzipped the tops of

our wet suits, and began talking about our impressions. Akatsuki-san, Higashira-san, and I had picked out our bikinis together. In particular, Akatsuki-san had been very enthusiastic when we chose Higashira-san's. And now, even though the target of Akatsuki-san's fixation was right in front of her, she was too excited about the snorkeling experience to even look.

"I've never been to the beach before, but I kinda like it," Minami-san said while looking at the bobbing surface of the ocean. "It's just like you said, Yume-chan. It's like we melted into it. It was like the small things didn't even matter anymore. I might wanna save up to come here again. You too, right, Kawanami?"

She suddenly called out to him, but he wasn't caught off guard at all. "Hell yeah! I wanna try ridin' a surfboard next time!"

"Surfing?! You're tryin' way too hard to be a stereotypical cool kid!"

"Just you watch, I'm gonna become a real man of the sea—tanned and everything!"

"Cringe!"

Minami-san and Kawanami-kun began cackling. During that time, I decided to talk to Asuhain-san, who was sitting next to me.

"What did you think? Have fun?" I asked.

"Yes... I suppose I was deeply moved." I wasn't sure if I was imagining it, but she looked as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. "It's just as Minami-san said; it's as if all the small things I'd been carrying melted away into the water. It's been a while since my mind has been so clear."

Ever since what happened earlier today, Asuhain-san had begun talking to me a little bit more normally. But right now, she was especially loquacious. *Is this the power of the great outdoors?* For the record, Mizuto was leaning on the edge of the boat, staring off into the distance. Apparently, he was exhausted from snorkeling, since he wasn't used to being too physically active. I'd heard that he'd picked this course out for Higashira-san in order to do something about her lack of exercise, but he was in pretty bad shape himself.

When our boat reached the shore, we were told we could play on the beach,

using the free time we had before the banana boat course. That being said, I wasn't exactly filled with energy, so I sat under a parasol while watching Yoshino-san's group frolic on the beach.

"Here ya go!" Akatsuki-san said, bringing over a chilled canned drink.

"Thanks." I took the can from her and pulled back the tab as she sat next to me.

Then, as soon as I started drinking, a teasing look crossed her face. "You got some smooth moves, if I do say so myself, Yume-chan."

I could tell that she was hinting at something, so I suddenly stopped drinking. "Wh-What do you mean?"

"What I mean is that you were getting' some lovey-dovey time with Irido-kun when Asuhain-san and Kawanami weren't lookin'. You've gotten so crafty. Makes me sad."

"You make me sound like some kind of mastermind..." I wryly smiled.

"But, y'know, you're walkin' a pretty tight rope. I know all about your little late-night pool rendezvous."

"Huh?!"

*How does she know about that? Sure, she might've figured out Mizuto and I met up, but she shouldn't know the specific location. Was she the one hiding in the bushes?*

"You should thank me! I stood guard for you, y'know?" she said.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I figured you were meeting Irido-kun at nine, so I went to the pool entrance about ten minutes earlier and watched you go into the pool. And then I coincidentally ran into Sakamizu-chan and the others, so we talked, and I kept an eye on the entrance to the pool. I mean, I didn't want anyone to disturb your little rendezvous!"

*Now that I think about it, we did hear other students on that floor. I guess that was Akatsuki-san and the others.*

“Wait, that’s pretty much stalking.”

“Oopsie!”

To be honest, if I had been in her shoes, I might have done the same thing. After all, I’d be curious. *Okay then, Akatsuki-san was waiting outside there the entire time we were talking. Hm? Wait.*

“How long were you there for?” I asked.

“Until you left with Irido-kun.”

“Nobody else came in or out of the pool, right?”

“Well, of course not. I was there the entire time to make sure of that.”

*How’s that possible? Then where did the person we saw go?* There wasn’t another entrance to the pool. Thus, there wasn’t a place for the person to run off without Akatsuki-san seeing them. The culprit who’d gotten away from us should’ve been seen by Akatsuki-san.

But even so, Akatsuki-san was saying that she hadn’t seen anyone. She had her own alibi too since she was talking with Maki-san and the others. I was sure she wasn’t lying. In that case, where had the culprit gone? They couldn’t have just disappeared into thin air, right?

I thought about this new mystery as we finished off the day riding the banana boat. It remained on my mind even afterwards when we went to change back into our clothes.

Higashira-san let out a huge sigh of relief as she undid the zipper on her wet suit. “Phew... Free at last.”

“Yeah, that must’ve been rough, especially with so much of your top half jutting out like this!”

As usual, Akatsuki-san began getting close and personal with Higashira-san and started sliding the zipper even further sideways, revealing more of Higashira-san’s breasts. Then, after unzipping it enough, Akatsuki-san moved the neck out, up over Higashira-san’s head, and then took her arms out from the sleeves.

“Gaaah!” Akatsuki-san screamed as she was consequently flung back from

Higashira-san's now freed H cups. *No, of course that's not what actually happened. Akatsuki-san definitely wanted it to happen, so she dramatically flung herself back. Well, it is true that it's hard to take it off by yourself when you have big boobs. It's easier to have someone else to lend a hand.*

"Do you want some help, Asuhain-san?" I asked.

"Huh? Uh... Yeah, thanks."

I pulled on the zipper of her wet suit and came to the realization that it was a lot easier than when I'd done it myself. And then, just as Akatsuki-san had done, I pulled it over her head, and then off her arms. Then, while I was at it, I helped get the bottom half off too by rolling it. It kinda felt like I was taking care of a little sister, which was a little fun since I was an only child.

But that feeling immediately disappeared as soon as I saw her thigh. It wasn't because I had dirty thoughts like Akatsuki-san, though—on her right leg, on the outer side of her thigh, I noticed a bandage.

"Asuhain-san...what happened here?"

"Oh...that?" It was as if it was hard to talk about for her. "That's from yesterday. It's mostly healed. Don't worry."

It took me a while before I finally said, "Oh...okay."

I remember Mizuto saying that the person who'd seen us must've hurt themselves on the branch when running away. She took off the wet bandage, revealing a cut that fit someone who'd been clipped by a sharp tree branch.

## **What the Boyfriend Can Do at a Time like This**

### **Mizuto Irido**

Our lodgings felt like a hotel in the mountains, next to the beach, which was only a part of a larger resort with various facilities. It was almost like a town. Standing in front of the lodging area were the students who'd finished their various courses. The teachers were taking roll call, and after they finished, we'd essentially have free time until dinner. Or at least, that's how it was supposed to have gone down, but one of the groups in our class had yet to arrive. Thanks

to that, we got our free time a little earlier than scheduled, or at least until roll call.

“Got a sec?” It was during this time that Yume covertly tugged on my sleeve. She didn’t say anything further and casually pulled me away from our class. I followed her to the huge pool next to the hotel.

The hotel likely wanted to emulate the vibe of a tropical country because they had palm trees around the pool. Yume stopped in the thin shadows of one of them as the sun set.

“What’s up?” I asked her.

It took some time before she found her words and was able to wade through her confusion to break through the silence. “It’s about the mysterious person from last night.”

“Do you have a lead?” I asked.

Yume nodded. “Asuhain-san... She has a cut on her thigh.”

“Her, huh?”

“You’re not surprised?”

“Despite someone catching us together red-handed, that information seemingly has yet to spread. I had a feeling it might’ve been someone who knew us.”

*With that logic, it makes sense why the culprit hadn’t said anything to anyone else. It also explains why they were aiming to catch the two of us meeting by the pool.* Of course, there was the possibility that they’d just happened to see the two of us, but it was equally as likely that they’d caught on to our plans to meet there from something one of us had said. To be honest, I’d been about sixty percent sure that the culprit had been Kawanami. But if the culprit really was Asuhain, then it made sense why her attitude towards me had changed. If she’d found out that Yume and I were dating, she would stop trying to ask me out and instead act even more awkward around Yume.

“So...what are you gonna do?” I asked. “If it really is her, I doubt she’ll spread rumors. There’s probably no harm in just pretending we don’t know.”



“True...”

“Doesn’t seem like you’re into the idea,” I said, looking at her face, which still seemed taut.

She wasn’t angry. Instead, it seemed like there was still something bothering her. Most likely, she was wondering why Asuhain had decided to peek in on us at all. Asuhain didn’t seem like the type to enjoy gossip. There must’ve been a reason. Something that only she knew the answer to. But now, Yume was lost as to what to do. She’d finally gotten on good terms with Asuhain, and she didn’t want to throw that away by pressing her about this.

“I bet you suck at *Ultimate Werewolf*.”

“Huh?”

Yume looked up as if I’d seen through her lie. “You don’t have a poker face at all. The reason you’re an honor student is because you’re honest to a fault, right? You’re not the type of person who can hide when something’s bothering you.”

“That...might be true.”

“If you need to work up the courage, you should do it sooner rather than later,” I said, putting my hand on her shoulder. “But compared to dating your stepsibling, this is nothing, right?” I smiled.

Yume looked up and forced a troubled smile. “Yeah, true.”

I was sure that Yume had already mostly made up her mind on what to do. I’d simply given her the push she needed. I hadn’t done it as an involved party, but as her boyfriend who was in the same boat.

“I’m...going to check with her. I feel like there are still a lot of things that are being left in the dark.”

“You got this.” The best I could do was send her off with her these three short, simple words of encouragement.

## **Finding the Perfect Timing**

## Yume Irido

When we returned to our class, the group that'd been late to arrive had finally come back and was trying to explain themselves to our teacher. It consisted of three guys and three girls, and apparently the girls who'd been leading the group had misunderstood when they had to be back by. Currently, they were arguing over it.

There were fifteen girls in our class and fifteen guys, for a total of thirty students. Though it was an even split, the girls had more power because of Yoshino-san's lead. Though I got the feeling that the guys tended to not care too much about that in general, it was times like this where some friction occurred.

In any case, after that, roll call was completed, and the group leaders had a meeting. Each class had five group leaders, and during this meeting, we needed to report the events of the day. Aside from one of the groups being late, there didn't seem to be much to report.

After the meeting, it was time for dinner and our recreation time, which were both Okinawa-themed. We ate Okinawan soba while listening to musicians perform traditional Okinawan music. After all that, we finally had free time.

"Phew... Really feels like we're at a resort," Akatsuki-san said as she lounged in a chair on our room's veranda while staring at the scenery.

From it, you could see the beach at night and all the trees that looked like they'd come from a tropical country.

"I like this. We can just be head empty, no thoughts. I feel so relaxed."

"I'm surprised. I thought you were the kind of person who hates staying still, Akatsuki-san."

"What am I, a tuna?!" For some reason, her quip back at me as I sat next to her was surprisingly gentle.

In terms of socializing with others, she spent her days involved with so many more people than I did, constantly messaging them. I imagined being away from her phone felt like a relaxing detox.

“Let’s go to the gift shop later, Yume-chan!”

“Yeah. I wanna look at gifts for the rest of the student council.” I glanced back into the room as I said this.

Inside, Higashira-san was sprawled out on one of the beds, and Asuhain-san was reading through her study materials. *I need to talk to her alone. Mizuto’s right. It’s only going to get harder to bring this up the more time passes.*

“Do you wanna come too, Asuhain-san?” I asked, prompting her to look up from her reading. “You probably want to buy some gifts for President Kurenai, Aso-senpai, and Haba-senpai, right?”

“I should... They’ve really helped us a lot.”

*Good. For now, I’ve succeeded in getting her to leave the room with me. I’d never be able to find time to get her alone otherwise.*

“What about you, Higashira-san?” I asked.

In response, she rolled over and waved her hand. “I will pass... I’ve nobody to give a gift to anyway.”

“What about your parents?” I wryly smiled.

Even so, Higashira-san showed no sign of moving an inch. She must’ve been pretty exhausted.

“All righty then, let’s get goin’!” Akatsuki-san said, getting up.

*I thought you said you wanted to go later...but okay.* I stood up and left the veranda with Akatsuki-san.

“Let’s go, Asuhain-san,” I said.

“Okay,” she said, putting her study materials back in her bag, grabbing her wallet, and getting off the bed.

After that, the three of us left the room, leaving Higashira-san by herself. After exiting outside, we walked along the sidewalk, which had palm trees—I think?—with thin leaves that were decorated with beautiful lights, which made it easy to see the path even when it was this dark at night.

It was bright yet quiet outside. The only sound was that of the continuously

crashing waves, which sounded so gentle from this distance. Hearing the ocean like this really made me feel that we'd come a far way from home. Living in Kyoto, there was almost no opportunity to go near the ocean. (It's easier to go to Lake Biwa.)

As we went around the winding sidewalk, we saw the gift shop. It was a one-floor building whose front had a large roof over the entrance. Upon going inside, we found ourselves in a space that was roughly as big as a supermarket. It had chinsuko, sata andagi, and all sorts of other sweets, along with handmade folk crafts of things like Shisa ornaments crammed into neat rows.

In between the shelves, we saw some familiar faces.

"Oh. Hey." Kawanami-kun lightly waved.

Akatsuki-san waved back and moved closer to him. "Oh wow, look at you, buying gifts. You've become a proper young lad."

"Yeah, you should already know that I'm serious about this kinda stuff at least."

"So where's my gift?"

"Why would *you* get one? Sheesh, how greedy are you?"

Mizuto shot me a cryptic gaze as I warmly thought about how nice the bickering between childhood friends was. His eyes flashed towards Asuhain-san, who was next to me. It was then that I understood what he was trying to get at.

"Asuhain-san, let's look over there," I suggested.

"Oh, yeah. Sure."

This was my chance now that Akatsuki-san and Kawanami-kun were up to their usual childhood friend antics. Now, I could sneak off with Asuhain-san to the corner of the store. I was sure that Mizuto would buy me all the time I needed.

## The Facts

## Mizuto Irido

I casually watched as Asuhain was dragged off by Yume. Fortunately, neither Kawanami nor Minami-san seemed to have noticed. I didn't want the two of them needlessly prying into what was going on. While I occasionally poked into their conversation in order to buy time for Yume, Minami-san suddenly remembered something.

"By the way, Irido-kun, Yume-chan told me something."

"Oh? Do tell," Kawanami said excitedly.

Minami-san glared at Kawanami who'd jumped onto the topic before I could even say anything.

"Butt out of this, you stupid voyeur! Shoo!"

"Okay, okay. I'll just stand over there with my ears covered, all right? Sheesh."

Kawanami raised both of his hands, emphasizing his surrender, and walked deeper into the store. He began looking at the gifts on the shelves while being true to his word and covering his ears. *Wow, she's really got him whipped.*

After he left, Minami-san lowered her voice and continued what she wanted to talk about earlier. "So, I was talking to Yume-chan last night, and I was wondering...did something happen?"

"How about you tell me what you two talked about first?"

"Don't worry, there's no need to be shy. I saw you two go into the pool, after all."

"I guess it's pointless to ask *why* you saw us..."

"Oopsie!"

*I'm not sure if she followed us or staked it out, but either way, this is definitely one of the things she's good at.*

"Let me confirm something first, though. How much did you see?"

"Well, I was there a little before nine—pretty much at eight fifty. Not really sure since I didn't have my phone."

"So you were staking us out... What makes you ask if something happened?"

“Well, after we talked, Yume-chan seemed like she was thinkin’ hard about something. That’s why I was wonderin’ if anything happened. Judgin’ by the vibes, I doubt it was a fight or anything.”

“Well, I guess something happened, in a manner of speaking...”

I wasn’t entirely sure if I should come out with what exactly had happened. If I did, I had no doubt that Minami-san’s huge network of contacts could help us out, but there was something about her that gave me pause. Plus, her best friend Yume hadn’t even told her what was going on, so...

“What did you talk to Yume about? Give me the details.”

“Pretty much the same thing that you and I just discussed. I was stationed outside the pool entrance the entire time that you two were in there.”

“Huh?” *If that’s true, then where did the culprit run off to?* “Is there anyone who can corroborate your story?”

“Oh, goin’ interrogation mode? But yeah, you can ask either Sakamizu-chan or Kanai-chan since they were both with me.”

“Were there any other people who knew that you were there?”

“Nope. Just little ol’ me. I wouldn’t breathe a word of this to anyone else.”

“I see...”

*No wonder Yume got lost in thought after this. This is the closed-room mystery that people like her love. But in that case...* “Hm?”

*Wait. Wait a second. Wouldn’t that make it impossible for Asuhain to be the culprit?* During our squabble this morning, I’d heard from Yume that there was already someone back in the room before her.

“Hm...”

“Gosh, why are you going into concentration mode too?! Seriously, what’s going on?!”

“Minami-san, sorry, but do you mind if I ask you one more thing? And don’t ask for context.”

“Okay, I guess. Shoot.”

“Were you watching over the pool entrance until we left the first time or the second?”

“Oh, that’s all you wanna know? I saw you two leave once and then go back inside and then back out to the elevator.”

“I see...”

*If she stopped watching after we left for the first time, then our current theory would’ve worked. But if she was watching the entire time, there was no way it could’ve been Asuhain. The culprit isn’t her.*

## **You Wouldn’t Get It**

### **Yume Irido**

As we looked at the colorful Ryukyu glass bowls lined up on the shelves, I looked for my chance to bring up what I wanted to ask her. I was waiting for the natural timing to confront Asuhain-san about the truth, but no matter how I thought about it, there wasn’t any way that was happening naturally.

Ultimately, all I could do was brace myself. If I had misunderstood things, then that would be fine. Even if she had seen us, I wouldn’t be angry. At the very least, I hoped that she’d tell me what she was thinking. That would be enough, in my mind. As I watched her glance at the Ryukyu glass, I hesitantly began talking.

“Hey...could I ask you something weird?” Asuhain-san turned towards me. I gulped once and turned away, not able to look her in the eyes, but I continued. “Where were you last night around nine?”

Even from my standpoint, this was a weird, rude question. But even so, I didn’t want to try and beat around the bush. As expected, though, Asuhain-san furrowed her brow, confused by my question.

“May I ask where this is coming from?”

“S-Sorry! Actually, last night, I was meeting with my boyfriend...” At this point, I had to come clean. I would simply keep the fact that I was with Mizuto specifically a secret. “When I did, someone saw us. I’m curious about who it

was, and was wondering if you might know anything..." I glanced at Asuhain-san to see how she reacted, but she wasn't looking at me anymore.

She let out a long, heavy sigh as she stared at the colorful glass that almost looked like a kaleidoscope.

"You're so simpleminded..." Her response was so unexpected that I could only stare at her. "Every time you open your mouth, it's all about love, love, love. Despite how much I perceive you as my rival, I've never been on your radar no matter how hard I try."

"Asuhain-san...?"

"It's unfair when you're all that's been on my mind."

As soon as she said that, her head snapped up to look me straight in the eyes, noticing the bewildered expression on my face.

Asuhain-san pursed her lips and looked down. She looked so frustrated and embarrassed, and there was nothing I could do. I had no clue what the right thing to do here was. While I clammed up, fully at a loss, she turned her back to me.

"Asuhain-san!" I called out, but my voice wasn't enough to stop her before she darted out of the store.

I reflexively ran after her into the brightly lit resort grounds. I needed to chase after that small back of hers before it disappeared into the darkness. I just barely caught up to her.

"Where is this coming from all of a sudden?!" I asked, grabbing her arm.

Asuhain-san still didn't turn to look at me. "It's not sudden at all..." she said, squeezing out these words.

"Huh?"

"This entire time... I've been so frustrated... I didn't want to admit it... I was so angry... My head and feelings have been a mess..." Asuhain-san trembled. It was like watching a dam that was primed to burst. "Why can't I stop thinking about you?! I've been trying for so long!"

"Did I do something? Then, I—"



“You...didn’t do anything. I... I’ve thought of you as a rival this entire time, but it looks like the feeling wasn’t mutual.”

Her rival? Suddenly, I remembered when we met for the first time on the student council, and how her eyes had seemed filled with fire to challenge me. Every time we had a test, those same eyes were filled with the desire to compete with me. Now that I thought about it, I hadn’t seen that same fire in her eyes since we started as second-years. No, this didn’t just start this year. She’d felt this way ever since she got the top score on the finals. *Oh, I see. I...*

“Why weren’t you even the least bit angry?!”

That was the first time she had beaten me. At the time, my head had been in the clouds. I’d been so happy that Mizuto and I were dating again that I couldn’t think about anything else. My rank on the test was the last thing on my mind. So when it had happened, I’d bluntly and honestly told her “Congratulations.”

“I was serious! I thought you were taking it seriously too! That’s why I earnestly kept the promise we made about my sleep schedule! I used every chance I had to study, and I finally—finally—won!” Her true, unfiltered feelings rang out into the night. “Am I weird for having tried so hard on some stupid test?! Are love-addled people like you normal?! Then tell me! How can I be normal?! Not once in my life has a guy ever made my heart race!”

*How did I not see this before? I’m so dense.* President Kurenai, Aso-senpai, and I—we had all gotten boyfriends. Ever since then, that’s all we ever talked about. Asuhain-san was the only one who didn’t have someone, so she was left out. I never thought she was the type who would be bothered by something like that... I thought she’d just brush off our talks as something stupid and uninteresting. I’d simply assumed all of this without even bothering to ask her.

“I... I’m so sorry. I had no idea...”

“It’s fine...” she said in a voice so cold, it made me doubt her emotional outburst earlier.

But when she turned around, there were tears in her eyes.



“You wouldn’t get it... Why *would* someone like me matter to you at all?” she declared these parting words, still hiding behind her mask.

The strength of my grip weakened, and she forcefully freed herself before disappearing into the night. This time, I couldn’t chase after her. I couldn’t even call after her. At this time, saying anything at all was too much. This entire time, I’d one-sidedly thought of her as my friend. It’d been nothing more than my own hubris.

# The Deeply Involved Third Day

## I Don't Want to Stay in Uncertainty...

On the morning of the school trip's third day, I slowly sat up in my bed and found that out of the four beds in our room, one was already empty. *Asuhain-san...* Even her belongings were gone. The only evidence of her having ever been here was the still messy sheets.

I couldn't help but remember the events of last night after I'd simply stood in place, not able to do anything as I watched Asuhain-san disappear into the night. After that...

"Asuhain isn't the culprit," Mizuto had said as he stood next to a tree. The lights hanging on it had been irritatingly bright. "I'm convinced she isn't, now that I know that Minami-san was standing guard by the pool entrance. I should've listened to you a little closer. Sorry..."

"What do you mean?" I asked weakly, curled up in a ball.

"Since Minami-san was standing guard by the pool entrance, the culprit had to have been hiding in the locker room and didn't leave until we were all gone."

"Wait...so they were hiding and we just didn't see them?"

"That's the only possibility. You saw all the tall lockers in there, didn't you?"

*Oh, right. They're big enough to fit a person. We could've easily overlooked that.*

"Do you remember how I came out of the locker room after you? That's because I was checking inside all the lockers. I'm guessing you didn't."

"Right..."

*So that means the mysterious individual was hiding in one of those lockers?*

"The culprit must've stealthily left the locker after Minami-san ended her

stakeout of the pool entrance. As a result, the culprit couldn't have gotten back to their room before either of us."

"Okay..."

"When you got back, Asuhain was already there, so that's why it's impossible for her to be the culprit. If she was, she would've had to have passed by you to get back to the room first."

"Yeah..."

"Do you know why we're talking about this right now, Yume?"

I meekly shook my head. I didn't have the will to think too much about anything.

"The culprit's someone else," he said gently. "That being said, it's a fact that her thigh has a cut on it, and it's true that someone cut themselves on the bushes."

"Oh..."

"Asuhain also started acting differently today. I'm thinking that she probably did hide behind those bushes, and that there was some kind of reason for doing so. But it wasn't when we met up. She must've been there before us and seen something, which made her start acting differently. I think the answer has to lie in the words she said to you."

*The last words she said to me before running off had been so emotionless. It sounded as if she'd given up.*

"Do you really not want to know what happened to her or what she's thinking? Would you really 'not get it'?"

I looked down and buried my face into my knees. "I don't know... I really don't, but I don't like not knowing..."

I was acting like a child, but that was how I truly, honestly felt.

I could tell that Mizuto had crouched down next to me, and then I felt him gently lay his hand against my back.

"I can stay by your side, but I can't really give you superficial words of praise,

and I definitely can't bad-mouth Asuhain to make you feel better. That wouldn't be fair, since she doesn't have anyone like that for her. More than anything, I'm sure you wouldn't be able to forgive yourself, would you?"

*He's right. I think that even having him talk to me like this is taking advantage of his kindness. Even if Mizuto helps me get back on my feet and I try to patch things up with Asuhain-san, I get the feeling I still might not really ever understand what's going through her head. I'll never be able to deny what she said to me.*

"Take a night to sleep on it," Mizuto said. "Then decide what you want to do. I'll help you as much as you need after that."

"Thanks..."

And now, I'd slept on it. The girls in our room changed in a more or less awkward atmosphere before leaving the room to go to the restaurant for breakfast. I spotted Mizuto when we arrived. Seeing me, Mizuto put the slice of bread he'd been eating down and looked up at me.

"Made up your mind?" he asked.

"Yeah."

*I want to know. I don't want to stay in the dark.* I'd been able to become an honor student, make friends, join the student council, and get a boyfriend. But even so, at this rate, I was on course to repeat the same mistakes I'd made as a middle schooler. I'd be passive, foolish, always waiting for someone to solve things for me. If I didn't face this head-on and find out what was going on, I'd never "get it."

"In that case, there's something we need to do first."

"Like what?"

"Don't you remember the other weird thing that happened during this trip?" he asked, a teasing smile spreading across his face.

## **The Reason behind the Seemingly Meaningless Incident**

Eventually, I found myself getting on the bus without anything actually being explained to me. True, we hadn't had much time, and there had been a lot of people around us, but I was sure that he was just being mean and withholding the explanation from me. *If you figured something out, tell me!* I was truly getting the full experience of being Watson while Sherlock, Mizuto, was seemingly having a lively conversation with his seat partner, Higashira-san.

"Isana, can I see your guidebook real quick?" Mizuto asked.

"Sure, but what happened to yours?"

"I put it in my luggage before we got on the bus."

"Oh, in that case, here you go."

"Hm... Wow, it's clean. Not a single mark or anything."

"Ehe heh heh. What a wonderful feeling, to be complimented... I take good care of my textbooks and notebooks. They've practically never been touched!"

"No, you should actually be using those."

Amid the anxiety that I felt during the entire bus ride, we reached our destination for the day—the Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium. Being here reminded me of the date that Mizuto and I had gone on a year ago, though this aquarium was at least twice as huge as that one.

After taking our commemorative photo by the whale shark statue in front of the aquarium, we walked inside the building, which was as spacious as an airport terminal. We took the escalator down and as we did, we all fell in awe at the beautiful blue of the ocean in front of us. Though this was nothing more than the entrance to the aquarium, there was a high ceiling that made it easier for us to get a great view of the huge ocean in front of us.

After getting off the escalator, we went to the right and finally gave our admittance tickets. For some reason, we were on the third floor. Apparently the route we were supposed to follow started from the entrance on this floor, then led to the second floor, and finally the ground floor.

"So what's the plan?" I asked Mizuto in a low voice while walking next to him.

We didn't have to stay in our groups at the aquarium, so we could essentially

just go around with whomever we wanted. Aquariums were typical date spots, but it's not like I was in the mood to boldly walk around with Mizuto. He, on the other hand, seemed perfectly normal.

"We're tying up loose ends for the other incident that occurred on this trip, not the peeping culprit."

"Do you mean the guidebooks getting stolen? What does that have to do with anything? All I want to do is figure out what's on Asuhain's mind."

"If I'm reading things right, then the incidents are very closely related. After all, Asuhain's the one behind that."

"Huh?"

I couldn't help but express my surprise at his statement and look at him. As I did, a large tank with planted coral (or something?) came into view.

While Mizuto watched the fish, which were such vivid blues and yellows that they almost looked painted, he began his explanation. "More specifically, she was an accomplice."

"An accomplice...? Why would Asuhain-san do all that?!"

"I'm not sure, but I have a good guess. That's why we need to clear things up."

As we passed by the tank with the coral, we entered the tropical fish area. Students from our school and tourists alike were loudly clamoring over the brightly colored fish swimming around. Though I'd always envisioned aquariums being quiet places, it was the exact opposite here.

The top of the tanks here faced the outside, so the rays of the sun were reflected through them. The blue that came through the tanks illuminated the path as well as the guests. As I walked through, I gazed at the tropical fish through the crowd.

"I wish I could take a better look at everything since we came all the way here..."

"But you can't focus like this, right?" Mizuto said, sympathetically. "We'll just have to come again some time with Minami-san, Asuhain-san, and the others."



“Yeah...”

Previously, I’d thought that if we were to come again, I’d want it to be the two of us. After all, if we were going on a trip, I wouldn’t want our time together to be interrupted by other people. But honestly, now, I was thinking that it wouldn’t be too bad to go on a trip with Asuhain-san and the others. The fact that I could think like this now was a show of how blessed I’d become. *How’d I get all these people that I want to go on a trip with—a boyfriend and so many friends?*

Past the large tanks, we walked a narrow path to get to the next area. The light reflecting through the tanks began to lessen and suddenly, it was like we were in a dimly lit movie theater. Partway through there, I saw some girls from our class that I recognized. They were from the group that’d been late yesterday. They were cackling and talking loudly.

“Hey, got a sec?” Mizuto asked, calling out to them.

The three of them turned around, surprised expressions on their faces.

“I-Irido-kun? Need something?” the girl in the middle, their leader, asked, clearly confused and surprised.

I was in the same boat. I’d thought we’d be talking to Yoshino-san’s group since we were investigating their theft case.

“Sorry, but could I see your guidebooks? Just wanna check something real quick,” he asked.

“O-Oh. W-Well, that’s kinda...”

The three of them looked at each other uncomfortably. *Huh? Why are they reacting like this?* But my confusion was answered by Mizuto’s next statement.

“They were stolen, weren’t they?”

The three of them gasped simultaneously. *They had theirs stolen too?* Seeing them freeze up, Mizuto continued to put on the pressure.

“You don’t have to be so scared—I’m here as a friend. To be honest, I think I know who stole them, but I’m gonna need the guidebooks you three have right now to prove it.”

*Huh? But you just said theirs were stolen! They can't show you guidebooks they don't have!* I was extremely confused, but Mizuto turned around to me.

"Don't you remember what I said about how they just talked on their own?"

"Oh, you mean when we spoke with Yoshino-san and her group?"

"Yeah."

Yesterday morning, Mizuto and I'd gone to their room, and during our conversation, Mizuto had picked up on something but decided to keep his mouth shut because he wanted to bully me.

"They said that the four of them couldn't find their guidebooks, so they concluded that they'd been stolen. They were very emphatic about that. You could interpret that as them having woken up, checked their bags, and immediately jumped to conclusions. It's clear that, in their minds, all of their guidebooks had been stolen."

*Now that he's laying it out like this, it does seem a little odd. If I'd checked inside my bag and seen that the guidebook was missing, I wouldn't immediately think that it was stolen; I'd think that I'd lost it.*

"I can only think of one reason that the simple act of checking in their bags would lead them to confidently declare that their guidebooks had been stolen."

"What is it?"

"Their guidebooks were switched out with other ones."

"Oh!" As soon as I reacted, an awkward look spread across the faces of the other three girls. *That makes sense. If they were switched out, then it'd be obvious that they'd been stolen, not lost.*

"But...the contents of the guidebooks are all the same, right? How'd they know that they were switched out? Was it because a different class number was on them? Or that something was written inside them?"

"If they had a different class's guidebook, they could just go straight to a teacher. After all, it'd be clear as day to anyone that the guidebooks had been switched. But if your guidebook got switched with one from the same class, then there's no way for a teacher to be a hundred percent sure that it was

actually stolen. After all, it doesn't really matter what's written in there. That's not something teachers are concerned about."

"So was the writing in the guidebooks the culprit's objective?"

"At the very least, that's the only possibility I can think of."

The only reason someone would steal something as meaningless as a guidebook was to obtain the extra information written inside. That had been the culprit's objective.

"The guidebooks most likely contained information that the victims wrote down. Something that couldn't easily be erased. Maybe something that'd been written in ink," Mizuto said, looking at the three girls who'd clammed up. "That's the reason you three got the time wrong yesterday and came late, right? The part about the meeting time had been blacked out."

*Wait, he was thinking about this all from such a trivial incident? That's all he needed to suspect that these three had had their guidebooks switched out like Yoshino-san's group?* The three of them once again looked at each other before whispering among themselves and then finally slightly nodding in agreement.

"Okay..." The girl in the middle sighed. "If you've figured out that much, then there's no reason to hide it anymore... You good with mine?"

"If possible, I'd like to see all three of yours."

Then, each of them took out their guidebooks and placed them in Mizuto's hands.

"It's kinda dark here, so let's go somewhere brighter," Mizuto said.

We moved as five down the path until we got to an area with tanks on the walls. Right next to the entrance to the area, there were countless long tentacles that looked like curtains of beads hanging down. The jellyfish almost reminded me of Cthulhu. Looking at the plaque there, I learned they were apparently habu-kurage, a type of box jellyfish.

Mizuto approached the wall, avoiding the crowds around the tanks, and began opening the guidebooks.

"I see..."

“You figure something out?” I asked.

Mizuto showed each one of them to me. As he’d said, each of them had been marked by a pen. Where they’d been marked seemed random. There didn’t seem to be a pattern...or at least that’s what I thought.

“Why would anyone switch out the guidebooks?”

“If someone blacked out the characters, you wouldn’t be able to write on them anymore, right?”

“By writing on it...do you mean like marking them with circles and x’s?”

“Yeah. What if the stolen guidebooks had been marked up like that? If you pick out each marked letter, then...”

“It spells out something?”

Mizuto smirked, showing off his mind for mystery solving. *That’s what the culprit was aiming for? They stole the guidebooks that had hidden messag—*

“If you look closely, each of these guidebooks have the same letters marked,” Mizuto said before I could finish my thought.

Mizuto took out his clean guidebook and compared it with the other three to confirm what the blacked-out letters had been.

“Broadly interpreting it, there are three types.”

And then Mizuto showed me the guidebook and pointed at each letter that the culprit desperately wanted Yoshino-san and the other girls to see.

*I. Ri. Do.* Whether they marked kanji, hiragana, or katakana, they’d carefully spelled out “Irido.” It was unmistakably our last name.

“Wh-Why...?”

*Why is our name—my name there? But judging by how this is going, then the message the guidebook is trying to spell out is...*

“They used the guidebooks for cryptographic communication,” Mizuto said calmly. “It’s like passing around notes in class. Probably using it in lieu of a phone since we don’t have ours. My guess is that if they’re going through the effort to share information, then it has to be about...” Mizuto’s gaze showed no

emotion, but it was piercing through the three who'd had their guidebooks stolen. "Who Yume's dating. Right?"

The three of them looked away and clammed up. *Who I'm dating? Like, the identity of the person I say I'm dating when I turn people down?*

"It's been a target for rumors anyway. You've made it obvious that it's someone at the school, and if it's someone our age, then it wouldn't be crazy to assume that you'll be meeting with them sometime during the trip. They're probably using the guidebooks as a way to collect information and spy on you. Figured as much..." Mizuto said, closing the three guidebooks and stacking them on top of one another.

*It makes sense. This is why Yoshino-san didn't want to reveal that their guidebooks were swapped—not stolen outright. Now that I think about it, it felt like she wasn't super happy that I'd come to her room.*

"S-Sorry..." one of the girls quietly apologized as she accepted the guidebooks back from Mizuto.

"I'm not mad or anything, and I doubt she is either," he said, shooting me a glance. "She hasn't been shy about the fact that she's seeing someone, so I can't blame anyone for being curious. If anything, it's her fault for making things so mysterious in the first place."

"Hey! Who's side are you on?!" I protested.

"But," Mizuto continued, "I know you guys had no ill intentions, but it doesn't feel great to know that people are sniffing around my stepsister's business. Just be more careful in the future."

After giving back their guidebooks, Mizuto didn't even so much as say goodbye before turning his back to them and leaving.

"You're a little angry, aren't you?" I quietly asked after catching up to him.

"Nope. You heard me. You're in the wrong here."

*Really?* I could sense that there was some kind of societal politeness and rigidity in his voice and actions. I got the feeling he'd acted like this as well when guys had begun swarming around me at the start of our first year. I could

feel myself smiling a bit. I considered poking him in the ribs, but I noticed that the girls were still watching, so I stopped myself. Instead, I decided to tease him a bit.

“You really emphasized the ‘sibling’ part back there, huh?”

“What? Did you want me to say, ‘Leave my woman alone’?”

“No way. I’m just surprised that someone who hates conversing with others as much as you can be so deliberate with your words.”

“Yeah. I’ve grown a bit.”

“And who do you have to thank for that?”

I looked at Mizuto as he fell silent, still looking forward. Even so, I knew exactly what he was thinking. He was probably going to put on airs and say that it was all for Higashira-san’s sake, but he most likely stopped himself because that wasn’t something that he should say to his girlfriend. I intertwined my fingers behind my back, feeling a new spring in my step.

“As your big sister, I’m so happy that my little brother’s grown into such a cool young man.”

“We have something more pressing to talk about.” Perhaps sensing that he was at a disadvantage, Mizuto forcefully changed the conversation. “So, we know that Yoshino’s group and those three girls were using the guidebooks as a way to pass notes to each other. If that’s the case, then what was the goal of the person stealing their guidebooks?”

“Uh...to see what they were writing?”

“If so, then stealing the guidebooks on the first night was way too early. It’d be better to wait until the second night when the girls had gathered more information. Besides, with a simple code like that, they could probably just glance at it and understand without having to go through the effort of stealing it.”

“True... So then...”

I thought back to the condition that the guidebooks they’d had were in. Because of all the blacked-out words, they couldn’t be used for codes anymore.

“To stop people from looking into me?”

“Yeah, that’s probably why.” I was slowly beginning to understand what was going on behind the scenes. “The girls in our class are pretty much divided into two forces,” Mizuto said, sticking up two fingers like a peace sign. “The first group is Yoshino and her friends. They wanna know who your boyfriend is. The other group are the thieves—the people who want to get in their way.”

Apparently, it was right to assume that the guys weren’t involved at all. According to Mizuto, the information he’d gotten from Kawanami-san had been correct. Now that I had a clear picture of all the pieces in play, I lightly stroked my chin while trying to put everything together.

“I think...I might have figured it out,” I said.

“Figured what out?”

“The mastermind behind the guidebook theft.”

“Me too,” Mizuto said, grinning. “There’s only one girl in our class who could do it so naturally.”

## **What Does the Number of Guidebooks Have to Do with Math?**

After leaving the area with the individual tanks, a huge tank on the right side called The Kuroshio Sea came into view. Before we knew it, we saw a massive manta ray swimming in front of us, which kinda startled me. The tank’s glass sparkled blue. It was almost like we were at the Ryukyu palace. It felt so fantastical, out of this world, and more than anything, huge.

After walking the path for some time, we came to a kind of theater. It almost didn’t even look like part of an aquarium anymore with how many people were there. The crowd reminded me of the kind that you’d see at Kiyomizu-dera. Moving from the back where the seats were and through the crowd of people, we came in front of a colossal tank. There was a movie-theater-screen-sized square acrylic panel that looked like it’d been cut out of the ocean. Unlike the guests who were snapping pictures and taking videos right in front of it, I felt like staying back, slightly frightened, despite not being particularly traumatized by anything similar in the past.

Inside the tank was the main attraction of the aquarium, the whale sharks, majestically swimming around. I tugged on Mizuto's sleeve while looking up at their white underbellies.

"I found her. Over there."

Mizuto looked in the direction I was pointing. The hall, illuminated by the blue light filtering through the huge tank, was split into two sections: a viewing area, and a sloped area with rows of seats for guests to look at the tank from. I could see her from up where we were near the seating area. I saw Akatsuki-san enter the path to the left of the tank with Maki-san and Nasuka-san, who had been in the same class as us in our first year, and then Higashira-san, who he'd entrusted our suspect to.

"Let's go."

Mizuto and I walked down the ramp, slipping through the huge crowd by the tank to get to the path that they'd gone down. Then, we entered the Whale Shark and Manta Ray Corner. Turning right brought us to an area that was unexpectedly bright. Looking up, the world beneath the waves extended as far as the eye can see.

The glass above us was bent in an arc to show the bottom of the huge tank we'd seen in the theater. It was a really strange feeling—like being at the bottom of the ocean. I couldn't help but feel anxious over the idea of the glass breaking and us being swallowed into the sea. All I could do was gape at it.

Underneath the transparent ceiling, there were benches where many guests were already sitting, and just like me, they were all looking up at the ocean. This was known as the Aqua Room. Akatsuki-san's group was standing in front of acrylic glass, excitedly gushing and squealing about it all.

"Oh, Irido-san! 'Sup?!"

Before we could call out to them, Maki-san, a tall girl with short hair, noticed us and waved. As she did, the other two turned to look at us, gave a quick wave, and greeted us. Higashira-san alone was obviously trembling from the ocean being right above her. We walked down the stairs to the bench they were by and as soon as she saw Mizuto, she scurried over to him like a small critter that was being chased by bees.



“Mizuto-kun!” she angrily whispered. “Do you know what manner of people you’ve stuck me with?! I’ve had the most difficult time with all the teasing regarding you!”

“Better than being ignored by them, right? You should get used to communicating with other girls.”

“It’s impossible! I’m a virgin otaku at my core! All I *can* do is act strangely!”

“You seem so confident. Why don’t you allot that confidence to other areas?”

A smile crept over my face as I watched her act as she usually did.

“Whoa there,” Maki-san interrupted, grabbing Higashira-san from behind. “You tryin’ to get all lovey-dovey on an aquarium date with your boyfriend when I’m not lookin’? Not happening!”

“Eek! Th-That’s not what I—”

“Your body’s so squeezable! It feels so nice! Do you use it at night to turn your boyfriend into a crazed animal? Huh?”



Higashira-san screamed as Maki-san continued to squeeze her like a stuffed animal. Since it was obvious I had a boyfriend due to how I'd turned other people down, Maki-san was the only one out of the four of us that had hung out in our first year without a special someone. As such, she'd only recently developed this jealous trait. *For the record, though, Akatsuki-san doesn't have a boyfriend either, but since she has something like a childhood friend, she counts as "taken" in Maki-san's eyes.*

"Chill," Nasuka-san, sporting her usual bob cut and gentle aura, said, gently soothing Maki-san. "Even if you try to interfere with the romance of others, it's not gonna make you any more successful yourself."

"How can you say that with a smile?! Are you tryin' to kill me?!"

Contrary to her peaceful appearance, Nasuka-san's words cut deep, making Maki-san release Higashira-san.

Using that as an opening, Mizuto approached Akatsuki-san.

"Minami-san, you mind showing me where the bathroom is?"

*That's a really weird question. Why would you ask her and not your best friend, Higashira-san?* At first, Akatsuki-san also seemed confused by the question. But then she cryptically smiled.

"The bathroom's right back where we came from. I don't mind showing you the way."

"Thanks."

"Sorry, gonna go to the bathroom real fast. Go on without me!" Akatsuki-san said to Maki-san and the others before going back the way we came with Mizuto.

I nonchalantly followed them as well. We passed back through the Whale Shark and Manta Ray Corner and headed to the narrow path where the toilets were at the end of the hall. When we reached there, Akatsuki-san leaned against the blue wall, her ponytail swinging a bit as she turned to Mizuto.

"So, what's up?" Akatsuki-san asked, jumping right into the topic. It was as if she knew that she'd be talking with Mizuto here today.

“Got some questions, obviously,” Mizuto said, not hesitating at all, just like Akatsuki-san. “After dinner on the first night, where were you, and what were you doing?”

*After dinner? Did something happen then?* But even though I was confused, she began cryptically smiling, intertwining her fingers behind her back.

“If you’re asking that, I’m assuming you saw something around then?” Akatsuki-san asked.

“Not really. I didn’t see anything at a decisive time, but I saw Asuhain being surrounded by Yoshino and her two friends. They were telling her off, saying something about not trying to put any moves on me.”

“That happened to her?” I asked.

I was a little surprised, but I could kind of imagine those three doing something like that. They were the people who joked about Mizuto and Higashira-san’s relationship, so I could easily imagine that they’d tell off Asuhain-san, who had asked Mizuto out due to some kind of sense of justice or lone-wolf mentality. None of them would be too happy about Asuhain-san asking out Mizuto. I hadn’t seen Asuhain-san do it myself, but they had probably witnessed her putting the moves on Mizuto. Personally, I couldn’t even imagine Asuhain-san getting close to a guy.

“I didn’t really care about the contents of their conversation, so I didn’t try to butt in or anything. The one thing I can say with absolute certainty is that Yoshino-san and her friends weren’t in their room at that time.”

“What do you mean... Oh!” When I realized what he was saying, I couldn’t help but turn my mumbling into a gasp. “You’re saying that’s when their guidebooks were stolen?”

“When dinner ended, there weren’t any particular plans until lights out. So if you wanted to steal them, you’d have to wait for the opportunity for Yoshino and the rest to leave their room. To avoid that, you chose right after dinner.”

*It’s true that it would’ve been impossible to precisely guess when they’d be out of their room since there weren’t any planned activities that would’ve required them to leave. In that case, it’d be best to go right after dinner. All she’d need*

would be for someone to buy her time.

“You said that Asuhain-san was an accomplice, right? Is this what you meant?” I asked.

Akatsuki-san tilted her head slightly, a troubled expression on her face. “Hm... I don’t really get what’s going on, but since things are starting to heat up, I’ll say something like a culprit would. You’re talking about how someone sneaked into their room to steal their guidebooks, right? Sounds kinda impossible. After all, how’d they even do that without a key?”

“By having someone who has the key open it. There was one more girl in their room who isn’t part of Yoshino-san’s usual trio. She was your spy, wasn’t she?”

*Oh... In that case, she wouldn’t need to sneak in. She could simply have her spy stealthily switch out the guidebooks when Yoshino-san and the others weren’t in the room, and then hide them so they couldn’t find them. It’s that simple.*

“It was important for all four of them to have their books switched out. Otherwise, one of them might’ve been a suspect. Maybe they even helped with the secret messages.”

*Wow, just like a spy. That girl doesn’t really seem the type to me, but I guess you can’t judge a book by its cover.*

“Interesting. Okay then, onto my next question. Why are you coming to me? If what you just said is right, then you’re sure that Asuhain-san was involved, but I’m not sure where I really fit into this,” Akatsuki-san asked.

“Because you’re an integral part of the entire scheme.”

“How’s that?”

“That’s just how things add up.”

“Addition? Like one plus one equals me?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh?” I muttered. His answer surprised me, so I found myself looking at him.

“There were seven girls total whose guidebooks had been stolen—four from

Yoshino's group and then three others. All of them had their guidebooks switched out, but the spy's one could be reused, so really, that means there were at least six guidebooks that the culprit needed."

"So...four used for Yoshino-san's group, but one was the spy's, so excluding that one, six total?"

Mizuto nodded at me as I counted, using my fingers. "In other words, excluding the spy, there were six other culprits. And as I said before, the victims—including the spy—were seven people. Furthermore, the only people involved in this incident were the girls, and there aren't any extra guidebook copies since the teachers only made enough for each student."

"So in other words, only the girls in our class... Oh..." As I said this out loud, it clicked. *He's right. It is simple math. After all...* "There are fifteen girls in our class..."

"There were thirteen guidebooks in play, both the victims' and perpetrators'. There were only two girls in our class who weren't involved."

*Fifteen minus thirteen...two.* With the number of victims confirmed, and the two people who weren't affected at all, it was only natural that the remaining six were the perpetrators. It was also really easy to identify who at least one of the two uninvolved parties was.

"Yume already checked her guidebook. Besides, it would've been pretty much impossible for them to steal hers. But either way, judging from the way she's acting, it's pretty easy to tell that she's not involved."

"Phew, you're, like, on the same wavelength? Gettin' steamy in here!" Akatsuki-san teased.

But also, I knew that I wasn't involved. Mizuto probably trusted me. Then again, I wasn't exactly the best at lying anyway.

"So then, who is the remaining person?" Mizuto continued, ignoring Akatsuki-san. "I had a feeling it'd be one girl in particular, and I confirmed it by doing something really simple."

"What'd you do?" Akatsuki-san asked.

Mizuto calmly responded. “Whoever stole the guidebooks would have the ones that Yoshino and the others had been using. There would’ve been secret messages written inside. Regardless of what writing instrument you use, there’d definitely be some kind of trace of something having been written. It’s a simple matter of looking at the guidebook and seeing if there’s any trace of something being written or not to determine if they’re involved.”

Then I suddenly remembered that on the bus before we got to the aquarium, Mizuto had...

“Isana immediately showed me hers when I asked, and wouldn’t you know it, it was completely clean.”

*Yeah, I remember him commenting on how clean it was.* Back then, I’d thought it was a weird thing to say, especially because of how messy and filled with books his room was, not to mention his lackadaisical attitude towards keeping things orderly. He wasn’t exactly the type I’d take to focus on things being clean, and as such, it had been out of character for him to praise the cleanliness of something, especially a guidebook.

“And that’s when you confirmed that she wasn’t involved...” I said.

“Exactly. With that, I confirmed the two people who weren’t involved. Naturally, that pinpointed who the thieves were. Asuhain-san was one of them, but so were you, Minami-san.”

Of course, out of the seven potential culprits that we could’ve gone to, I would have chosen Akatsuki-san. She was my closest friend, and pretty much the only person I could think of who’d go so far as to steal to protect my reputation. Even last year, I could feel that things would get out of hand when Akatsuki-san involved herself with me.

I had no evidence, but I was almost a hundred-percent sure that she was the ringleader of this whole thing. As if to confirm that, Akatsuki-san didn’t seem to try and contest anything and simply smiled at Mizuto before talking.

“You’re pretty sharp, Irido-kun. You got me. I surrender! I wanted this to stay under the radar so Yume-chan wouldn’t find out, but after you laid everything out so clearly, I can’t exactly make up any excuses.”

“Akatsuki-san...is this how you’ve been protecting me this entire time?”

I thought back to the start of the school year when she asked me if I knew how to turn people down, and then immediately after, a guy suddenly asked me out. I had no doubt that Akatsuki-san had been working behind the scenes to help me out.

Akatsuki-san looked guilty. “I don’t usually do anything so direct... I chat on LINE and stuff, and try to subtly get people to give up—stuff like that. By the way, Kawanami’s a culprit too—not with the guidebooks, but he does help swat down anyone who tries anything on the two of you.”

“I had a feeling. Though the way you phrased that kinda infringes on his honor.” Mizuto shrugged.

It’s precisely because Kawanami-kun had that side to him that he’d been so surprised when Higashira-san popped up by Mizuto’s side.

“I was thinking you might not need me to help you anymore, and I was thinkin’ that you two might wanna score some good memories together since it’s our school trip and all. So this was mostly just running a teensy-weensy interference.”

“You’ve really mellowed out,” Mizuto said.

“One thing you’ve never understood about me is that I’ve *been* mellowed out since last year. I only messed up once, right?”

“That one time was more than enough.”

It seemed that something had happened without me knowing, but there was something else that I was more interested in.

“Asuhain-san stopped Yoshino-san and her friends to buy time, right? Is that also why she asked Mizuto out?”

By getting close to Mizuto, she could use Yoshino-san and the rest’s desire not to see any girls closer to him to bait them towards her. To make sure that Mizuto wouldn’t catch onto that intention, she’d made sure to ask him out before the school trip. Was that it? Was that really the only reason she’d asked him out?



“Oh wait. Full stop! Don’t misunderstand, Yume-chan!” Akatsuki-san began frantically trying to clear something up. “I didn’t tell her to do that! I wouldn’t ask anyone to fake confess for something like this! Whether I’d do it myself is another story, though...” she said, as if she’d done it before. “Asuhain-san just said she’d do it. I said that all she had to do was lend us her guidebook, but she was the one who brought it up and asked us if it’d work.”

“Asuhain-san did it...by herself?”

Akatsuki-san folded her thin arms and tilted her head. “I told her she didn’t have to go that far, but she wouldn’t listen and said that this would make things more certain. I thought that maybe she actually had a thing for Irido-kun, but judging by last night...” Akatsuki-san glanced at me.

*N-No. I don’t think Asuhain-san feels that way about me...right?*

Mizuto folded his arms as well. “So I’m guessing you don’t know anything about why she started acting weird on the second day?”

“Nope, not at all! I tried asking, but she wouldn’t tell me. Maybe I shoulda stopped her from fake asking you out...”

“I suppose only Asuhain knows the answer,” Mizuto said indifferently to a deflated Akatsuki-san.

*I think I’m slowly starting to piece everything together. I think I see the situation surrounding Asuhain-san. Though I still have no clue what’s been going on with her ever since the start of this trip.*

“It’s time to talk about the real topic now.”

“Right...”

Even I knew what he was getting at. Asuhain-san had entered the aquarium faster than any of us here. Mizuto looked right at me. His eyes were gentle but powerful. I could feel myself relying on him immediately as usual, but the next thing he said to me wasn’t him being soft on me at all.

“The rest is up to you.”

“Huh?”

During my confusion, Mizuto began talking to me like I was a kid. “It won’t

mean anything if I'm the one solving everything. After all, I'm not the one she's after, right?"

Then I remembered back to what Asuhain-san had said about how she couldn't stop thinking about me and how I didn't get it. I'd been the one to push myself closer to her. I'd been the one who wanted to get closer to her. I'd been the one who wanted to learn more about her.

"Okay..."

Though I felt alone and uneasy, I'd borrowed more than enough strength. I needed to do my best. I needed to figure out Asuhain-san. I wouldn't let her say that I didn't get it anymore.

## **Her One Weapon, Her One Relationship**

After I passed through the Aqua Room, there were suddenly fewer lights, and the other guests looked to be nothing but shadows. In the darkness, a specimen of a massive giant squid was lit up, welcoming me. Its white skin and slender tentacles that shone in the light looked more like they belonged to a monster than any living creature. It was clear that I was entering the Deep Sea area.

The individual tanks glowed a dull, deep blue, and each of them had an explanation panel and were lit up by artificial light. Since there were a lot of people, despite it being dark, it wasn't as frightening as being in a haunted house. But as I walked alone along the sole lit path, like the aisle of a movie theater, I felt like I was deep in the sea moving further away from civilization and the light of the sun.

As I walked through the darkness, I remembered something. When I'd asked Asuhain-san why she wanted to beat me so badly, she'd said she had nothing else going on. The only way she could take on others was through her grades. That was the only way she could prove her superiority to the people who belittled her. And when she was so confident that she could win against anyone with her grades, *I* appeared.

*When did I forget her intense gaze?* She'd always been looking at me, her rival—her sworn enemy who'd taken away her one weapon. On the other hand, I

thought back to how indifferent she'd acted when Aso-senpai and I had been talking about romance. Most likely, every time we discussed it around her, she wished she could be a normal girl like us so she wouldn't have to be so focused on something like her studies to protect her identity.

*When did I become a normie?* I used to be just like Asuhain-san. The only thing I'd had going for me was my seriousness, and just like her, I'd been frustrated about not getting the highest grade on a math test—my best subject. I don't know when, but at a certain point, I found that I didn't need to rely on one specific thing anymore because I had so many more important things to me. Suddenly, I remembered how Mizuto had teased me by saying that I'd grown as a person.

*He's right, though...* But up until now, most of the relationships I'd had weren't ones I'd developed on my own. So much of what I had now all started thanks to meeting Mizuto. Somewhere along the way, I forgot what it was like to be someone who had nothing—no, who had only one thing.

My high school glow up had only been surface level. Though I wanted to say that I'd grown, I'd lost understanding of my past self in the process. Could I really call that growth? That's more like running away from who I used to be. Ultimately, I was still shy, pessimistic, and narrow-minded. It would be sad if growth meant living on while forgetting about that. After all, the more you grow, the more things you don't understand.

I was starting to understand why neither Mizuto nor Higashira-san ever attempted to do anything about their lack of friends. They were preserving their identities. They were fine as is and thought that was the best way to be happy.

That's why they never tried too hard to be understood by others. If anyone showed up along the way who understood them, then that would be nice, sure, but otherwise, it wasn't a big deal. It was that simple.

*So what about Asuhain-san?* What my past self had wanted was someone who understood me. Whether that manifested as a friend or a boyfriend didn't matter; I wanted someone to prove to me that I wasn't alone. *Which means Asuhain-san wants...*

After walking through the long, dark hall with the individual tanks, a path to

the right appeared. Down it was a curved wall that faced left. On it were small, square-shaped windows of different individual tanks in two rows. Near the ceiling, there was a sign emitting a dull blue light that read: “Tiny Marine Life in the Deep Sea.”

I wasn’t sure if it was just because most of the people were gathered in the previous area, but there wasn’t much of a crowd here. I passed by about four or five people and continued down the path until I reached an area with a huge tank, nearly two blackboards long. Standing in front of it was a single girl.

She was vacantly staring at the bug-eyed fish swimming around in the dim, blue light of the deep sea. Her profile was beautiful enough to send electricity through my body. She’d always had a pretty face, but when dyed by the light from the tank and the darkness from the hallway, she had the same transcendent beauty of a sculpture.

It was an ironic sense of beauty that the less emotion showed on her face, the more beautiful she became. *Oh, wow. How am I only realizing this now? I...don’t think I’ve ever seen her smile.*

“Asuhain-san,” I resolutely called out, prompting her to sluggishly turn her head towards me. “Would you like to go around the aquarium together?”

In response, she responded robotically—cold and emotionless. “There’s nothing left to see. The exit’s right around the corner.”

“Then let’s go to the beach. Or even the gift shop on the first floor.”

“You really think that I’ll go along with you if you strong-arm me again?” Asuhain-san turned her gaze back to the tank. “How long are you going to keep up that arrogant attitude of yours? Your actions practically scream that you want to save the charity case.”

“I might be arrogant, yeah.”

Her words were as sharp and direct as a knife, but I took them head-on. I was sure that acting like a Goody Two-shoes here would only get on Asuhain-san’s nerves.

Suddenly, I got it. I didn’t use logic to reach a conclusion like Mizuto or my best subject, math; instead, I used my own instincts.

“You’ve been trying so hard to understand me this entire time without me even having to do anything.” Asuhain-san’s eyes flicked over to me as I said this. “The reason you chose Mizuto as the person to ask out was by process of elimination, right?” Still, she stayed silent. “The only guys you’ve really had any interaction with are the ones from our Kobe trip. There wasn’t anyone on the student council you could go after without getting in someone else’s way, and Kawanami-kun is the kind of guy you’d probably hate the most, which naturally left Mizuto as the only option. After all, he’s not the type to brag about getting asked out and aimlessly spread that news around.” Still, she stayed silent. “All you wanted to do was ask someone out, hoping to find out if something inside you would change. Mizuto was the most convenient person for your experiment since he was the one with the highest possibility of making you experience romantic feelings.” Still, she stayed silent, so instead, I answered for her. “You were studying romance, weren’t you? For my sake...”

Asuhain-san stayed completely silent, but she guiltily looked away. Even though she had finally beat me on a test, I’d been so enamored with my budding romance that I hadn’t reacted like I was bitter about losing at all. That was why she decided that she needed to change herself.

It was all to understand what I was saying—to be able to have the same conversations that I enjoyed. So she used her one weapon: studying. She tried to understand what’s so wonderful about romance.

“I have no way of knowing how your experiment turned out for you, but I’m pretty sure that Mizuto would have accepted you even if he hadn’t seen right through you. He’s kinda like you in some regards, after all.”

*Specifically, how he’s so removed from the world that he barely reacts to anything.* But on the flip side, when there was something he was really passionate about, he’d get so into it that his surroundings disappeared. I was almost jealous of how much like Mizuto she was in that regard.

“But after the first day...you stopped that experiment. Was it because you realized that it was pointless? Or because you started to hate yourself?” *I’m not sure, but I have a feeling it’s the latter.* Asuhain-san was pretty hard on herself. I wouldn’t be surprised had she reflected on how she was acting and suddenly started to hate it. “And then, when you were trying to distance yourself from

Mizuto and me, I chased after you, not knowing what was going through your head... At first, you tried to pretend like nothing was wrong and go back to how things used to be, but it hurt that I didn't know what you were going through, and then you changed your mind, thinking that there was no need to push yourself to act like everything was okay. Am I right? I'd like you to say something if I'm not."

Even the greatest literary detectives couldn't always precisely guess every little thing going on in the culprit's mind. There was no way that someone as unimaginative as I was could do anything better than desperately trying to think that I understood.

I thought she'd be mad at me for not understanding her. I thought I would've made her mad. But even so, I felt like I was making progress. Compared to how I was before, completely in the dark, I knew what I didn't know, and was starting to move towards feeling like I understood. That was why I thought hearing Asuhain-san's true thoughts would be a big step towards this goal.

But then, Asuhain-san betrayed my expectations. "You're wrong," she said, not in an angry tone, but a voice as quiet as if we'd been submerged into the deep sea. "I was simply in despair... I was sad and lonely, like a child whose parents didn't buy them something they wanted. I couldn't even get mad... I didn't give up because I didn't want to force myself to be something that I wasn't anymore. If anything, I think I gave up on the very act of giving up."

*She did? So she didn't simply toss away her loneliness and sadness because she didn't care anymore, but she's dragging those weights around with her.*

"Oh..." I was a little bit lost, but still, I said, "That's rough."

"That wasn't exactly thoughtful of you to say," Asuhain-san said, turning to look at me.

I slightly smiled and nodded. "Better than saying nothing, isn't it? Words are too unwieldy to convey what's in your heart, but...there's nothing else we can do *but* use our words." *If we aren't able to experience what they're feeling, then all we can do is talk it out.* Useless actions or direct, uncouth, thoughtless words were better than not saying anything at all.

"I see..." Asuhain-san said, beginning to look up at the top of the tank where

the dim light that filtered in almost looked like a stairway. “So, you’re not a skilled enough speaker to be tactful, I see.”

“I’m a lot better than I used to be, especially in comparison to how I was in middle school!” I said, jokingly.

As I did, she looked back at me. Then, just slightly—very, very slightly—the end of her lips curled.

“I can more or less imagine,” she said.

That was the first time I’d ever seen her smile from the heart.

Since more people began to come in, the two of us left the aquarium. The exit was connected to the beach that we’d seen a little bit of from the entrance. It was vast, and there were a lot of people there, swimming in the ocean or playing in the sand. But even though it was a beach, not everyone was in a bathing suit. About half of them were in normal clothes. *Oh, right. I think I saw in a video or something once that people in Okinawa don’t wear swimsuits when they swim.*

The white sand crunched under our feet as Asuhain-san and I entered and began looking at the emerald ocean.

“There...aren’t as many people as I expected,” Asuhain-san said.

*True. It’s probably because it’s not swimming season. I feel like there were more people in the Churaumi Aquarium.*

“Have you ever been to the beach, Asuhain-san?”

“My family doesn’t really go on trips, so I’ve only really been on field trips.”

“Now that you mention it, I think I’m in the same boat...”

It went without saying that I’d never gone on one with my birth father, but my mom and I never went on trips either. She was always so busy with work.

“So...” I looked at Asuhain-san. “Wanna go in?”

“Huh? By ‘in’...do you mean into the water?”

“Yeah.”

Asuhain-san looked down at what she was wearing—a white tunic bound at the waist with string, and skinny capris. It was a very summery outfit.

“I didn’t bring my bathing suit...”

“We’ll just dip our feet in,” I said, taking off one of my sandals. But when I put my bare foot onto the sand... “Ow!” Of course, the bottom of my foot felt like it’d been burned, and I began hopping on the foot that was still wearing the sandal.

I looked at Asuhain-san, and tried laughing it off. “I’m sure it’ll be cooler near the water.”

“Right...” Asuhain-san said in an almost annoyed tone while looking at the vast sea. “It might be nice once in a while.”

I put my sandal back on, and we went towards the edge of the water. This time, I took off both of my sandals and stood barefoot in the cool, wet sand. It was a strange feeling of freedom that my feet, which were typically wearing shoes or socks, experienced from the unfamiliar touch of nature.

Following my lead, Asuhain-san took off her shoes, rolled up her socks, and put them inside her shoes before carrying them. She nervously looked at her feet while cautiously stepping on the sand many times as if to check something. Right after that, the water flowed back in and washed over our feet.

“Eek!” Asuhain-san softly yelped from the cold water, jumping back and grabbing my shoulder.

“Are you okay?”

Hearing my question, Asuhain-san looked at me and gasped, before looking down with embarrassment. *This might be my first time seeing her act like her true self too. Despite how long we’ve worked together on the student council, I can’t believe how many new sides of her I’m seeing. I’m so touched!*

After playing with the water that ebbed and flowed, Asuhain-san suddenly began speaking.

“I saw...” she said softly.

“Huh?” I looked up at her.



She continued looking at the waves while talking. “On the night of the first day, at the hotel pool, I...I was hiding in the bushes. I wanted to understand you, so I went there. This wasn’t at nine, though.”

*Mizuto said that Asuhain-san wasn’t the one who’d seen us together, but it’s still a fact that she has a scratch on her thigh.* I wondered if Asuhain-san was going to give an answer to what I’d asked her last night, now that I’d actually tried thinking from her perspective.

As I tried to mentally organize all the information, I spoke. “Not *after* nine, right?” *Mizuto and I found the blood after nine, so if she hid there, it had to have been before nine.* “You’re talking about earlier.”

“Right. It must’ve been around eight thirty... I was looking for a place to be alone, and when I arrived on the floor with the pool, I saw two people enter. I couldn’t help but be curious, so I followed them.”

“And then what happened?”

“At first, I heard a voice say something about how they wished they could’ve been in the same group. Or at least, that’s what I think they were talking about. Their tone of voice was different than usual, so in the spur of the moment, I hid in the bushes by the entrance, and then...”

“And then?”

“I saw a confession.”

*Huh?* “Like someone asking another person out?”

“I believe that’s the right interpretation. I saw that and...became frightened.”

“Frightened?”

“I was afraid that having a fixation towards someone was incredibly shallow, and that same fixation had taken root in my heart as well.”

*I can’t deny that it’s shallow. I did a lot of shallow things in order to date Mizuto. But I can’t believe she felt that way after seeing someone bare their heart like that...*

“I...guess it didn’t go well for them, then,” I said.

“Yeah... They were turned down and quickly acted out. Though, now that I think about it, I think they became levelheaded again. But I...wanted to deny that I was like that person—and I wanted to prove it—so I immediately jumped out of the bushes...” The waves washed over our feet with a soft sound. “And I pushed the two of them into the pool.”

Now she was demonstrating the other type of confession—a confession to a “crime.” Nobody got hurt, so she shouldn’t have cared too much, but for Asuhain-san, this had been a very important event. No matter how much Aso-senpai annoyed her, Asuhain-san never shoved her off or slapped her hands away. This might’ve been the first time in her life that she’d ever been violent.

“You were trying to help the person getting asked out, right?” I might’ve just been trying to give her some peace of mind for the time being, but I gave her my frank opinion while looking at her. “You’ve told me before that you look up to President Kurenai for helping you when you couldn’t get away from someone hitting on you, right? It’s basically the same thing.”

“I...suppose. That’s one way of looking at it.”

“What happened after that?” I asked.

“One of them immediately left. The other one asked me to bring them a change of clothes from their room; I did, and then we went our separate ways. While they changed, we didn’t say anything. Nobody else came into the locker room either. It was an awkward situation from start to finish. I can’t help but wonder if there was a better way to have handled that.”

“I see...”

Even now, I remembered the conversation we’d had last night and wondered if I couldn’t have done a better job talking to her. There probably wasn’t a person in this world who didn’t think back on something and wonder if they could’ve done something differently. In that regard, I felt as if Asuhain-san and I could relate.

“By the way...you haven’t referred to those two by name, but did you know them?”

“Yes...”

“Is it okay for you to tell me who they were?”

“I’m really sorry, but I can’t tell you that much,” she said in her usual resolute tone of voice. “I think it would hurt their reputations if I blabbed about it. It isn’t my place to spread this around.”

“I see. Yeah...that’s good on you.”

“You think so? I thought it was the norm for people to enjoy gossip.”

“What’s normal isn’t important. What’s important is whether it’s right for you.”

I got the feeling that I’d been like her, trapped by the shackles of “what would a normal person do?” But now I could honestly think that what was normal and what was common sense were stupid compared to the individuality that people bring to the table.

“You shouldn’t go by what’s normal,” I continued. “If there’s something you want to do, you should do it without caring what other people think. Remember? Whoever gets the lower score on the test has to listen to what the other one says, so I’ll do anything I can as long as it’s in my power to do so. It’ll be my way of apologizing for alienating you.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I’m going to. I won’t accept anything less. Here’s the thing, Asuhain-san,” I said, turning to face her and grabbing her small hands. “It’s true that I wasn’t bitter when you beat me in the finals. If anything...I was happy.”

“Happy...?”

“Yeah, of course! I’d been watching you work hard all this time. I saw you cracking open your textbooks and notebooks whenever you got a chance. You worked so much harder than I did, how couldn’t I acknowledge that? After seeing you work so hard, I couldn’t even be mad. Your hard work was rewarded, and I was genuinely happy about that. That feeling came before anything else.” *Well, also, my head was occupied by the fact that I got a boyfriend...* I could feel myself wryly smiling. “So that’s why I want to apologize. I’m sorry that I stopped being your rival...”

I couldn't view her as my rival. I saw her as my hardworking friend. But that's not what Asuhain-san wanted from me. Even so, she wouldn't be satisfied if I just pretended to be the person she wanted. That's why all I could do was apologize. I'd ask her to be my friend with all my heart.

"Then..." Her voice had gotten so soft that I had to lean in to hear her. "Could I...you?"

"Sorry, I didn't catch that."

"You know...like what you do with Minami-san and the other girls... Um..." The words she wanted to say were on the tip of her tongue, but she had trouble getting them out. Her cheeks grew a brighter pink with each passing second. "Could I...hug you?"

*Oh... I see.* I smiled and opened both my arms. "Of course. Come on."

Asuhain-san nervously looked both ways before looking to the right again and then looked at her feet for some reason. Then she quietly took a deep breath and looked at my face and cutely grunted as she fell onto me. I caught her small body in my chest and wrapped my arms around her back. She was so soft, warm, and cute. *This* was Ran Asuhain.



“Um, Irido-san...?” she said in my ear.

“Yeah?”

“I... I’m not very good at this, and...”

“Yeah?”

“And I might say rude things without being able to read the room, and...”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t talk about romance at all, but...”

“Yeah?”

“Will you...still be my friend?”

“Yeah.” I nodded without any hesitation. “Of course!”

## **Happily Ever After (for the Girls, at Least)**

### **Mizuto Irido**

On the afternoon of the third day, our activity schedule was the same as the first day; we’d split up into our groups and go around the southern part of the main island. Though each group was free to decide where they’d go, most of the groups decided to go to the Naha Kokusai Dori Shopping Street, and our group was not an exception.

Though it was a shopping district, it wasn’t on the same large scale as ones in Tokyo. It was a street with two car lanes and a mishmash of chain stores, showrooms, and gift shops. It might’ve been closest to the vibe of the Compasso Teramachi shopping arcade in Kyoto. The only difference was that there wasn’t any kind of roof, so you could see the sky, and also the roads were larger.

The biggest tell that this was Okinawa were the palm trees planted on the sides of the street. The reason I thought about this was most likely because I wasn’t usually all that interested in cities. But the first thing on the list was grabbing food, so we went into a café that mainly Kawanami and Minami-san had looked up and had their eyes on.

Opening the menu, I saw a picture of a crepe with a *lot* of cream and a *lot* of fruit. Eating the crepe would be like a balancing act between sating one's desires and getting heartburn.

"Oh god, oh god... The calories..." Isana weirdly mumbled while looking at the menu.

Minami-san gently patted her on the back while talking like a scam artist. "Don't worry about it. Not today. One day of eating bad isn't enough to put on weight."

"Th-That's right... It's a mere day..."

"You've worked so hard on your diet! You deserve a little treat..."

"That's right... This is my reward!"

It was like watching an addict rebound. I wasn't going to say anything, and instead count this as a cheat day. But still, when she got back, I'd have to make her exercise. I wasn't about to let her live an unhealthy life.

On the other hand, Yume and Asuhain were looking at the menu together.

"I think I'm gonna get this one with all the stuff on it. What about you, Asuhain-san?"

"I think I'll..."

Yume smiled as she watched Asuhain think about her order at this place that she wasn't used to being in. They seemed more like siblings than she and I did. Asuhain had really warmed up to Yume and didn't seem to want to leave her side. It wasn't as close as Isana stuck to me, but she stayed by her side even when Yume talked to me or Minami-san. Her facial expression didn't change a bit until Yume spoke to her, and then it loosened up slightly. Yume seemed happy when Asuhain reacted like that.

After we finished our fight with the mountains of whipped cream and fruit, we left the café and walked around. While looking around at the stores, Yume talked to Asuhain actively, and Asuhain did her best to respond, albeit with a little awkwardness and stammering.

Minami-san had some mixed feelings watching them act like a pair of sisters

from behind. “That’s... That’s my spot...”

“You’re such a child...” Kogure Kawanami said, exasperatedly sighing. “Irido-san’s usually so reserved, but look at her being all aggressive like that. Just stay back and happily watch over them.”

“I am! I’m lonely and jealous, but Yume-chan acting like a big sister is also cute...”

“So all’s well that ends well, right?”

Behind the pair of childhood friends, Isana and I were watching over all of this.

“Mizuto-kun,” she said suddenly. “Recently, I’ve begun to think that yuri does it for me as well.”

“Why are you coming out to me all of a sudden?”

“But in that case, you’re a huge obstacle. What do you believe I should do?”

“How should I know? Don’t act like *I’m* the third wheel here. If anything, she’s the one getting in the way.”

“Hm... But both of their boobs are large... I’m not sure if I’m too fond of that. It’s better if there’s some kind of difference between the two of them... It’d be perfect if this was a harem, though.” Isana began tilting her head in deep thought with a worry that most people would not even begin to understand. I decided to ignore her as well.

For me, seeing Yume get a new straitlaced friend made me happy. This had been a connection she’d made with her own two hands, and besides that, her only best friend up till now had been Minami-san, who was kinda...out there.

Asuhain would never stalk someone, nor would she propose to someone she had no feelings for, all just for the sake of being part of Yume’s family. Unlike Minami-san. I was sure that even if we revealed our relationship to her, Asuhain would calmly accept the truth...or at least that’s what I thought at the time.

When we finally entered the arcade shopping district, it was really hard not to think about the Compasso Teramachi shopping arcade in Kyoto. There were



mountains of colorful products stacked up. This scenery that drew in the eyes of those walking by really reminded me of the stalls at festivals. One such product that was drawing the attention of Yume and the others was a colorful aloha dress with a flower pattern on it. They were shoulder to shoulder while looking at it, fussing over whether they'd look good in it. I stayed back, watching them.

"I guess...I should thank you," a voice from nearby said.

Before I knew it, Asuhain was standing next to me. She wasn't really looking at me, though—instead, she was watching as Yume excitedly browsed. I couldn't help but smile a little.

"What exactly are you thanking me for?" I asked.

"On the first day...on the bus, you accepted me. I think I felt...comfortable."

"Happy to hear that."

"If that had happened maybe two or three times more, I might've actually fallen for you."

I was a little surprised to hear this—not by what she said, but the fact that she said it.

"But that's not how you actually ended up feeling, right?" I asked.

She nodded. "You're decent for a guy, but not so much that I'd let you have your way with my body."

I paused for a second. "And that's your basis for whether or not you can date someone?"

"What else would I base it on?"

She was similar to how logical Isana was. If she didn't understand the concept of love, then naturally, she'd end up with that kind of biology-based mindset.

"Well, that works out for me. I can't have you actually falling for me; it'd be pretty inconvenient."

"The way you said that's kinda gross, but I'll leave it at that. After all, I was rude to both you and Higashira-san."

*Oh, right. She thinks I'm dating Isana. Since she's gotten so close to Yume, it's*

*gonna be annoying to keep hiding our relationship, so maybe I'll come clean.* But just as I was thinking that, I was given reason to not.

“However,” Asuhain started, glaring at me with a look so deadly it would’ve easily killed a puppy. “Though you may not be related by blood, I will *end your existence* if you lay a finger on Irido-san.”

I could feel a cold sweat break out on my back, and in the next moment, Asuhain left without saying a word, returning to Yume and the others. All I could do was watch as her small back became even smaller. I couldn’t take my eyes off of her. Of course I couldn’t. When animals feel as though they’re in danger, they keep their eyes on the threat until they’re safe.

“Hm? Irido? You good? Hello?”

In comparison, Kawanami called out to me, but I couldn’t even properly respond to him. *Well, crap. I’m totally gonna get my shit kicked in.*

## Enjoying the School Trip Normally

### Yume Irido

It was now the evening of the third day of our school trip, and as soon as we entered our new hotel’s room, Akatsuki-san excitedly cried out in amazement. The room’s decor gave off a clean look, as all the wallpaper and furnishings were pure white, but there was one part that stood out in particular—the beds.

Like at our last hotel, there were four beds, but two of them were lofted, accessible by ladder, and two underneath. There was enough space for Akatsuki-san and Asuhain-san to stand on the bottom beds without hitting their heads. It was the kind of room I’ve dreamed about. I really had no qualms with staying here.

Akatsuki-san quickly climbed into the loft bed and peered down at us from up top, squealing excitedly. “This is so hype! Can I sleep up here?!”

“Anyone else want to?” I asked, looking at the other two. Higashira-san seemed a little restless as she looked at it. “Do you want the loft bed too, Higashira-san?”

“Huh? W-Well, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to take a look,” she said before shakily climbing the ladder into the bed.

*I hope she doesn’t fall off...* I worriedly watched as she got into the bed before I sat on the one underneath.

“Welcome!” Akatsuki-san said warmly.

“Oh! It’s like a secret fort!”

“Nobody’ll get in our way up here. You can be as loud as you want!”

“Eek!”

I could hear them energetically playing above me. Asuhain-san sat down on the other open bed, and our eyes met. It started to feel a little awkward, so I forced a smile.

“Sounds like they’re having fun up there,” I said.

“I suppose...”

Asuhain-san wasn’t used to having casual conversations yet, so she was still speaking stiffly. *I told her she doesn’t have to be formal with me, but maybe it’s just a habit of hers at this point.* At least she wasn’t like Higashira-san, who would always speak formally because she felt it was too troublesome to figure out who she should and shouldn’t speak casually with. Asuhain-san had much better reasons for her manner of speaking, surely.

In order to help her come out of her shell, I decided to tease her. “Should we get touchy-feely like them?” I asked.

“Huh?!” Asuhain-san’s face went bright red from surprise as if she’d just gotten out of the bath. “N-No, we don’t have that kind of flippant relationship, but also as student council members, we should refrain from such proclivities...”

“Aw, don’t be shy.” I got up from my bed and knelt on hers, grunting slightly as I pushed her down, eliciting a surprised scream from her.

“Let’s see...how’s this spot for you?”

“Mmnnf... Th-That’s... Ah...”

I embraced her body and began tickling her around her ribs, making her face go red. She trembled and began to let out soft, sweet moans.

*She's so cute! I totally get why Aso-senpai hugs her like a doll now! She's so small and adorable; plus, her reactions are great. This is amazing! I wanna do this forever...*



“Uh...” Before I knew it, the two who’d been making a racket before had quieted down and had begun to whisper to each other. “They’re...”

“Indeed.”

“They’re doin’ it, huh?”

“There is no doubt that they are indeed doing *it*.”

“We aren’t!” I yelled back up to them.

*Don’t make it sound like we’re the horny couple in the booth next door at an internet café!*

When we went down for dinner, I met with Mizuto. There was still some time before the dinner buffet began, and since we hadn’t had much time to talk alone, I called out to him.

“You got a minute?” When I got his ear, I started telling him about everything that had happened with Asuhain-san earlier today. “So that’s about the gist of it.” I felt that, as Mizuto had put effort into my reconciliation with Asuhain-san, he deserved to know what had happened.

“I see... A romantic confession, huh?” Mizuto seemed to have really zeroed in on what Asuhain-san had seen at the pool. “Does seem like a good place to do that.”

“I know, right? I didn’t think other students would’ve had the same idea to go there to be alone with someone.”

“Maybe they didn’t. Maybe they just happened to enter it, got into the mood, and things went from there.”

*True. That’s possible.* Including myself, the people I knew had only ever asked someone else out after clearly setting up the situation to do so, so it was hard for me to imagine.

“Can I ask you something? Asuhain didn’t say anything about what time she and the person who did the asking out left the pool, did she?” Mizuto said, asking a strange question.

I tilted my head, trying to think back to my conversation with her, but I couldn't remember her saying anything about that, so I shook my head. "No. All she said was how she went into the pool around eight thirty—nothing about when she left. Besides, she doesn't wear a watch or anything, so it's not like she could tell the time."

"Right... Nobody has their phones either."

*Without a watch, the only way to check the time is by asking the group leader for the phone.* Those who'd anticipated that situation had come with a watch—Yoshino-san being one of those people.

"By the way..." Mizuto said, suddenly changing the conversation. "Did Asuhain say anything? Like...about us living together?"

"Hm? Why? Are you worried about gossip all of a sudden? Have you always been such a delicate little flower?"

"It's not that... Asuhain is the straitlaced type, so I was thinking that she might have some opinions on a guy and a girl living together, even if they're family."

"I feel like she would've brought that up a while ago. She knows we're stepsiblings. Maybe I could even tell her that we're dating..."

"I wouldn't if I were you," he said quickly and firmly. Seeing my confusion, Mizuto continued on to smooth over what he said. "Sure, she might accept that we live together, but there's no guarantee she's okay with us dating."

"That's true... Um, did something happen?"

"Like what?"

*He's acting suspicious, but his poker face is way too good. I can't catch him slipping up.* "Anyway, we have to continue hiding our relationship from Asuhain-san, right?"

"Yeah, I think it's for the best."

"If you're only keeping our relationship from her a secret so you can cheat on me with her, I'll kill you."

"Like I would do that..." Mizuto scoffed.

*I know he wouldn't, of course.* As we chatted, the doors to the banquet hall opened. It wouldn't be good to keep up this chummy conversation, so I waved goodbye and began to leave, but before I could, he stopped me as if he were Columbo.

"Just one more thing. If Yoshino talks to you, there's something I want you to tell her for me."

"To Yoshino-san?"

After hearing what he wanted me to tell her, I tilted my head even further in confusion.

"At any rate, just tell her that. It'll be more than enough," he said.

"For...what?"

"Don't worry about it. Just focus on having fun with Asuhain. Isn't that what's most important?" He turned his back to me and began walking towards the banquet hall, leaving me with the following words: "I'll clean everything up, so leave the rest to me."

And now that the buffet had begun, an opportunity came to speak with Yoshino-san, as if it'd been fate.

"Oh, Yume-chan! I'm super-duper sorry about everything!"

As I was walking around the buffet, putting food on my tray, Yoshino-san came up next to me with a guilty look on her face. Today, she was wearing a baggy blouse that hid the lines of her torso, and black skinny jeans that showed off her long, slender legs. It was the kind of cool outfit a model would wear—one that showed off the wearer's confidence. Right now, however, there wasn't a hint of confidence on her face—only meekness.

"It was just supposed to be a little bit of fun we were having, but it sucks that you found out about it— No, that's not right. I'm so sorry we snooped!"

"Oh... Are you talking about the guidebooks?"

*The dots finally connected.* They'd used the guidebooks to secretly communicate with each other to figure out who I was dating. I probably



should've been more displeased, but I was so busy with Asuhain-san that I'd completely forgotten.

Seeing my reaction, a look of surprise filled Yoshino-san's face. "You don't seem too bothered. Wow, you're so bighearted!"

"Oh, no, that's not it. I just had my mind occupied by something else... Besides, it doesn't seem like you really had any bad intentions, and it's also partly my fault for turning it into a mystery."

"No, no! If I were in your shoes, I'd be bragging just like you! I'd want people to know to back off if I were taken!"

"If anything, I feel more concerned about how the class was divided into two because of me..."

"Ah...don't worry about that! As the representatives of the two sides, both Akatsuki-chan and I buried the hatchet! Like it never happened!"

*But it did.*

"It was kinda like we were havin' fun playin' spies, or at least that's how we settled it. You don't have to worry about a thing!"

*"Well, that's good..." She really thinks about other people. I'm pretty sure I'm right, and she's not a bad person. She might be nosy, and a little flashy appearance-wise, but she's not a bad person.*

"Sheesh, this trip's been a whole thing. I've messed up a lot. Totally down in the dumps..." Right when I was thinking that it was rare for Yoshino-san to look so gloomy, she did a one-eighty. "But, y'know, the ocean was suuuper fun! The dolphins at the aquarium were hella cute too! Overall, the trip's been awesome!"

"O-Oh... That's good..."

It was like the pessimist in me was being purified by the bright optimism she was radiating. I was simply envious of how easily it seemed she could enjoy life.

"Well, so that's basically how it is! I wanted to apologize in person, so I'll see ya around!" And just as she was about to disappear as quickly as she appeared like the typhoon she was, I suddenly remembered what Mizuto had asked me

to do for him.

“Oh, wait! Mizuto wanted me to tell you something!”

“Huh? He did? Why?”

“I’m not really sure, but... Uh...” I tried to remember exactly what he’d said and then regurgitated it: “It might be too late by now, but you should tell our teacher.” As soon as these words left my mouth, Yoshino-san froze.

*Huh? Why? What meaning was in the words he said? It seems like she knows what he’s talking about, though.* Then, Yoshino spoke in a soft voice, her expression still frozen.

“And...Mizuto said that?”

“Y-Yeah. He didn’t clue me in on what he meant by that, though.”

“Oh... Okay. Thanks. I’m not really sure either, but I guess I should go straight to the source, right?” she said, snapping back to her usual brightness, but I couldn’t get her previous expression out of my head.

It was as if her mask had been broken, like a crack had formed on her face. I couldn’t help but envision it. I silently watched as Yoshino-san returned to her friends and remembered how Mizuto said he’d take care of the rest.

*I guess there’s nothing left for me to think about.* That’s what Mizuto had said. All I needed to do was focus on having fun with Asuhain-san on this trip. In that case, I needed to do just that. I stuffed Yoshino-san’s expression into the back of my mind and returned to the table where Asuhain-san was waiting.

A hero was born in the changing room.

“Huh? Huge... Ginormous!”

“What the hell’s your diet like?! Do you do gymnastics?!”

“No, it’s a guy! It’s true what they say about them getting bigger when guys grope you!”

“M-M-M-M-May I touch them?!”

After opening her shirt and revealing her bra, Higashira-san was currently

being swarmed by a group of very excited girls, like an idol and her fans. Higashira-san, however, was unable to say anything resembling words, and instead kept muttering “um” and “uh” while her arms flapped around.

The biggest difference between tonight’s hotel and all the other ones up until now was that it had a communal bathing area, which featured a hot spring. All the girls basically decided they couldn’t *not* go, and as a result, the situation in front of me was born. *It’s only natural, I suppose...*

It was only a matter of time until Higashira-san’s huge boobs became known to the girls in the class. Until now, she’d been able to avoid this because her clothes, her slouch, and her lack of a presence hid her breasts. She’d inevitably drawn attention to herself when we changed for phys ed. Thanks to the sheer size she was packing, she was soon unable to shield them from others.

But up until now, nobody’d had any chance to really get close to her to really experience them. Her “boyfriend,” Mizuto, was very protective of her, so no one ever had the chance. He would never let anyone try to embarrass her in an open area, or a closed one for that matter. Nor would he let her be alone with just me or Akatsuki-san.

From the girls’ perspective, they didn’t want to garner any ire from the popular Mizuto, so it was kind of an unspoken agreement that none of them would lay a hand on her boobs. That’s how things had been, but now, in this space filled with just girls, our bodies were laid bare. In this case, the interest of the girls couldn’t be contained any further.

“Okay, folks, back it up!” In place of Higashira-san, who’d gone beet red and silent, Akatsuki-san stepped in and played bodyguard. “Form a single line! It’s a thousand yen per grope!”

“That’s highway robbery!”

“A thousand yen? Sheesh...”

“I-I have ten thousand... Will that work?”

“Do it! Use that money you got from your parents!”

“Hey! Put your wallets away!” I yelled.

As a member of the student council, I couldn't allow this to happen right in front of me. Hearing my angry voice made the girls scatter, allowing Higashira-san to heave a sigh of relief.

"Thank you very much, Yume-san..."

"No worries. I can only imagine how pissed Mizuto would get..."

"I was so close to developing a fetish for high school girls lining up to fondle me one by one."

"Maybe *you're* the one he'd get pissed at..." *I really want to believe she's trying to make a joke.* Then I looked at Akatsuki-san, who had already stripped down to her panties. "You shouldn't sell other people's bodies!"

"I thought they'd back down with that price, but I freaked out when they actually took it seriously, ha ha ha!"

"Sheesh..."

But then again, I think the only reason that Akatsuki-san and I were able to fight temptation is because we'd already fallen prey to it during our Kobe trip. Though, I definitely wouldn't have paid a thousand yen.

Finally, Higashira-san put her hands on the back of her bra, unhooking it with a satisfying click. The girls that'd run away were shooting side-glances at her. After Higashira-san released her boobs from the cups of her bra, the swellings on her chest bounced around like rubber balls, eliciting impressed gasps from the girls.

*But also, with Higashira-san getting all this attention, I should probably help her out.* I wasn't going to deny anymore that I wasn't also like her, someone with large boobs, but Higashira-san was acting like a lightning rod, keeping other people's eyes off of me. But more importantly, all was silent around Asuhain-san.

She'd quickly changed out of her clothes, and covered her curvy breasts with a towel. Of course, there was no way that she could really hide the huge lumps on her chest, but thanks to Higashira-san, leering eyes kept away from her. Asuhain-san would be able to handle this even less easily than Higashira-san, so I was happy she didn't have to experience anything bad before I took her into

the hot spring.

“Irido-san?” Asuhain-san asked, looking at me curiously, most likely because I was taking so long to get changed.

I took off my blouse and put it into my clothes basket. “I have to tie up my hair, so you can go ahead if you want,” I said.

“Oh...” She didn’t move from my side.

It reminded me of how I used to be, which warmed my heart. I used to always stay with the one person I could actually talk to in middle school. That being said, it must’ve been awkward standing naked in the changing room. After stripping down to just my underwear, I turned my back to Asuhain-san.

“Want to help me tie it up?” I asked.

“Sure,” Asuhain-san, who looked like she had nowhere to go, said, looking up before beginning to cautiously touch my hair.

First, she helped straighten out my hair, and then she held most of it in place while I took the rest of it and wrapped it into a bun before fixing it in place with a hair accessory.

“Thanks!” I said, turning to her.

“Sure...” she said, a little sheepishly.

Afterwards, I took off my bra and panties, put them in the basket, and picked up my towel. Right around then, Akatsuki-san, who’d been boldly walking around without hiding anything with her towel, came by with Higashira-san.

“Let’s go, Yume-chan!”

“Yeah.” I nodded, turning around.

Asuhain-san stood next to me, and Higashira-san stood on the other side of me, shrinking her shoulders with embarrassment. Akatsuki-san suddenly clammed up and looked at us one by one.

“Wh-What?” I asked.

Akatsuki-san surveyed our breasts, waists, and butts emotionlessly.

“Beep, beep, beep—boom!” She mimicked the sound of an explosion and

suddenly pointed towards Asuhain-san. “Eighty-six, fifty-three, seventy-four!” Then she pointed at Higashira-san. “Error, sixty-three, ninety-four.” Lastly, she pointed at me. “Eighty-five, fifty-six, seventy-nine.” After mouthing off all these mysterious values, she staggered back from us. “Sorry, I really can’t stand next to you three.”

“Huh?”

“Your boob levels are over nine thousand!” she yelled before fleeing into the bath.

*Y-You’re overreacting...* Akatsuki-san might’ve been on the shorter side, but she still had a good body. *I really don’t think she has anything to worry about.* It seemed that Akatsuki-san wasn’t the only one bothered. Higashira-san’s eyes flung open and glued themselves to my own boobs.

“E-Eighty-five...”

“What are you so freaked out about, Ms. ‘Error’?”

We entered the bath some time later, coming upon murky water flowing into gray stone. We saw some familiar faces excitedly making a ruckus, mysteriously going from one end and then running back out. I called out to Nasuka-san, who was leaning against the edge as she soaked.

“What are they doing?” I asked.

Nasuka-san’s short bob cut shook as she pointed at the ceiling. “Look up there.”

In the middle was a square hole through which you could see the night sky. The starlight that filtered in through it dimly lit the bath, and the wind coolly blew against our naked bodies.

“It’s an outdoor bath...” Asuhain-san murmured.

The girls who were acting up were going into the spot where they could see the sky, getting embarrassed, and then splashing away. It was like playing a game of chicken. Unless someone magically came crashing down, there wasn’t any way that someone could’ve seen them. That being said, it did take some

amount of courage to be naked outside, even if there wasn't anyone around. It seemed that there were two kings of the chicken game, and they were two people I knew. They were boldly resting their shoulders against the stone border while soaking up the starlight.

"Oh, there you three are!" Akatsuki-san said.

"Over here, Irido-san!" Maki-san followed up.

There was a significant difference in their heights, but both girls had slender, sporty bodies and were stretching their legs in the water. *Will these two be okay without me?* I glanced at Asuhain-san and Higashira-san.

After a few seconds of feeling out our intentions, Higashira-san took a step back.

"Go ahead," she said.

"Don't act like I'm raring to be over there," I said.

*I guess I don't have a choice... Higashira-san and Asuhain-san already stand out enough without any help. I can't have them get caught up in a game of chicken.* I stepped into the bath and nervously stepped towards the part with the open ceiling. The cool night air caressed my skin.

Looking up, I saw a square cutout of the starry sky. The gentle light filtering in reminded me of opening a treasure chest in a video game, but what weighed on my mind more was the fact that I didn't have any clothes on. *I'm naked...outside...* It was a weird sense of freedom from normal day activities, but also...

"Feels kinda naughty, doesn't it?" Akatsuki-san smirked when I looked back down.

She and Maki-san had their limbs stretched out, embraced by the night sky.

"The feel of the wind on every crevice of your body..."

"This is how our ancestors lived! I might get hooked..."

*I'm sure this isn't the wrong way to enjoy outdoor baths, but I'm not sure why, but I don't want people to think I'm the same as these two.* Right then, I heard water splashing as someone approached. I turned around, and I saw a pair of

boobs just barely being covered by a towel. Asuhain-san was wading through the water over to us.

“Asuhain-san? Are you sure?” *I thought this would be too embarrassing for you.*

Then she looked up at the night sky. “This doesn’t happen every day. When in Rome...”

*Wow, I never thought I’d live to see the day that she’d say that.* She wasn’t the type to do anything unnecessary that didn’t have to do with studying...the exception being if President Kurenai asked her for help. *Well...I guess she’s right. When in Rome, do as the Romans do! Plus, with Asuhain-san here, people won’t lump me together with Akatsuki-san and Maki-san.*

Asuhain-san and I sat next to Akatsuki-san and Maki-san. We placed our towels on the edge of the bath and then slowly dipped ourselves into the water. As we did, I noticed that Maki-san’s eyes locked onto a certain part of our bodies.

“Look at them jiggle. Let me feel ’em.”

“No.” *These are for Mizuto’s hands only.*

“Damn you, you lewd woman! You sayin’ your boobs are only for your boyfriend?!”

I fell silent, surprised by how Maki-san had jokingly expressed exactly what had been on my mind. *I-I’m not lewd! This is normal...* Asuhain-san’s flushed face rose to look at the starry sky above.

“What do you think?” I asked.

After a few seconds, Asuhain-san answered. “I feel like I’ve had a lot of firsts after meeting you...”

Though it didn’t really answer my question, I didn’t let myself get thrown off. “Really?”

“Getting frustrated that I didn’t get the highest grade, going on a trip with school acquaintances, sharing ice cream—all of them were things that I thought I’d never experience.”



“Well, the trip was more thanks to President Kurenai,” I said, wryly smiling. “But I get you. I’ve had a lot of firsts since entering high school.”

*Even excluding my ex becoming my stepbrother, I never expected that I’d join the student council. Also, all the things she experienced for the first time, I did as well.* Asuhain-san scooped some of the water and looked down at the tiny hot springs she’d made in her hands.

“It’s not like I ever was interested in these kinds of things, but...they’re more fun than I expected. Learning that must be a good thing... That concludes my impressions.”

I wasn’t sure how to describe it—roundabout, logical? But she could’ve only said all of that after coming to terms with her feelings. *This is on-brand for a straitlaced girl like her.*

“Your name’s Asuhain-san? Nice to meet you,” Maki-san called out, judging that our conversation was over. “I’m Maki Sakamizu, and I was in the same class as Irido-san last year. I’ve only heard some stuff about you—pretty much rumors—but let’s be friends!”

*Wow...she’s a true socialite. She really fits the bill as a basketball team member (my own bias). But she isn’t the kind of person that Asuhain-san does well with. She’ll probably give Maki-san the cold shoulder, so I should intervene here.*

But just as I went to, Asuhain-san betrayed my expectations. “Thanks... Likewise.” Though it was stiff, she still gave a friendly response. And then, Asuhain-san followed up. “Um...what exactly have you heard about me?”

*Whoa! She’s actually continuing the conversation on her own! As far as I knew, this might’ve been the first time Asuhain-san had tried to continue a conversation with someone she was meeting for the first time. She’s grown so much! This is something that neither Mizuto nor Higashira-san can do! Not that they’ve even tried.*

An expression of joy filled Maki-san’s face and she began talking. Though they were talking about me, I couldn’t help but smile at Asuhain-san’s cute and valiant effort. After chatting for some time, she got worn-out, as expected. Her face had grown considerably red, so I proposed that we get out and wash our

bodies.

“Want me to wash your back, Asuhain-san?”

As soon as I said this, Akatsuki-san began complaining. “Hey, that’s not fair!”

But my suggestion was a way to reward Asuhain-san for working so hard. Though she seemed a little lost as to how to respond, eventually, she did.

“Well...in that case, I’ll help you,” she said.

“Hm? With what?”

“Um...your hair. I’ve been thinking that it must be difficult to wash hair as long as yours.”

“Oh, you’ll help? Thanks! You’re right! It’s a pain!”

The two of us stood up and got out of the bath. As we did, I noticed a light red line across her outer right thigh from where the bush branch had cut her.

“Is your thigh okay now?” I asked.

“It’s mostly healed by now.”

“That’s good. I guess being in the ocean probably helped.”

I reached out and touched the scar, making Asuhain-san jump a little.

“Eek! Th-That tickles...”

“It’s that sensitive? Then how about this?!”

“Ah! W-Wait, it seriously tickles!”

Watching the two of us play as we left, the girls around us began whispering.

“Aren’t they a little *too* friendly?”

“Now that I think about it, Irido-san’s dating someone, right?”

“Yeah, the smartest person in the school... Wait!”

“Asuhain-san scored highest on the finals last year, right?”

*Hm? I’m getting the feeling that a new misunderstanding is being formed, but...whatever for now!*

“Night!”

“Good night!”

“Yep, night!” I said to Akatsuki-san and Higashira-san before turning off the light.

A faint light filtered through the curtains. I walked back to my bed, crawled under the sheets, and lay on my side. As I did, my eyes met with Asuhain-san, who’d done the same.

We stared at each other in silence before I broke out laughing. I didn’t feel sleepy at all yet, plus locking eyes with Asuhain-san as we both lay in bed was funny. That’s why I started talking to Asuhain-san in a low voice with my face half buried in a pillow.

“I guess the school trip’s gonna be over tomorrow, huh?”

“Yeah...” she replied in a low voice.

“Did you have fun?”

“Ultimately...”

“That’s good.”

*What do people talk about at times like these?* As soon as I thought about that, I realized that this was a cliché situation. School trip nights were meant for gossip!

“So...what happened with Mizuto?” I asked.

Asuhain-san didn’t really have anyone to gossip about besides him, so I brought up the guy that she unlikely had feelings for. My boyfriend.

At first, I thought this might’ve been a mistake, but she didn’t seem bothered at all. “I don’t think he’s a bad person. He gave me proper support.”

“O-Oh...”

It was better than getting hurt by tactless words, but I had complicated feelings, hearing how my boyfriend had been nice to another girl.

“But I don’t think I could ever date him.”

“Huh? R-Really?”

“Really. He’s intelligent, but he seems boorish. It’s like he can see through everything; it almost makes me uncomfortable. Thinking about how despite being so intelligent, he indulges in Higashira-san’s chest evokes a hard aversion on a biological level.”

*Sh-She’s really pummeling him... But also, that last bit is just your own imagination.*

“He doesn’t seem to be the type who’s driven by his sexual urges, but I think he’s the type to lead girls on and make them misunderstand his feelings towards them. You should be careful not to be fooled too, Irido-san.”

*She’s very talkative today. Did he actually do something to her? He was strangely insistent that we don’t reveal our relationship to Asuhain-san.*

After that, we started talking about everything that had happened today. In that time, I began noticing that the amount of words we spoke lessened, and our eyelids had gotten heavy.

*It’d been a while since I’d felt a wave of sleep this comfortable. Now that I think about it, I was worried about a lot of things on the first and second days. The first day, there was the pool incident, and then the second day, I had Asuhain-san to worry about. That must be why I feel so fulfilled right now before sleeping. It’s been three days since I’ve been able to sleep without any worries.*

Right as I was about to drift off to sleep, a certain thought passed through my head. *Oh, now that I think about it, who was that person who saw us at the pool?*

# The Conclusive Fourth Day

## The Culprit

### Mizuto Irido

*I'll be frank. At this point in time, I haven't pinpointed who saw my secret tryst with Yume. After all, I don't have any clear information about them at all.* The only thing I could be certain of was that the culprit had hidden herself in a locker in the girls' locker room, avoiding detection. In other words, the culprit was a girl. Out of all the second-years, there were about a hundred girls; adding in the female guests at the hotel, there were countless people who could've walked in on us.

However, I had a theory that if I obtained just one more piece of the puzzle, this mystery would be blown wide open. If there was something that I noticed, it'd be just that. If just one more condition was met, then out of over a hundred potential suspects, that number would magically be narrowed down to just one.

If my theory was right, then I could say that I was almost a hundred-percent certain who the culprit was. That's why from here on out, I needed to work to change my theory into truth.

Personally, I didn't really care whether we figured out the culprit's identity, but I was sure that it would continue to weigh on Yume's mind. More importantly, if my theory was right, then the culprit's memories of this trip would be soured as well.

It wasn't exactly in character for me, but *somebody* had to solve this mystery. As long as everything ended without incident, then it'd be okay. *I'll make sure that this once-in-a-lifetime school trip ends on a positive note.* But it's not like I had to do too much legwork at this point. I'd already set the stage. All I had to do was wait, and the information I wanted would come to me. *Isn't that right, Yako Yoshino?*

## Why Are Your Depictions of Clothes So Frequent This Time?

On the fourth and last day of the school trip, the only thing on our itinerary was sightseeing at Shuri Castle. Going off the picture I saw of the red-tile roof, I thought that it'd be similar to the Heian Shrine, but I was wrong. In reality, nearly everything around the castle were homes that people actually lived in. Shuri Castle was in the middle, at the top of a small hill.

But apparently there were rules for the appearance of the buildings in the area, which most likely explained why all of the homes had white walls and red roofs. They really stood out the most.

What excited us students the most was finding a Lawson. We'd only ever seen their signs in blue, but here, it was red. Even their usual blue lines on the outside of the store were all red. It was so unexpected that, at first, it didn't even register in my mind that it was a Lawson.

In Kyoto, McDonald's was famous for its signs being brown instead of red, and as someone who lived there, it was exciting to see other differently designed signs.

After climbing the stone-paved road on the wide hill, a pure-red gate came into view. It was apparently the entrance to Shuri Castle—the Shurei Gate. Upon arriving, each of our classes took turns going through it.

Once we entered, we were allowed to go off with our own individual groups. Our group of six followed the stone walls and eventually found the inner gate in the castle walls.

Unlike the Shurei Gate, this was a plain gate that looked as if someone had opened a hole in the castle walls. On either side of it were completely gray Shisa.

After passing through the gate, we entered an area that had walls as curvy as waves. There was a stone path in the middle of the grass that stretched to a staircase, which led to another small gate, but this one was painted a beautiful red.

After climbing the stairs and passing through the gate, we came face-to-face with a castle wall that was about five meters in height. The path continued

straight to the left, and at the end of it was another staircase and gate.

“Th-There are too many stairs...” Isana complained in a weak voice.

I was honestly starting to get a little fatigued in my legs too. “It’s a castle on top of a hill. The more stairs, the more hill to climb, right?”

“Ugh...” Isana grumbled dejectedly.

But I was right there with her. After climbing the stairs and passing through the gate, we entered a somewhat open space. I was wondering why all the tourists were gathered on the left side, but it seemed that there was about a waist-high wall from which you could see the entire landscape.

“Wow, we’re so high! Kawanami, take some pics of us!” Minami-san demanded.

“Yeah, yeah.”

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, Kawanami became the cameraman and took the flip phone. The four girls of our group put their backs to the wall with the Naha scenery as their backdrop. Of course, Minami-san was used to taking pictures and it seemed that Yume was too, but Isana did the typical I-don’t-go-out-much peace sign, while Asuhain wore a stiff expression.

I kept myself out of it because taking pictures wasn’t really my thing, but things hardly go as planned. Ultimately, Kawanami forcibly dragged me into frame, and we all took a group picture.

After that, we went through another gate, arrived at a large, stone-paved open space, and then an even bigger gate—the Hoshin Gate. It was so tall that we had to strain our necks to look up, and its roof, walls, and pillars were all the same shade of red. This was the gate to the castle, but it was pretty much its own building too. If someone had told me that this was the castle, I’d have believed them.

Normally, the area past the gate was supposed to be red and gold. Apparently, the main temple that used to be there had since burned down, and they were in the process of restoring it. Currently, there was scaffolding, largely in the shape of the temple. *So we’re finally halfway to the castle, huh?* Of course, we still had to go back, so we were more like a fourth of the way done.

“Phew...” Isana sighed in the corner of the plaza by the Hoshin Gate. “Hill, stairs, hill stairs... This is too much for a shut-in...”

“Really? Gettin’ tired out from somethin’ like this? Lazybones,” Kawanami, her fated enemy, teased her, but Isana didn’t even react.

“Humans aren’t required to climb hills. It’s fine...” she said as if she’d reached some form of enlightenment. She squatted in front of the red gate and looked up at it.

Seeing Isana, Yume called out to Minami-san. “Wanna take a break? We won’t get in anyone’s way in this spacious area either.”

“Sure, why not?”

And with that, we took a break and looked around the area. This was perfect for me since *she* would catch up if we waited long enough. I aimlessly walked around the area, covertly distancing myself from Yume and Isana. As I did, a group of students who’d entered after us caught up, and among them was a certain individual.

“Hey...”

*There you are.* I turned around upon hearing her voice. Standing there was a girl with flashy hair and an outfit that revealed her belly button—Yako Yoshino. Her shoulders, stomach, and thighs were on full display. It was an outfit that really didn’t fit the historical nature of the place we were visiting. Currently, she was shooting me a look. I couldn’t read whether her expression contained fear or doubt, but either way, I knew it wasn’t friendly.

It was good that I’d moved to the tree that was planted at the edge of this area, because neither Isana or Yume could see us. Like this, I could cut straight to the chase with Yoshino.

“Need something?”

Yoshino furrowed her eyebrows, probably thinking that I was being brazen. “Is that *really* what you’re gonna ask after that message you gave me?”

“That was me being kind in my own way, more or less.”

“So you’re implying that there was more to your motives, right? What do you



want from me? I didn't take you as the blackmailing type."

"That's not what I'm trying to do. You're the only one who's thinking that," I said, shrugging. "Besides, the fact that your cell phone is broken isn't exactly blackmail material." Yoshino frowned. I wryly smiled and continued. "By the way, I don't have any hard evidence of that—it's all just my own hypothesis. But after seeing your reaction, I'm sure I'm right. The flip phone you had broke after you fell in the water, right?"

"How...do you know that?"

"There are three reasons, but do you really wanna know?"

"As if I'll be able to accept this situation without any explanation!"

*Okay, suit yourself.* "First, on the morning of the second day, Yume called you, but you didn't pick up."

I'd gone with her to investigate the missing guidebooks, and thinking that it'd be rude to suddenly visit their room, Yume had tried calling ahead, but Yoshino hadn't picked up. It would make sense if the phone had been broken by then.

"Second, for some reason, after that, your group was unusually close to ours. Even in the American Village, you were weirdly sticking by Yume. That's because you were hoping that if any kind of emergency information was shared, Yume would share it with you, right?"

After all, that very morning, Yume had offered her help if they were in any trouble, so it would make sense that Yoshino would hang around just in case she did need help.

"Third, the clothes that you were drying in the window on the morning of the second day."

"My clothes...?"

"They were the exact same clothes you were wearing on the night of the first day."

Yoshino's expression slightly became more grim. For something that she didn't want others to find out about, she was pretty careless. Maybe she shouldn't have so easily let a guy into her room.

“Of course, the same goes for us, but we were told the entire schedule for the school trip ahead of time, so we all brought four days’ worth of clothes. There was no reason to do laundry. If there was, then it’d have to be because some unexpected accident happened. Something like, say...becoming absolutely drenched.” *And how would that happen? There was an event the night before that perfectly explained that.* “Yoshino, Asuhain pushed you into the pool, right?”

Yoshino did her best not to show anything in her expression at all. But it was too late. *The moment you were so scared of me already proved my theory.*

“I heard about that via Yume,” I continued. “At around eight thirty on the first night, Asuhain saw someone ask someone else out by the pool. She didn’t reveal who those two people were, but taking into account the three reasons I listed earlier, I was thinking that one of them was definitely you, and specifically, you were the one asking the other person out.”

“Why...?”

“Hypothesizing from what Asuhain said, there are only about three other people that the other person could be. And out of those three, none of them were people I could imagine asking you out. No offense.”

“Wait... I’m not seeing where you’re going with this.”

I wasn’t sure if Yoshino had calmed down, but she was still trying to keep a straight face. “Asking someone out by the pool? And you’re saying I was pushed in? How the heck are you getting *me* from that? Just because I washed my clothes doesn’t mean that they were wet. What if a drink had exploded on me or something?”

“Now that I think about it, you’re wearing the same clothes from the first day, aren’t you? They look familiar.”

“Yeah, they’re dry now.”

“They smell like chlorine.”

“Huh?”

Yoshino frantically went to sniff her shoulder strap of her camisole and then

froze.

I smirked slightly. “You’re so honest.”

Yoshino’s face went red with embarrassment. I hadn’t expected her to fall for that so easily.

“Argh, fine! What do you want from me?! Are you just bullying me?!”

“Not at all. I couldn’t care less about your love life. You might think differently of me, but there’s something more important that I want to ask.” I then pointed at Yoshino’s left wrist, or more importantly, the watch she had on. “You got out of the pool with Asuhain at eight thirty, right?”

“Huh? What’s the point of that question, even?”

“With that, I’ll know exactly who you asked out.”

“Why don’t you just *ask* me?”

“You don’t want to say, right? Besides, I bet it’d make *them* happier too, this way.”

Yoshino’s eyes turned to slits as she glared at me. I wasn’t sure what emotions were going through her head, but for a bit, she stayed silent, accepting the truth that’d been thrown in front of her.

“Fine. You win,” she sighed before staring at me, the fight gone from her face. “In exchange, would you mind hearing me out? After all, everything you said—your hypothesis, or whatever—is spot on.”

“Sure. It’s a small price to pay.”

“You’re treating someone’s love life as a ‘price’?” Then Yoshino looked at her watch. “What did you want again? The time we got out of the pool?”

“Yeah. If possible, I’d like the precise time.”

This was information that we couldn’t get out of Asuhain. She simply couldn’t have known, since she’d lacked any way of telling the time.

“Just a second... I know I saw...” she muttered. “Oh, right. It was around eight fifty.”

“Eight fifty, huh?” *That’s exactly ten minutes before I went in there. That*

*confirms it. "Thanks. Everything's clear now."*

"Uh-huh. Then let me give you a quiz: who did I ask out?"

Then, I said a single name, which made Yoshino's face loosen. "You really are the worst, you know that?" she said in a voice of submission.

Then I listened to her love story and how it had both started and ended without anyone knowing.

## **The Identity of the Mysterious Individual**

After enjoying looking out from the narrow path that went around the restoration area of the temple, we had to go through various castle walls to get back to the Shurei Gate. There was a large area where various stalls were set up. Most of the students decided to hang out here before we had to go back to Kyoto.

Some students were looking at souvenirs, while others were eating ice cream they'd bought, but there was one person who was sitting underneath a tree with branches as big as a roof, her sketchbook propped open on her lap. As I got closer to her, I sat next to her without any reservations.

"What're you drawing?" I asked.

Then, in response, she, Isana Higashira, responded while lightly pressing her pen against the page. "I saw many different pieces of scenery which could easily become a picture, so I'm doing some rough sketches and adding random characters."

"You remember what the scenery looked like?"

"Just bits and pieces. I have pictures to reference later as well."

Isana had brought an old digital camera with her for her own purposes. She wanted pictures she could use for her own reference, so she'd borrowed one from her dad.

As I watched her sketch out the scenery we saw from the Shuri Castle, I began my questioning. "The school trip's coming to an end, but how was it for you?"

“It was great! So much better than middle school! I was never aware that going on a school trip could be so fun when you have friends!”

“Wow, you’re making me tear up, but...yeah, I agree with you, more or less.”

*I had fun too. There were various problems, but all’s well that ends well. Or rather, it just has to end well.*

“You can keep sketching, but there’s something I wanna tell you. Is that okay?”

“Sure.”

“It’s nothing big, but actually, Yume and I found ourselves in a bit of trouble during the school trip, and I have an idea as to how to solve that. To do that, I’d like it if you listened to my thoughts.”

“Huh? Is there anything you could gain from me of all people lending an ear? I’m not particularly gifted in the advice-giving department.”

“All you have to do is listen. It’ll help me organize my thoughts too.” As I looked up at the blue Okinawan sky through the thick tree branches, I began recollecting everything that’d happened. “So, truth be told, Yume and I met up somewhere on the first night at nine.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You remember how the hotel had a pool? We figured that no students would go there, so we made plans to meet there. So, we were talking for a bit, and then suddenly we heard a rustling from behind us. When we turned around, we saw someone—a shadowy figure—fleeing the scene.”

“Whoa.”

“We tried to quickly chase after them, but when we left the locker rooms to get to the hallway, they were nowhere to be seen. Of course, you know that it’ll be a pain if our relationship gets out, right? That’s why we decided it was necessary to figure out who the culprit was before the end of the trip when everyone gets their phones back.”

“That makes sense.”

“But honestly, I had no clue who they could be up until this morning. After all,

there was only one thing I knew about the culprit. You know, Minami-san was actually watching over the entrance to the pool while we were in there, and according to her, nobody left the whole time.”

“Oh, really?”

“So the culprit didn’t leave the locker room. Instead, they hid in there. I checked the boys’ locker room, and didn’t find anyone, so by process of elimination, the culprit must’ve been hiding in the girls’ locker room—the one that Yume didn’t check. In other words, the culprit had to have been a girl. After all, I doubt that in the heat of the moment, a guy would flee into the girls’ locker room.”

“Hm. I see.”

“Conversely, that’s all I had to go off of, but also, that wasn’t the only thing that happened at the pool that night. Thinking about that overall, everything came together neatly like a puzzle, and I was able to take the number of suspects down to just one.”

“How so?”

“At eight thirty, a half hour before Yume and I went into the pool, there were three people there. One of them was Asuhain. She was hiding in the bushes after seeing a different pair—not us—head in there. She witnessed Yako Yoshino ask someone out.”

“Interesting.”

“It didn’t work out, and apparently things got heated. Seeing them erupt into an argument, Asuhain jumped out of the bushes and, in the heat of the moment, pushed both of them into the pool.”

“Oh dear.”

“That being said, these two incidents are not unrelated. The person Yoshino asked out was actually the last person to leave, and they were the very same person who saw me and Yume.”

Up until now, Isana had been idly nodding along and sketching, but as soon as she heard this, her hand stopped moving and she glanced at me. “Why...do you

think that?”

“I heard from Yoshino not too long ago that after she got rejected, she had Asuhain grab her a change of clothes. She said that by the time they left the pool, it was eight fifty. Do you remember what I said earlier? Minami-san started watching over the pool entrance around then—ten minutes before nine. Of course, she didn’t see Yoshino or Asuhain leave the pool, since they’d already left by then. But she didn’t see anyone go in either.”

“Uh-huh...”

“There’s the slightest of inconsistencies in the times that Minami-san and Yoshino told me, so more than likely, they just missed each other. But either way, the only way the culprit could’ve entered the pool was between the time that Yoshino and Asuhain left and Minami-san arrived—just a few minutes. The timing is as strict as threading a needle. Can that really be written off as a mere coincidence?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Of course, Minami-san didn’t tell anyone that she was watching over the entrance for us, and I’m sure even she didn’t even know what time she’d start watching. Not running into her can definitely only be called a coincidence. But what about Yoshino and Asuhain? If we assume that the culprit was someone who had nothing to do with the two of them, then they’d have no reason to try and avoid them. Even if they were extremely shy, it would’ve been hard for them to know that they were in there without at least peeking inside. Asuhain said that nobody else came into the locker room, and that she and Yoshino didn’t exchange a single look or word. So how would the culprit know that the two of them were still in there?”

“I see...”

“I think that the culprit already knew that the two of them were in there, and it was difficult for her to face them. There’s only one person that fits the bill—the person that Yoshino asked out.”

Isana fell silent.

“The person who rejected Yoshino is also the same person who saw me and

Yume. As soon as I figured this out, there was one person who fit the four conditions to be the culprit.”

Then, I put up my index finger. “First, as I said earlier, they had to be a girl.”

Then I put up my middle finger. “Second, they had to be in the same class as Yoshino, but in a different group. After all, Asuhain heard them say something about how they wished they could’ve been in the same group. Yoshino’d only say that if they were classmates.”

Then, I put up my ring finger. “Third, they had to have a swimsuit. The person who rejected Yoshino apparently left the pool first, in contrast to Yoshino, whose clothes had gotten wet and who had to wait for Asuhain to bring back a change of clothes. The only one who could do that would be someone who was wearing a swimsuit in the first place. If I remember right, the locker room had a dryer for swimsuits.”

Then, I put up my pinky. “Fourth, they needed to be someone who didn’t have an alibi at exactly nine.”

Then, I put down my index finger. “Going off just the first requirement, there were over a hundred suspects. But, by adding the second requirement, it narrowed it down to eleven girls in our class, not including Yoshino and her group.”

Then, I put down my middle finger. “Then, when you add in the third requirement, the only people who had swimsuits were those who’d chosen the marine experience course for the afternoon of the second day. The only people who chose that were Yoshino’s group and our group. But Yoshino’s group’s already not an option, meaning that the culprit had to have been one of the four girls in our group.”

Then, I put down my ring finger. “Which brings us to the fourth requirement. Out of the remaining four suspects, Yume obviously couldn’t be a suspect. Same goes for Minami-san since she was watching over the entrance of the pool, and since she was with her friends, she has a verifiable alibi. Asuhain was in the room when Yume got back from the pool, so it couldn’t have been her. The culprit was hiding in the locker room and couldn’t have gotten back to the room before Yume.”



Then, I put my pinky down. “Which leaves just one person.” I looked at my best friend’s side profile. “You were the one peeping on us, weren’t you, Isana?”

Isana Higashira was the culprit who’d been hiding in the bushes and peeping on me and Yume at nine. She silently stared at her sketchbook before groaning, her shoulders trembling slightly. The hustle and bustle from the school trip faded, and all I could see was the midafternoon shadows from the light filtering through the trees. The shadows formed a kind of barrier, separating us from the outside world. But this was normal for the two of us. Whether it was the corner of the library, the roof of the school during the cultural festival, or hanging outside of the sports festival—we’d spent so much time like this. For us, this was just another day.

“I-Incredible!” Isana’s head snapped up and she leaned towards me. She got into my personal space to the point that I thought her nose was gonna smash into me, her eyes sparkling while she excitedly continued. “I was wondering when I would be found out, but I never expected it to happen so cleanly! Wonderful job! It’s my loss! I’ve always thought you were intelligent, but you’ve gone above and beyond my expectations!”

“Is this really how the culprit should act when they’re found out? Well, I guess you’re acting exactly as planned.”

I wasn’t the type to talk a lot, but the reason I played out this solution was because I thought it’d make Isana happier...though this was beyond my wildest beliefs. Isana leaned back, placed her hand on her chest, and took deep breaths.

“Phew, that made my heart race. So this is what it feels like to be a caught culprit. I got a front row seat, even!”

“Personally, I thought you’d say, ‘What an interesting theory. Perhaps you should become an author.’”

“Oh no. I know firsthand you shouldn’t become an author.”

“Urk...” *I know that too.*

Then Isana shook her legs and leaned forward, looking up at me. “So? What

happens next? I'm not much of a mystery reader."

"It's time for the culprit to confess her motive. Why did you peep on us?"

"Ah...that? I suppose I've no choice but to confess, then." She began whistling the tune that plays during a certain young detective anime when the culprit is confessing. "I had two reasons."

"You don't have to force yourself to explain it like an intellectual when you're not cut out for it."

"How rude! I truly have two reasons! First, I simply wanted to watch."

"Can I ask why?"

"Sure, why not? Yume-san mentioned that she wanted to take a shower before nine, and I guessed that meant she wanted to meet up with you around that time. Then I began thinking about what it's like between the two of you when you're alone."

"I guess I get it... So what's the other reason?"

"The other reason is that...I kind of wanted to confirm something."

"What?"

"Similar to confronting something that frightens you... I was wondering if I would be okay if I saw you in a romantic situation with someone else."

I fell silent, but Isana didn't seem to be in pain or look awkward otherwise. She continued speaking in a matter-of-fact way. "It's not that I still pine for you or anything, and I truly wish for Yume-san's happiness with all my heart. But even so, I still wondered how I would feel when confronted with the two of you together. It's the same kind of feelings one has when playing a horror game—fear and curiosity mix together, making it impossible not to take action. Besides, I had time on my hands."

"So that's why you thought you'd sneak into the pool ahead of us?"

"I did. However, right before I did, I was caught. I was beginning to have second thoughts and was indecisively loitering around the entrance to the pool. It was then that Yoshino-san came upon me. She pulled me into the pool area, simply saying that she wanted to go into the pool."

“So even then, it wasn’t even a thought in your head that Yoshino would be asking you out.”

“Of course not! I never suspected that my first time being in a romantic situation—or at least being the one asked out—would be with a girl...and especially a gyaru.”

“Yeah, of course not...”

Even I hadn’t predicted it one bit. Maybe it was just how she acted with girls, but Yoshino wasn’t the type to wear her feelings on her sleeve. Her personality was so bright already; she probably hid everything but that and kept her true self hidden deep inside.

“This is just my own pure curiosity, but...what did Yoshino say to you?” I asked.

“She talked about how it was sad that a pool this fashionable was currently occupied by two girls. I simply nodded along until she suddenly said that the two of us should date. That’s pretty much how it went.”

“So she disguised it as a joke?”

“Most likely, if I’d reacted better, Yoshino-san would’ve backed down. But in actuality, I was so surprised that I couldn’t help but give her my unfiltered response, and as such, she dug her heels in...”

Then, I remembered what Yoshino had told me about her motivations behind asking Isana Higashira out.

## **The Motive of the Gyaru Who Was Kind to Isana Higashira**

“It was pretty much...love at first sight,” Yako Yoshino had said remorsefully as we stood in the corner of the spacious plaza in front of the majestic Hoshin Gate. “At first, I really didn’t get it. I noticed that she was always by herself and that I’d never seen her try to even talk to other people. I got curious about what she was like...so I tried talking to her. I was so curious that I didn’t even notice how big her boobs were.”

“Wow, you’re a social person down to your very core,” I said, surprised by her

authentic gyaru actions.

“Yeah, I get that a lot.” She dryly chuckled. “For real, though, in the entire year that we were in the same class, I never saw her talk with anyone—in our class, at least. I know that you two are close, but speaking purely in terms of the amount of time spent with her, I’ve spent more time with her since we were in the same class.”

“True enough.”

“So anyway, I was thinking that she’d be screwed if I wasn’t around and that she could only really rely on me. Before I knew it, I was unconsciously feeling that and...that’s how something kinda like a possessiveness came over me.”

*I honestly understand what she means.* Even when Yume and I had dated in middle school, or when I hung out with Isana in the corner of the library, I couldn’t deny that I’d felt something like a sense of superiority for knowing their beauty when nobody else did. *So from that feeling, Yoshino couldn’t let go of Isana?*

“Thinking that you own someone’s super creepy, right? That’s why I tried not thinking about it as much as possible, but...maybe around this past winter, I saw...”

“Saw what?”

“Her drawing.”

Suddenly, it all clicked. That was about the time that our trip to Kobe ended, and I’d started to manage Isana.

“I got a glimpse of her drawing on her tablet in the corner of the classroom. It was like electricity shot through my body as soon as I saw it. It wasn’t even just that she was crazy good... I’d seen her work on socials.”

“Oh...”

“It wasn’t trending or anything, but it had enough internet presence that even a normie like me was impressed. I remember thinking that I liked the drawing itself too, and feeling impressed that she was the one who’d drawn that. As soon as I thought that, I began thinking that destiny might have been at play

here.”

“I more or less understand...” I said with a sigh.

There’s no greater pleasure in this world than realizing the value of something when others don’t. As someone who’d realized Isana’s talent before anyone else in this world, I knew that better than anyone.

“But yeah, my feelings stemming from that pretty much spelled the end,” Yoshino said with a self-loathing smile. “I lost it. I thought that this was normal behavior, but I fought like hell to hide it from everyone else. Given my rep, I can’t really talk about this with anyone.”

“Is that why you teased the two of us about how close we were?”

“Yeah... When we were still in the same class, I asked her and found out that the two of you weren’t dating. I thought if I acted that way, nobody would think I had feelings for her.”

“So what you whispered in Asuhain’s ear after dinner, was that...”

“Oh god, you saw that? Yeah, I encouraged her. After all, if she bagged you, that’d be one less rival to worry about for Isana-chan’s heart. Ugh, I’m so cringe! No wonder Ran-chan’s so weirded out by me.”

*So this answers why Asuhain was so shocked by Yoshino’s confession to Isana.* Yoshino had openly been pretty teasing about my relationship with Isana, but then she had also tried to stop Asuhain from getting close to me for the sake of our “relationship”; in reality, she’d just been hiding her feelings, and secretly getting into position to ask Isana out.

Asuhain, who’d been wrestling with her feelings regarding Yume, couldn’t help but compare herself to Yoshino, who was single-heartedly going after the apple of her eye. Asuhain was afraid that she might have been like Yoshino. That’s why she’d tried to put distance between herself and Yume.

“And then, I got rightfully turned down,” Yoshino said lightly. “In the moment, I got kinda fired up and grabbed her, but Asuhain pushed us into the pool, which kinda cooled my head. Made me realize that someone like me doesn’t have the right to do anything with Isana-chan. The hubris of me, right?”

“You don’t have to put yourself down so much, y’know.”

“No, I do. I’m a coward who can’t even tell our teacher that I broke the phone they gave me.” *Technically, that’s Asuhain’s fault.* Then, Yoshino grunted a bit as she stretched. “I feel so much better now that I’ve come clean! By the way, you turned Isana-chan down, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I say this with both jealousy and bitterness, but you’re definitely gonna regret it.”

“I won’t,” I said without any hesitation. “If I’d said yes back then, I doubt she would’ve been able to draw.”

“Oh... Yeah, that wouldn’t be good.” Yoshino chuckled before turning her back to me. It was as if she were trying to say goodbye to the person she’d been up until now. “Well, keep makin’ her happy, okay? She’s the girl I stan!”

## **Isana Won’t Get Thrown Off**

As I recollected Yoshino walking away, as if a load had been taken off her shoulders, I shot a glance at Isana. She didn’t have the capability to achieve happiness through something as basic as romance anymore. Both I, the one she’d fallen in love with once, and she, the person who’d fallen in love, thought that, so that must’ve been the case. Right now, I had a bigger responsibility to her, bigger than being her boyfriend would’ve ever been. In order to respond to her expectations, I needed to take responsibility as the one who’d removed her from the path of being a normal high school girl.

“So? What’s your conclusion from your experiment?” I asked.

“Hm?” Isana asked, tilting her head.

“You were testing your feelings, right? You saw both me and Yume and were wondering how you’d feel, right? So what’s your conclusion?”

I also had the responsibility of accepting the results of her experiment. No matter what they were, I had no right to say no as the person who’d turned her down.

“Well...” She fell into thought as she looked at the boundless, bright sky. As she did, I couldn’t help but feel nervous in anticipation. But eventually, she mumbled in a voice as soft as a droplet of rain. “I don’t remember...”

“Huh?” I couldn’t help but furrow my brows at her response, especially since she was wearing a serious expression.

“Yume-san was so hot... I completely forgot,” she said, leaving me at a loss for words. “B-But surely I can’t be blamed! Especially not after she seductively said that the *continuation* would be when you returned home! It’s too hot, especially when she acts all prim and proper all the time! I was so aroused that I couldn’t stay still back then!” *So that’s where that rustling in the bushes came from.* “Now I’m unable to see Yume in any other light than a dirty one! Even last night, I was frightened that I might get a nosebleed from hearing her bust size!”

“Now that I think about it, I heard that on the morning of the second day, you found your way into Yume’s bed.”

“That was most likely done unconsciously... I was worried my heart was going to give out the moment my eyes opened and Yume-san’s face came into view.” Isana’s hands began to tremble as she looked at me with an intense gaze. “When you return home today...*something’s* going to happen, isn’t it? After all, four days’ worth of *that*...well, *it’s* bound to happen, right?”

“Whatever you’re picturing’s not gonna happen—not right after this exhausting trip.” *Besides, our parents are gonna be home.*

“In my fantasies, Yume-san is *really* something... I have high-quality images saved in my brain from seeing her naked in the bath. I apologize, but I’m going to be feasting on this fantasy for a bit.”

“There are no calories in fantasies.”

“Of course there are... The amount of satisfaction varies by the fantasy.” Then she gasped as if struck by inspiration. She quickly flipped the page of her sketchbook from her sketch of Shuri Castle to a blank one and fervently began sketching something new.

“What’s up? Think of something?” I asked, taking off my friend hat and putting on my manager one.

Isana didn't stop for even a second while answering me. "Mizuto-kun, you told me that I need something like a poster girl, right?"

"Yeah... An original character really makes the difference between artists."

I was already coming up with plans for Isana to start drawing manga, but I didn't want her to become a full-blown manga artist. I wanted her to build up her skills by experiencing what it was like to draw manga.

But just throwing her into it and making her figure out how to do paneling would've been too difficult, so I wanted to take things step-by-step. First, I wanted her to start by drawing pictures with speech bubbles, but to do that, she needed recurring characters.

"How about we go with her?" Isana asked.

Before I knew it, she'd drawn a rough sketch of a girl and was now showing it to me. It was a cute high school girl with long black hair and a beret; she reminded me of Yume. Her caped school uniform looked like something out of a fantasy series.

"What kind of character is this?" I asked.

"A beautiful genius detective with an incredibly powerful sex drive!"





I had no words. It was a very blatant combination of everything she'd experienced on this trip.

"Though she's extremely calm and brilliant during a case, when she's alone with the protagonist, she becomes very loving and horny! Oh, right! How about we make the main protagonist's fetish revolve around deduction?! She'll be like, 'While watching your eyes move, it's become clear that you're turned on by my thighs!' And then she'll flip her skirt! Isn't that an amazing idea?!"

*Isana's too much of a lust monster. But that's better for this kind of thing. Thinking about what it might do for her brand, though... I'm not sure. Currently, Isana's a more SFW artist focused on the refreshing golden years of teenagers.*

"The answer's a yes, of course, right?! Allow me to draw this!" she insisted. "I'm simply going to draw it anyway!"

"Ugh, fine, fine! There's no point trying to stop you anyway!"

And thus, this character, who'd been spontaneously born, would go extremely viral at a later date, and would be the reason Isana would receive a certain DM, but that's a story for another time.

"I'm deeply, deeply sorry!"

While we were waiting to board the plane at the Naha Airport, Isana fessed up to Yume.

Ultimately, Yume's reaction was to go beet red and hide her face with her hands, unable to say a single word.

Isana tilted her head, shooting me a look of confusion as I stood there, here as an observer. "Does this mean...I've been forgiven?"

"I don't know how you could interpret it that way," I said.

"I'm so embarrassed... When I think about how someone I know saw me like that, I... Ugh... I wanna die..." Yume groaned.

*Oh... I see what's going on here. It's true that there's a pretty big difference between how she acts in public versus when she's snuggling up to me.*

Isana crouched next to Yume, who'd curled up into a ball, and began speaking in a reserved voice. "I-It's no problem! You were adorable!"

"I really don't want my friends to see me like that!"

"I think it's good to have a way you act only around your boyfriend! From now on, no matter how strict or harsh you are with me, I'll simply remember how you're probably snuggly like a cat when you're with your boyfriend."

"Just kill me now!"

Despite Yume enduring some psychological scars, our school trip came to a close. I was sure that we'd remember this trip many times more from here on out—especially Yume, who'd probably never end up forgetting this trip, even if she wanted to.

# Final Chapter: The Fifth Day for Just the Two(?) of Us

## Four Days' Worth of Debt

After getting back from the school trip, perhaps due to the fatigue of traveling and not being used to it, I passed out before the sun had even set. By the time I woke up, it was bright outside, meaning it was already morning, despite it feeling as if I'd only slept for two hours tops.

*Where'd the night go?* In exchange, I felt very clearheaded, but I still felt as if I'd wasted time. It was so early in the morning that when I went down to the living room, none of the rest of the household had woken up yet. When I entered, I saw dinner from last night on the table, wrapped in plastic. I was hungry, so I happily ate it.

We had the day after the school trip off, so since I'd been uncharacteristically active during it, I decided to take things slow today. Thinking that, I sat on the couch and opened a book.

It wasn't long until our parents got up and went to work. Though we were off due to the school trip, it was still a normal weekday for everyone else. It felt like I'd gained something.

After a bit, around ten, Yume finally appeared.

"Morning..."

"Morning," I said.

Though she sluggishly entered the room, she'd properly changed out of her pajamas and was now wearing a long-sleeved blouse and a skirt. It was a familiar outfit of hers, but it felt strange to see, especially after spending the last few days being around her in summer clothes.

After finishing the black tea and toast she'd prepared for herself, she went to the bathroom before coming back to the living room. Then, she walked over and plopped down on the couch next to me before tilting over and lying on my

thighs.

“You did good,” I said, looking down at her.

“Mm...” Yume practically grumbled.

“You free today?” I asked.

“Yeah, but tomorrow I’m going to meet up with the student council members to give them their souvenirs.”

“Wow, dutiful as always.”

“Not really. This is normal.”

I closed my book and put it on the table before gently stroking Yume’s cheek.

As I did, Yume looked up at me. “They at work?”

“Yeah. It’s a weekday for them.”

“So they won’t be back until later?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Wanna...do it?”

*Well, if our parents aren’t home, it’s only natural that this topic comes up.* Just as Isana had so enthusiastically mentioned, Yume *had* said that we’d do things after getting back home. Even so...

“I dunno, I’m kinda out of it.”

“Ah...” Yume made a sound of understanding. “Yeah, I get that. I kinda wanna take it easy too.”

After being prohibited from engaging in any of these activities for four days straight, I knew that, at the very least, the flesh was willing even if the spirit was weak. *Well, I’ll give it two hours or so. If I’m in the mood, I’m sure it won’t be too late to change my mind then.*

So, with that, we didn’t kiss or even touch each other’s bodies. We kept a naturally close proximity as friendly siblings and spent the morning that way. When lunchtime came around, we made pasta together, adding a frozen potato salad and an instant soup on the side. I decided to keep things simple and easy.

After eating, I felt like I could rest again, and this time, it was my turn to lay my head on her lap. All the while, we read and sporadically conversed. At one point, Yume's phone chimed from the table. Yume picked it up, looked at it, and began responding to whatever message she'd gotten.

"Who is it?" I found myself asking.

"Asuhain-san."

*She's initiating the conversation? I kinda didn't imagine her to be the type to do that, but I guess it makes sense with how she was acting.* If she knew I was using Yume's lap as my pillow right now, she'd probably explode with anger.

For a time, Yume continued messaging her. Sometimes she'd chuckle or mutter something under her breath, and I watched her the entire time she did it from my position on top of her lap. When I sat up, I repositioned myself so that we were shoulder to shoulder and then wrapped my arm around her waist.

"Hm? Mizuto?" Yume asked, confused.

I positioned myself so that I was able to give her a hug from behind. I gripped her tighter, pulling our bodies closer together, and buried my face into her neck.

She smiled, amused. "Feeling neglected?"

But I didn't respond. Even after smelling Yume's scent, I felt as if my lax mood had returned. As I lightly breathed into her, I heard her softly moan and squirm.

Then, in a kind of amused but alluring way, she turned to me. "You wanna go...upstairs?"

Instead of answering her, I playfully nibbled on her earlobe, making her giggle.

"Sorry, Asuhain-san," Yume said, texting something before putting her phone away in her pocket.

After that, Yume turned towards me and put her lips on mine, unable to hold back anymore. After a few seconds, Yume smiled at me teasingly. "Hard to believe you were so calm just a few seconds ago."

"There's a debt to be paid—four days' worth."

There were hours until our parents got home. We hadn't been able to find any time to really be alone during the trip, and it was hard to know when the next time we'd really be able to be alone at home would be. I needed to make sure that I got my four days' worth of payment today.

As we got more and more into things, we began to leave the living room, meant for our family, to my room—a private space. Suddenly, Yume's phone dinged again, leading both of us to silently look at her pocket.

"You...okay with not answering?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah. I told her I wouldn't be able to respond for a bit."

*Okay, then. Let's get things back on track.* We held hands as we went upstairs and then into my room. It was just as I'd left it—books in messy piles, scattered across the room—but at least my bed was free of any obstructions.

I pushed Yume down onto my bed, eliciting an excited squeal from her. I mounted Yume as she lay there and kissed her again. This time, it wasn't a playful kiss, but an exciting one that would push both of us even further into the mood.

Suddenly, her pocket beeped again, making us both silently stop kissing and freeze up. Yume took out her phone and looked at it.

"Who is it?"

"Asuhain-san," Yume said after just looking at the sender before looking at me. "Can I leave my phone on your desk so it...doesn't get in the way?"

"Yeah..."

Yume got out from underneath me and went to my desk, not too far away. She fiddled with her phone before putting it down and coming back.

"I...turned off my notifications."

"Got it."

*Well then, let's get things back on track.* Yume sat on my bed and slowly put her hands on my shoulders. This time, she mounted me and began kissing me again, her soft body pressing against me.

Yume softly moaned as I wrapped my arms around her, putting my hands under her blouse. As her smooth skin ran against my fingers, I slowly lifted the hem of her blouse and moved my hands up until I found the hook of her bra.

In the next moment, there was a click, signaling that her bra was unhooked. As soon as it was, I felt something boiling inside me. It was a strange feeling, and no matter how many times it repeated, the feelings I had in this moment would never fa—

Suddenly, there was a ringing from my desk as a call came. Both of us fell silent. *Okay, well, getting back on track...* But then it rang again. *Okay, well, getting back—* Then another ring. *Okay, well—* Then another ring.

“Come on!” Yume pressed her unhooked bra against her and got off the bed, quickly moving to her phone. Most likely, if Yume kept ignoring the call, Asuhain would get suspicious, so Yume’s only move here was to pick up the phone.

“Hello? Oh, yeah. It’s okay, don’t worry. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Huh? Now?!” Yume turned to me, a troubled look on her face as she held her phone with one hand and her bra with another. “Well, I’m kinda in the middle of something... Huh? N-No. Not like that!” After repeating this kind of frantic talk about two or three more times, Yume hung up, letting out a sigh.

“Asuhain? What’d she want?” I asked nervously. I didn’t need to ask who it was.

A very guilty look crossed Yume’s face. “Well...you know how I was supposed to meet up with everyone from the student council tomorrow? They wanna do it today...”

“Oh...”

“B-But I said no! The original plan was for tomorrow anyway!”

“No...you should go,” I said, shutting out what I really wanted. “Your relationship with Asuhain is important. We have all the time in the world to find another opportunity.”

*Besides, I don’t want Asuhain to get any funny theories in her head. After all, that’s the girl who went out of her way to say that she’d end my existence.*

“Huh? But...” Yume worriedly looked at me while pressing her phone against



her chest. “Th-This might be weird coming from me, but...are you okay?”

*Nope. Not at all.* “Yeah, of course. Who do you take me for? I have complete control of my desires.”

“Okay, well in that case...” Yume put her hand to her chin, thinking before walking over to my bed and kneeling on the floor. “Mm,” she grunted, widening her arms, asking for a hug.

I was at a loss for a bit, but I hugged Yume and I felt her hug me back. It was like she was impressing the shape of her body into mine. I could feel her squeezing me with everything she had. She knew I was being blue-balled, so she made sure that the softness of her breasts, the bumps of her ribs, the rhythm of her breathing—all of that was burned into me. After a little bit, Yume reluctantly let go of me and looked up.

“Can you...hold back until later?”

It was like a mom asking her kid if they could be patient. “I can,” I said, wryly smiling.

“Also, I think you know already, but...”

“I do. Don’t worry.”

*Allow me to explain. Yume is the type of person who doesn’t approve of her boyfriend watching porn.* “Okay, then...” Yume stood up and rehooked her bra while walking to the door. “I’ll be back later. Seriously, sorry!” she said, putting her hands together apologetically before walking out into the hall.

“Hello, Asuhain-san? So actually...”

Her voice got softer as she walked away, and eventually, I couldn’t hear her anymore. I crashed back onto my bed and let out a long sigh while looking at the ceiling. *I bet this is gonna happen many more times. In the first place, we have to be careful so that our parents don’t catch on. It’s not a huge problem to add one more person—Asuhain—to the list.* But even so, this time...just this time...

“This sucks...” I found myself complaining.

Internally, I resolved that I was going to make sure that this was a debt she

paid back in full for sure.

## Afterword

Not to toot my own horn, but I'm not a big reader of mystery novels. At best, I might read one a year or something. If anything, I'm more into mystery games. That's why whenever Yume mouths off a title of a mystery novel, I make sure I've already read it so I know it like the back of my hand.

My point is that even someone like me can write a mystery...or at least, that's the kind of message I've wanted to try spreading recently. That aside, I think I should explain the reasoning behind why *StepExes* is a mystery novel this time around.

In the first place, I already had an idea to make *StepExes* into a mystery series before it was novelized. The reason I gave up on that had to do with me not having any confidence in pulling it off, and also because it'd feel like an unnecessary element to the story. That being said, now that we've passed the ten-volume mark, it's starting to become time to think about how I'm gonna wrap up the series. I've honestly thought that it's a little rough to keep going on as I've been doing.

To come clean, there have been two things that I've been worried about since volume 4. The first has to deal with me having absolutely no clue how to wrap up a long-running rom-com. The other has to do with Mizuto and Yume not having any screen time when I try to highlight other characters.

I haven't really mentioned this too much, but presently, *StepExes* is the first straight-up rom-com that I've worked on. Everything else has included action or mystery solving, so I'm completely lacking in experience in the ending-a-rom-com department.

I thought that I could try out a lot of different things as I worked on it, but after writing the tenth volume, lo and behold, I still don't have a clue what to do. I've just been writing my way down this foggy path, finding it difficult to slap together an entire volume. You might think writing a mystery is hard, but honestly, writing *StepExes* is a million times harder.

There's a belief out there that when a writer's agonizing over their work, it's because they have a lot of ideas floating around, but even if something good can come out of that, there's no point unless they can actually put it into words. That was a painful lesson I learned while helping with the anime.

So, the theme I'm pursuing now is "reproducibility" and whether or not I can continuously create the same interesting thing. If not, even if you're able to slap something together, there's no future for it. If there's no future, there's no growth. If there's no growth, boredom ensues, and in my opinion, boredom is the killer of creative types. As such, I've determined that I do not have the ability of reproducibility to prolong a rom-com, and have adopted a different approach.

And that's where the idea for writing a mystery came from. So, why did I choose a mystery? Well, to explain that, I have to talk about the other thing I've been worried about. In order to have a mystery be the basis for the story, the other characters have to be the focal point of the drama. It's just like in Sherlock Holmes stories, in which you need a Sherlock and you need a Watson. These two roles were filled by Mizuto and Yume respectively.

In reality, the main focus of this volume was Asuhain-san, but there's only one scene focused on her. The mystery genre is one in which this kind of construction makes it easier to write.

In volume 10, I took Yume and Mizuto's relationship as far as I could, and I started thinking that Mizuto had the aptitude to be a detective. A lot of requirements were met, so I decided to give it a shot.

It took about a month to come up with the overall plot, but thanks to that, I had a pretty easy time working on everything. This time around, I switched to speech-to-text instead of typing everything out...even if that resulted in a lot of incorrect inputs, especially with the name "Asuhain."

But anyway, that's how the mystery came together. I think it's a pretty respectable mystery, and I hope everyone who, as a result, got a little more interested in the genre can read something (my own personal advertisement) steeped even deeper in the genre like *Sherlock + Academy* (MF Bunko J) or *Boku ga Kotaeru Kimi no Nazotoki* (SEIKASHA e-FICTIONS).

I plan for the next volume to focus on Kawanami and Akatsuki. One morning, the two of them wake up to find themselves in the same bed?! I haven't thought any further than that... The story's planned, but uncertain.

Anyway, this has been Kyosuke Kamishiro's *My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex Volume 11: You Wouldn't Get It*. You might have guessed, but I really like writing girls chatting with each other.

**"You Wouldn't Get It"**



**11**

**My Stepmom's  
Daughter Is My Ex**





"That was so cool! It was, like, completely blue!"

"Yes... I suppose I was deeply moved."

"It was like we melted into the ocean!"

"I-Indeed! And then the fish were swimming right in front of us!"

Ran Asuhain

Akatsuki Minami

Yume Irido

Isana Higashira





"So beautiful..." I said.

There was a clear, starry sky above us and a sparkling cityscape beneath us, and then the pool which reflected both at the same time. The scenery that sparkled like gems was reflected in Yume's doe-like eyes. I silently gazed at this sight for a while before her gaze turned towards me.

"You're not setting up something stupid, are you?" she asked.

Her eyes were reflecting doubt in my words. But who was I to go against her expectations?

"You're more beautiful, though," I said.





Author  
Kyosuke  
Kamishiro

Illustrator  
TakayaKi

11

# My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"You Wouldn't Get It"



**"You Wouldn't Get It"**



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by Kyosuke Kamishiro

Translated by Geirrlon Dunn Edited by Samantha J. Moore

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