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9

# My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"A Proposal Isn't Enough"





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# Chapter 1: This Path Is Bound to Be Fun

## The Shape of Happiness

Mizuto Irido

“Mizuto-kun, you know what the shape of your happiness is, don’t you?” a guy much more mature than I claimed, as if he could see right through me. “Hollywood films end with a kiss, RPGs with a wedding—most people imagine happiness taking one of those stereotypical forms. However, in reality, there is no *one* defined shape of happiness. There are people who are labeled ‘loners’ who absolutely love being by themselves. People who are labeled as talentless who are perfectly content with their lack of talent. It’s even a common comedy trope for people to look to greener pastures, chasing after something they desire, not realizing that it’s not what they need.” His words were so smooth, like a clear, flowing river. “You’re much more perceptive than others. That’s why, despite still being a kid, you’ve figured out the shape of your happiness, and it’s not that of a family.”

Most people just naturally imagined a future with a family of their own. Their partner is there, they have kids, and they all live under the same roof—an image so common, it’s as if that image had been imprinted in their brains. But...was that future really necessary? Was it really necessary for *me*?

“Middle schoolers can put off thinking about the future because they’re just kids, and college students are expected to learn how to be adults, but high schoolers fall right in the middle. They’re still kids, but also on their way to becoming adults. It’s like they’re caterpillars in cocoons. Then again, this is all just my own little pet theory. Still, though, I really sympathize with you. You’re in the most annoying part of your life—simultaneously too young and too old to make a decision...”

Though he was directing this at me, it felt so...unrelated to me. Even after all he said, I couldn’t help the feeling that this had nothing to do with me at all.



“So, what’s it going to be?” Despite that lingering feeling, I had to make a hard choice. “Will you pick the reckless option of returning to being a kid, letting your emotions run wild and put off thinking about the future and hoping that things’ll work out in the end as if you were playing an RPG? Or will you continue walking towards adulthood and seal off your emotions, like a speedrun, being efficient with every move in pursuit of the shape of your happiness?” Ryosei Keikoin smiled like a dungeon master. “I hope you can make a better choice. I really do, as your stepsister’s ex-father.”

## A Battle under the Kotatsu

Kyoto is famous worldwide as a tourist destination, but most locals would probably agree that, while it might be a good place to visit, it’s not the best place to live. Summers are as steamy as a sauna, and winters are as cold as a refrigerator. There’s no way any resident thinks the vast number of temples and shrines around offsets the annoyingness of the unique weather patterns of this area, which is sandwiched between mountains. Also, people who actually live there rarely go to any of the tourist attractions, so they might as well not get any value out of the location. *I don’t even know where Kinkakuji is.*

It was currently December. The season of the autumn leaves had ended, and finally, the harsh winter was beginning to bare its fangs. And so, we had retrieved our secret weapon—the kotatsu—from storage and deployed it to the front lines to defend us from winter’s bite.

“It’s so cold...” I shivered as I shut the door behind me.

It wasn’t often that I left the house other than for school reasons, but this had been one of those rare days. I’d avoided direct exposure to the cold wind, but the inside of the house didn’t feel much warmer. With shorter days, there was less sun, making it completely possible that it was colder inside than it was outside. *I’m starting to miss the hot springs in Kobe.*

I went to the living room, leaving my coat on. I knew that turning on the heat wouldn’t immediately warm up the house, so I went straight to the one thing that could warm me up quickly, and it just so happened to be in front of our couch.

Not too long ago, there used to be a low glass table in front of our couch, but now, there was a blanket-covered magical device with a heavenly space underneath it, warmed by a secret heater. I thrust my legs underneath the blanket and steeped them in the waiting warmth. I spaced out for a bit, but was immediately brought back down to earth by a squish. As I stretched my legs out, my feet touched something soft.

“Mm...”

I heard something that sounded like someone sleeping, and that’s when I finally noticed a familiar girl’s head sticking out of the left side of the kotatsu. I partially on reflex pulled up the blanket and looked underneath it. Waiting there in the dim, orange-lit space were porcelain legs that were folded into an almost fetal position. Her long skirt had been rolled up, putting on full display her smooth thighs. If I lowered my gaze just a little more, I could’ve easily seen her panties.

“Mmh...”

I must’ve stared for about ten seconds or so before the girl who’d made this kotatsu her new home—just as a snail would to a shell—stirred a little from being cold and raised her legs a little more. At this point, I was starting to be able to see her butt, so I dropped the blanket in a panic.

I looked down at Yume, who was peacefully sleeping, with just her head sticking out of the kotatsu. *I’m getting déjà vu*. Didn’t something similar happen right before we went to Kobe? Back then, Isana had been with me, so I hadn’t done anything too crazy. Now, with Yume in such a defenseless position and nobody else around, certain ideas popped into my head, whether I wanted them to or not.

Of course, I couldn’t *act* on these ideas. They weren’t *legitimate* options. Even if we didn’t have a history, it’d spell the end of our family if I became a guy who’d peek at my stepsister’s practically half naked body as she was passed out under the kotatsu.

Most likely, what I needed to do here was restrain myself and go to my room. But also...the radiating warmth made it nearly impossible to leave.

Suddenly, I felt something poking my knees as I sat cross-legged under the

kotatsu. Before I knew it, I saw that Yume was slowly opening her eyes. *You're awake? I'm so glad you woke up now and not when I pulled up the blanket.* She stared at my face as she kept the rest of her body covered by the kotatsu. Then I felt her poke me with her toes again.

We both stared at each other in silence. She simply looked at me, not producing even the smallest sound, so I followed suit and kept my mouth shut. At the very least, it didn't seem like she wanted to kick me out of the kotatsu.

I took off my coat and then took the book that I'd just come back from buying out of the bag, and began flipping through its pages. As I did, she continued poking my leg. I'd occasionally glance at her, and when I did, she smiled happily. *Does...she want attention?* The idea of rolling over and simply going along with her whims didn't sit right with me, so I wordlessly repelled her foot when she tried to poke me, and just as I did, the living room door opened.

"Oh, Mizuto-kun, welcome home!" Yuni-san said as she came in. She quickly made her way over to the kotatsu, and as she did, she noticed Yume. "Oh, Yume, you're gonna catch a cold if you sleep there."

"Mmng..." Yume answered her as if in a daze, but made no effort to leave.

"What am I gonna do with you...?"

With that, Yuni-san left, and the toe poking resumed. The puppy dog look in her eyes gave me absolutely no indication as to what she wanted me to do here, but I wasn't a fan of staying purely on the receiving end. Just as she went to poke me again, I quickly stuck my hand under the blanket and caught her bare foot.

"Wai—" Her foot was soft and dainty. I took that very foot and immediately began tickling it. "Mm— H-Hey!"

She seemed to be in agony as she tried to keep her voice down, but still, I didn't let go of her foot and continued to tickle her. This was nothing but a snippet of a normal, daily life—completely commonplace for family members. But as lukewarm as the comfort from the ordinary felt, there was something stimulating that made my heart beat faster.

"Phew..." I exhaled as I finally let her foot go.



Yume initially shot me an angry look, but then, she smiled with just her eyes and began rubbing her foot against my leg as if she was petting it.

The comfort from being family. The stimulation from being a guy and a girl. I felt both of those emotions simultaneously. I felt like I was going crazy—like I was gonna lose who I was.

## **A House of Cards Built on a House of Cards**

### **Yume Irido**

“Senpai! Senpaaai!” Aso-senpai’s voice echoed across the student council room, an octave higher than usual. “Did you see the official live stream yesterday? It was sooo intense! I’m so hyped for the new patch!”

“Uh-huh...” It went without saying that the guy sitting on the guest couch with Aso-senpai’s head on his shoulder was Hoshibe-senpai. He seemed kinda robotically nodding along to whatever she said while shooting us uncomfortable glances.

“Oh, right. Senpai, can we talk on the phone again tonight?! I still got some of the event left to do, so can you keep me company while I grind it?”

Asuhain-san, President Kurenai, Haba-senpai, and I just sat in silence, doing our work, while Aso-senpai spoke to Hoshibe-senpai using her flirty voice at its maximum level. Not a single word was exchanged between any of us. The only defense against Aso-senpai’s sweet voice was the clacking of our keyboards.

Finally, Hoshibe-senpai exhaled heavily, peeled Aso-senpai off of him, and stood up.

“Huh? Senpai?”

“Sorry, Kurenai. I’ll stop hangin’ out here.”

Aso-senpai was thrown by this sudden statement. “What?! We won’t be able to see each other as much! Why?!”

“Because you’re not doing your work at all!” President Kurenai and Hoshibe-senpai said at the same time.

Aso-senpai frowned and looked away after both her boss and boyfriend hit her with a sound argument. “What’s the big deal? We’re finally dating...I should be able to do this much at least.” She pouted, frowning while averting her eyes.

“No, you’re setting a bad example,” Hoshibe-senpai said. “We can hang as much as you want *after* you finish your work.” He gave Aso-senpai a light tap on the head.

She looked up at him, slightly bitterly, and said, “Okay...”

“Later,” Hoshibe-senpai softly said before leaving the room.

Aso-senpai longingly watched him leave and then finally returned to her seat, dispirited. “I’m so Senpai-deficient right now...”

“I’d always thought that you were the type to prioritize romance over friendships and work, but it’s rough seeing such a perfect demonstration of that right in front of me,” President Kurenai said through half-closed eyes.

For some reason, Aso-senpai’s response was to act cutely. “Heh heh. Sowwy! This must be too stimulating for a single girl like you.” Silence followed before the storm. “Ow! H-Hey, Suzurin, that hurts! Don’t kick my leg! Ow!”

*Yeah...she asked for that.* Ever since emerging from the trip to Kobe with a boyfriend, Aso-senpai had been pushing her luck all the time. So far, we’d decided to let it slide because she’d finally gotten with the person she’d been after for so long, but it seemed giving her that leeway had been a poor decision on our part.

Asuhain-san glared at Aso-senpai as she winced in pain from President Kurenai’s kicks. “I understand you’re happy, but don’t forget that your underclassmen are the ones who have to pick up your slack.”

“Urk... Look, I’m really sorry about that! But I bet that if any of you were in my position, you’d be acting the same! I guarantee it! It’s not my fault that I got a boyfriend! I’m not a bad person!”

“I’m going to grab some papers,” Haba-senpai said before quickly leaving his seat.

He most likely sensed that our conversation was about to turn into girl talk.

He'd often quickly disappear like this when his almost clairvoyant senses caught on to the change in direction of the conversation.

After watching Haba-senpai disappear into the documents room, President Kurenai rested her head in her hands. "Aisa, it's good and all that you're happy, but maybe you should wake up and smell the coffee a bit."

"Oh, get off my back! I'll do my work! Happy?!"

"Yeah, but what I was trying to say was..." President Kurenai proceeded to point at the voluptuous bulge on Aso-senpai's chest. "How long do you think you can keep lying to him? You're already dating."

"Urk..."

I blinked with disbelief seeing Aso-senpai clam up. "Huh? You...*still* haven't told him?!"

"Wow I'm astonished—in a bad way. How can you do that when you're all over him?" Asuhain-san said, her glare growing ever more fierce. She was a natural at giving the stink eye.

Aso-senpai stuffed a lot of pads inside her bra to give her a cup size that was roughly three times bigger than it actually was. Up until now she'd skillfully been able to make it seem like her fake cup size had been her real one, but now that she was in a relationship, well... There would come a time when she'd have to show him the true size of her breasts...so if he saw *that*, it would probably give him a major shock.

President Kurenai looked at Aso-senpai, who was seemingly shrinking. "Despite how he acts, Hoshibe-senpai is a gentleman, but he's still a guy. He might be extremely disappointed. It's like getting to the mountain of treasure and finding out it's nothing but a mountain of trash covering a modest mound of pebbles."

"Th-They're not pebbles! I'm at least bigger than Akki!" Akatsuki-san was catching strays. "A-Anyway, I'm just continuing to do this because bigger boobs fit better with the clothes I like. I'm not *trying* to deceive him..."

"Then come clean. Don't blame me when it's go time and his *you-know-what* shrivels up."



“It won’t! It’ll be super hard!”

Asuhain-san covertly averted her gaze as the conversation became overtly dirty. This little chat wasn’t happening specifically because of the current group. When one girl in a group has a boyfriend, topics naturally fall on the explicit side.

I might’ve had a boyfriend in the past, but I had absolutely no knowledge about *that* part of a relationship. All I could do was awkwardly laugh to play things off. It was best to stay silent when you had no knowledge about the topic at hand.

“You know it’s already December, right?” President Kurenai said in a tired voice. “You don’t even have a month left until Christmas. Don’t tell me you’re planning on spending your first Christmas together lying and glossing over the truth, are you?”

“B-But we only just started dating... Isn’t it a little soon?”

“This little charade of yours has been going on for too long already. Plus, Hoshibe-senpai is a surprisingly voracious guy when he makes up his mind. I don’t think he’s kind enough to ignore the meal set before him.”

“Urgh...” Aso-senpai shrunk even more, her face turning red. *Hm, Christmas... Yeah. I’ve been told that couples typically do that kinda stuff on Christmas.* “But I don’t know what to do! How am I supposed to tell him?! What, should I just be like, ‘Sorry, bro. Actually I got small tits’?! How could that ever come up organically?!”

“Well...”

Judging from her wishy-washy response, it seemed that even President Kurenai was at a loss. Indeed, it was an incredibly difficult problem.

“What if you just slowly reduce the number of pads?” Asuhain-san was the one to suggest an answer to this difficult problem. “You don’t have to come right out with the truth. If you just reduce the number of pads little by little, then the size of your chest will gradually decrease. Doing it over a long period of time might even result in him not noticing the difference in the first place.”

“Whoa! That’s it!” Aso-senpai suddenly sprung back to her normal, energetic

self. “You’re a genius, Ranran! How did you come up with such a clever plan?!”

“I tried doing something similar in middle school, but it made my chest area uncomfortably tight, so I stopped.”

“Oh nice, I don’t think I’ll have to worry about that— Wait, shut up!”

Regardless of Aso-senpai’s quip, it looked like a weight had been lifted off of her shoulders. But even if she was feeling relieved, I was still worried.

“Isn’t this just adding an extra layer to the lie?” I asked.

“Well, I’m sure that even if Hoshibe-senpai discovered the truth, he wouldn’t make a big deal of it,” President Kurenai said. “All that’s left is to pray that he’s not a big tit guy.”

## For Some Reason

I envied Aso-senpai. She had her own things to worry about, of course, but worrying in itself showed a glimpse of her happiness.

*I’m going to steal Mizuto’s heart before the year ends.* Though I was happy to have at least made up my mind about that, I had something to take care of first. I had to think about the meeting with my biological dad and how he’d invited Mizuto as well.

I had the option of having mom ask Mizuto for me, but ultimately, I’d decided that I’d talk to him myself. I wasn’t trying to use this as a way to advance my agenda, but I felt that in telling him, I’d convey a certain kind of determination.

The last time I spoke with my dad had been *years* ago. Talking with him was neither awkward nor easy, but especially now that we had different last names, it felt like a ceremony of sorts. Plus, if Mizuto came with me, then...

But also, why did he want to meet Mizuto in the first place? Was he concerned about a teenage boy living with his teenage daughter? Did he want to size Mizuto up a bit? I didn’t really think my dad cared all that much about me.

Either way, I wanted to invite Mizuto to this “parent meeting the married couple” kinda situation. Sure, if I invited him, he might be a little more aware of

my feelings for him, but in the end, it was a simple matter of this being my meeting, so it was only right for me to be the one to invite him. Anyway, like, for real...the whole married couple thing made me hesitate.

*No, stop. This is a bad habit.* There wasn't even a full month left until this year ended. There was no time to be wishy-washy. *I'm gonna tell him. I'm gonna tell him today. Right when I get home.*

After the student council ended, I went home, and found Mizuto in the living room, already changed out of his uniform.

"Hey, so—"

Right as I called out to him, he turned around and looked up from his phone. "Oh, perfect timing."

"Huh?"

"Tomorrow's Saturday, so I made plans with Isana to go to her house in the afternoon. That okay?"

His question came so abruptly that it killed all my momentum. *He's going to Higashira-san's house? Why all of a sudden?* But also, now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen Higashira-san over at our house lately. Suddenly, my heart hurt.

"Why are you asking for my permission?" For some reason, I asked this in a tone as if I was picking a fight.

Mizuto looked away and tilted his head as if he was troubled. "I dunno... Just kinda felt like I should," he practically mumbled before standing up.

He swiftly began to make his way out of the living room. When he passed me, I suddenly remembered. *Wait, I need to tell him about my dad. I need to stop him.* But before I could even say another word, the living room door shut behind him. I lowered the hand I'd raised to stop him.

"I...missed my chance again."

## **The Similarities between a Girl with an Alt Account and Artists**

**Isana Higashira**



“Hm...”

Looking at my very messy rough sketch, I tilted my head. It'd been at least twenty minutes since I'd turned on my tablet in my room. I couldn't come up with any ideas for compositions, and even if I did, I wasn't sure how to draw them. I especially didn't know how to draw things like the wrinkles in shirts. My brain felt fried. *May I have permission to simply draw characters naked?*

During the trip, drawing had been so easy. However, ever since then, every image I'd drawn looked horrible, in my opinion. At times like this, solely utilizing what was in my head was futile. I exchanged my stylus for my phone and moved in front of my mirror. It was a tool that many girls cherished and kept enshrined on their walls; however, as of late, I'd been using it primarily as a way to take pictures of myself for reference material purposes. I'd pose in a variety of ways and capture them with my phone camera. I was essentially a girl with a secret alt account. *I must exercise the maximum amount of caution to ensure my mother and father never discover these pictures.*

“Hm...”

*I'd like to draw a butt. I'd like to draw breasts. But if I want to draw both of them, it will require me to twist my body into a difficult position. This is truly a difficult conundrum.* I twisted my neck as I attempted a pose where I turned my back to the mirror and thrust my rear outwards, and then a pose where I bent my knees slightly and leaned forward to show my cleavage.

*Perhaps I should just take a leap and dive right into drawing a more indecent composition?* For example, I could...sit on the ground, spread my legs wide, squish my breasts together with my elbows, and then...

“Hey, Isana. Lock your front door. It's dangerous... Huh?”

There was a click and the door to my room opened. Standing there was Mizuto-kun, frozen in place.

“Ah...”

I too froze, my mouth agape. My legs were spread open in an M-shape, while my phone remained pointed towards the mirror. Time stopped for a full ten seconds before it resumed.

“Sorry...” Mizuto-kun slowly and awkwardly closed the door as he backed away.

“W-Wait! P-Please wait! Th-This is a misunderstanding! A huge misunderstanding! I’m merely doing this for reference material!”





# The Path to the Future

Mizuto Irido

I'd been called over to the Higashira household not by Isana, but by her mother, Natora-san. Essentially, it'd played out with her simply telling me "I got business with you, so come on over, kid." That being said...she'd invited me, but she didn't seem to be home?

"Thanks to that, I walked in on a disastrous scene. Sheesh..."

"That's my line!" Isana protested, her face beet red. She was wearing nothing but a long-sleeved shirt, which fit almost like a dress—long enough to cover her thighs, but...

"So...I know this is your room and all, but you should at least wear something underneath."

"I-I am! I'm wearing panties!"

"Wear shorts at least."

Now that I thought about it, she was the type to only wear clothes on her upper half during a video call because that was all that would appear on camera. Thanks to that, I got a full look of certain...places...whether I wanted to or not. No matter how close we were, things could still get awkward between us.

"It's been a while since we've hung out on the weekend," I said, changing the subject.

Isana hadn't come to my place much recently, nor did we hang out at the library after school often. This was, of course, because she was working on her art.

Ever since the trip to Kobe, Isana had thrown herself even more into drawing. Consequently, that cut into the time that we could hang out, so we mostly communicated over text.

"Have you drawn anything since then?" I asked.

“Well, I suppose I’ve done some drawings... Would you like to see?”

“If it’s okay with you.”

Isana picked up her tablet from the desk and gave it to me. Looking at the screen, I saw a row of image thumbnails.

“P-Please refrain from looking at anything unscrupulous!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“W-Well, there are quite a few pictures similar to the ones I was taking when you arrived...”

I fell silent. *I’ll be extremely careful to avoid those.* I held the tablet and sat on the ground, cross-legged. Isana initially sat on the bed, but gasped as if she realized something and then immediately sat on her knees on the floor. She must’ve realized that sitting on the bed while I sat on the floor would’ve put her panties at eye level. *Can you realize that a little sooner next time?*

I began looking through the drawings. They were mostly rough sketches, with some that looked like outlines of people. Honestly, some of them were pretty special. There were many that she’d just done the line art for, but none of her drawings were colored in.

“You haven’t finished any of these,” I observed.

“I haven’t... For some reason, none of these really resonate with me.”

*Is she in a slump? How, when she just drew that amazing picture not too long ago?* “What about that rough sketch you drew on the way back from Kobe?”

“Oh! I did complete that! It’s in a different folder.” She extended her hands, asking me for the tablet, so I handed it to her. Apparently, going through her tablet on my own was dangerous. “Here it is!” Isana said, walking towards me on her knees before sitting next to me. Then, my eyes were immediately drawn into the screen of the tablet as she showed it to me.

It was a picture of a girl, sad, but crying while smiling. “They should’ve sent a poet” came to mind when looking at the picture—my vocabulary was too limited to do it justice.

It was as if emotion was flowing from it. There weren’t any speech bubbles or

captions, but the character's subtle mannerisms, the way she played with her hair, and the detail to the coloring made it rife with storytelling. It was the sort of picture that could go viral.

Of course, it was still rough around the edges compared to the art that pros would post. This was especially true in regards to the coloring. It felt as if her skill hadn't caught up to how she'd wanted to color it. But even so...

"It was much nicer when it was still a rough sketch, wasn't it?" Isana remarked. "This happens more often than one might think."

"I still think it's amazing. It's on a whole new level since I last saw it."

"Y-You think so? Ehe heh heh..."

*It's so frustrating that I can't get the right words to describe how I feel. This goes beyond what "amazing" expresses.* Her drawing wasn't something that could've been achieved through the use of techniques that could be honed through simple practice. She'd needed an artist's intuition to achieve something like this.

If even an amateur like me could feel that way at a glance, I was convinced that Isana had a talent that could touch the hearts of many. If she could just get a following and improve her skills... Wait, actually, even if she didn't think it was good, wasn't it good enough for people to rate it positively?

"How's the picture doing?"

"Huh?" Isana tilted her head.

*Uh, what kind of reaction is that?* "Is it getting good engagement?"

"I...suppose so? It's positively regarded? After all, you just praised it, so..."

"Hm?" I raised my eyebrows in confusion.

"Huh?"

*Wait, don't tell me...* "By the way, where do you post your drawings again? Twitter?"

"Huh? I don't post them at all." My suspicions were confirmed. "I briefly considered posting them, but ultimately... Well, you're the only one I've shown

that drawing to.”

*She’s drawn this much without even planning on showing them to anyone other than me? I guess this is a form of talent in its own right... But also, now I get it.*

“Have you ever considered that maybe you can’t finish your drawings *because* you only show them to me?”

“Uh...I’m not sure I follow.”

“What I mean is that you don’t have a goal. Without one, you can’t fail even if you stop halfway. If you go home halfway through a marathon, you’re disqualified. But who’s gonna get mad at you if you give up on a casual jog? That’s what I mean. The way you’re working, there’s no risk of failure and because of that, you don’t give quitting a second thought.”

“O-Oh, I see... That truly hits home... How embarrassing...” she said, covering her ears.

I pulled both her hands away from her ears. “Post this picture.”

“Huh?!” Isana jumped a little. “P-Please don’t suggest something so reckless! Do you think that someone who is incapable of making humorous tweets and taking pictures of swanky sweets can do that?!”

“Who cares if you’re capable of doing those things or not? Forget that. Just post your art. There are sites dedicated to that, right? If you’re really that nervous about it, you can leave managing the account to me. I don’t want to see you get ratioed to oblivion for any careless tweets you put out.”

“Wh-Why would you go that far for me...? I won’t be giving you a salary, you know?”

“Well, if I had to give a reason...” I was hesitant to say more, but this wasn’t the time to be embarrassed. I could feel myself holding the fate of her talent in the palm of my hand. “I’ve fallen for your talent.” I stared right at Isana and declared this as she let out a moronic sound.

“Hwah?”

“Isana, you have talent, and it’s a once in a generation kinda talent. I’m not

sure how, but I'm the first one to see that. It is my duty as the one who first discovered your talent to help nurture it and share it with the world. I feel like I'd be okay using my entire life to do that—"

"W-Wait! Stop! Please stop!" Isana insisted, stopping my long-winded spiel as she pushed me back by the shoulders, her face completely red.

"What?"

"Y-You're putting me on too high a pedestal. I'm ecstatic that you feel that way, but I lack anything resembling talent. I am not nearly that impressive..."

"No, you are. You just don't realize it. I'll say it as many times as you want. Isana Higashira, you are a prodigy."

Isana looked down and groaned a bit, her mouth shut. She played with her bangs—a mannerism indicative of her embarrassment. I was fairly embarrassed too, but if I let it show, everything I'd done would go to waste.

I continued looking at her face wholeheartedly, but she kept looking in every direction except towards me, as if searching for an escape. Even so, I continued to stare right at her to catch her gaze.

"O-Okay, I'll do it..." she finally said, giving in. "If you'll take care of everything aside from the art, then okay... I too have interest in posting my artwork..."

"Great. Then let's get right to figuring out what you're gonna draw next."

"'Next'?"

"Is your great plan to post one picture and end your career as an artist? You gotta keep at it if you want to get better. Don't you get frustrated sometimes thinking about how you wish you could've done something differently, but you don't know how? Your art practically screams that."

"Mizuto-kun...are you a mind reader?"

*I'm just an avid reader. I'm confident in my abilities to read between the lines.*  
I took her tablet and went through her rough sketches.

"This should be good. Finish this rough sketch."

"This one?"

“Don’t phone it in. Put everything you got into it. Squeeze out every last drop of imagination you have. But I’m giving you a deadline. Get it done in a week.”

“Huh?! A deadline?!” she whined.

“Yeah, if I don’t give you one, you’ll never finish it.”

Isana frowned, unsatisfied, while looking at the rough sketch I’d picked out. “Hm, this one, though...”

“Don’t like it?”

“Can you blame me? It’s not provocative in the slightest.”

“I’m not about to let someone underage start an NSFW art account.” *If this was just for fun then that’d be a different story.* “Well then, how about this?”

“Yes?”

“It’s true that this isn’t a very lewd drawing. The character is fully clothed and there’s absolutely nothing in the situation that’s erotic. So what you’re gonna do is make it *look* erotic. How does that sound? If you do it like that, it’ll still be legal and you’ll have fun editing your art.”

“Oh?” The look in her eyes changed.

I wasn’t speaking from experience, of course, but when the element of sex was involved, a person’s motivation went into overdrive. As proof, a lot of erotic artists are amazingly talented. Isana was the type of person who could stare at the illustrations in the front of a light novel for over ten minutes without breaking a sweat. I was confident that I could use that to my advantage to motivate her.

“I feel so extremely motivated, Mizuto-kun! Eroticism is best when it is subtle! It’s a similar situation to how an official body pillow that doesn’t show nipples is much more exciting than a doujin that does.”

“No, I don’t think that’s similar at all.”

*But I’m not going to get into it too much, since she’s finally motivated.* I hadn’t imagined this situation at all, but weirdly enough, I was starting to feel incredibly motivated too. This might’ve been the first time in my life that I really felt like I *wanted* to do something. Several ideas for the title of Isana Higashira’s



first picture of a broken heart began floating around my head.

“By the way, Mizuto-kun...” Isana began very apprehensively while looking up at me. “If I finish by the deadline...could I...receive a reward?”

*Sheesh, what a philistine. The deadline is for your sake, you know?* I gave a small smile. “Fine. I’ll think of something.”

“Yay!” Isana jumped from the floor for joy like a child. “Eek!” In the next moment, she covered the lumps on her chest with her hands, clearly flustered. *It must’ve hurt when they flew up and then back down. You idiot.*

But either way, now that we’d decided all this, it was time to create an account. First up was making an email account.

“So what kind of handle do you wanna use?”

“Oh, good question. Hm, what indeed...? Something easy to remember would be best, right?”

“As long as it’s not so simple that it conversely becomes hard to search.”

*I see those kinda names around every now and then. There are some artists who just use a normal noun as their username.*

As we discussed things, we heard a call from outside her room.

“Hey, Isana!” Suddenly the door opened, and behind it, a tall woman appeared. It was Isana’s mom, Natora-san. “Oh, you’re here already?”

“Thanks for having me.” *Oh right. I forgot. She’s the one who invited me.* “You said you wanted to talk to me about something?”

“Yeah. But I guess you already know about Isana’s current state.”

“Her current state?”

I looked next to me. *Is she talking about how her daughter’s wearing an oversized shirt and is the epitome of defenseless right now?*

“So you know how she’s been pretty into drawing lately, right?” *Oh, that’s what she meant.* “Holing up in her room isn’t anything new, but it’s gotten worse. Sometimes, she doesn’t even come out to eat.”

“If you’re asking me to make her stop drawing, I’m going to have to refuse.”

“That’s not it at all. Don’t be so defensive. I’m a pretty lenient mom—don’t think of me as anything else. I’m not narrow-minded.” *So what does she want from me?* “I think it’s good that she’s got something she’s so into. Nowadays, studying hard and getting good grades doesn’t guarantee a bright future. When I was your age, I went off and did my own thing, so I get it, but we *are* paying a pretty penny for her to go to Rakuro.”

*That’s right... Yume and I are scholarship students, so we don’t really feel the financial burden, but it is an expensive private school.*

“So listen, Mizuto-kun. Do you know how Isana did on the midterms?”

Suddenly, Isana shrunk and hid behind me. I looked at her. “Now that I think about it...no, I don’t.”

“Good for you, because they were disastrous,” Natora-san said as Isana moaned while shrinking her shoulders. “I don’t have anything against her drawing, but I *do* have a problem if her drawing results in her being kicked out or having to repeat a grade. It’ll cost us a shit ton of money. So that’s where you come in, Mizuto-kun. You’re gonna be Isana’s private tutor.”

“Huh?”

She’d declared this without even giving me the option to say no. “It won’t be much, but I’ll pay you since this’ll be a kind of part-time job. If it’s not enough, you can use her body to make up the difference.”

“Did you hear that?!” Isana exclaimed. “She just sold her daughter’s body! That is not the behavior of a mother!”

“Aw, shaddup. You can assert your human rights once you get human grades.”

Isana shrunk her shoulders again after Natora-san threw reality back in her face. That being said, I was with Isana. That’s definitely not how a mother should act. *Hm, being a tutor though... It’s true that Isana’s been slacking on her studies, but if I become her tutor, I’ll have to come over here periodically.*

“*Why are you asking for my permission?*” Yume’s words echoed in my head.

“So, whaddya think? Not to toot my own horn, but I think this is the perfect

plan,” Natora-san said, grinning as if she’d read my mind.

*Does she know that I’m trying to make Isana a popular artist?* If I became her tutor, I’d be able to efficiently teach her and help manage her art account at the same time. It was as if all the obstacles were being removed from my path. Did I even have a choice?

“Okay... At the very least, I’ll help her until finals,” I agreed.

“Good to hear! I don’t got any cash on hand, so Isana, you pay ’im.”

“Eek! Oh no, I feel my virginity may be in danger of being stolen!”

“Keep it,” I shortly declined.

*Why’d you say it so gleefully? Both mother and daughter are lacking in grace.*

## **Towards My Goal**

### **Yume Irido**

“Huh?”

I froze, hearing what Mizuto reported to me after he returned from Higashira-san’s house.

“I’m gonna be her tutor,” he repeated. “Natora-san—Isana’s mom—asked me. I’m gonna do it at least until finals, so I’ll be going over to her place pretty much every day.”

*“Pretty much every day”?! He’ll be going to Higashira-san’s house on a daily basis? He’s going to be her tutor? They’re going to be alone?!*

“Natora-san’s really pushy. She’s completely different from Yuni-san. She was even talking about how if the money she’s paying me isn’t enough, I could get the rest from Isana’s body.”

“From her *body*?!”

“Before you get any weird ideas, I turned her down on that,” he said, apathetically looking at me.

*O-Oh right. Of course. Hm? But wait. Even if she said it as a joke, doesn’t the*

*fact that she said something like that mean that she—Higashira-san's mom—approves of him?* In the first place, giving her treasured daughter a male tutor of the same age meant that she trusted him a lot, right? Pretty much, her mom was at the point where if anything happened, she'd be okay with it.

*Doesn't that mean that she's extremely willing to accept him into her family?! Also, he's calling Higashira-san's mom by her first name?! Since when has he been so close to her mom?! Is he, like, part of the family or something?! I felt as if my head was exploding.* In the first place, people at school thought that Higashira-san and Mizuto were dating. But if that rumor were to spread to Higashira-san's family...

"I wanted to give you a heads up since I'm sure I might end up coming back late. Well anyway, I got stuff to look into, so—"

"W-Wait!"

I grabbed Mizuto by the arm in a panic as he turned to leave. He shot me a confused look. *This is it. There's no going back. If he is on good terms with Higashira-san's mom, then...*

"I... I have something I need to ask you."

*I'm not giving up. Even if neither Higashira-san nor Mizuto have any intention of things progressing between them, I'm not giving up my spot next to him.*

"Could you meet my dad with me?"

## Chapter 2: Soulmate

### The Kind of Person Who Can Become the Happiest

Kogure Kawanami

“Family hangouts are surprisingly draining,” Akatsuki said, sitting on my lap and playing a game. “Parents are like living, breathing diaries—and not very good ones, since they easily blab about the things their kids wanna keep secret.”

She’d just gotten out of the bath, and the warmth of her small body seeped into me as she leaned against my chest. It was chilly, so she was like the perfect heating pad. The only problem was looking downwards. One small peek, and I could see her cleavage through the loose collar of her pajamas.

“Yeah...” I nodded along, trying to act normal. “Well, I dunno if I’d say my parents are like diaries, but I *do* have a walking, talking manifestation of my embarrassing past.”

“Who are you calling your embarrassing past?!”

As an act of rebellion, she began grinding the top of her head against my chin. The smell of her shampoo filled my nose whether I wanted it to or not.

“So what made you think about this all of a sudden?” I asked.

“Hm? Ah, well, one of my friends introduced her boyfriend to her parents.”

“Uh-huh... Rushin’ through things, I’m guessing. She crazy?”

“Hey, you can at least sugarcoat your words a bit! I mean, yeah, that’s what I thought too, but still!”

“So, what? If she breaks up with that guy and gets a new boyfriend, is she gonna introduce him to her parents too?”

“I can totally see them saying something like, ‘He seems much nicer than the last boy you brought home.’”

“Oh god, that’d be the absolute worst...”

Just imagining it gave me chills. How’s the boyfriend even supposed to react to that?

Akatsuki looked at me. “Good thing we never told our parents about us.”

“Yeah, if we did *anything* right back then, it was not telling them.”

“For real!”

We laughed. But the one downside to not disclosing our relationship was that my parents still asked why we weren’t dating yet.

Akatsuki leaned back against my chest. “But yeah, you never know what’s gonna happen when you date someone. Breaking up’s always a possibility.”

“I mean, would you date someone if you knew you two weren’t gonna last?” I asked.

“Good point... Man, it’d be nice if all the couples in the world could end up getting married.”

“I mean, it’s not like divorce doesn’t exist.”

“Don’t be such a downer!”

Back in the day, finding a relationship to romantically involve yourself in forever was life’s main goal. Now, there were so many options. If you wanted someone you could pour your love into, all you had to do was stan someone. If you wanted attention, you could become a streamer. Marriage was no longer a necessary milestone. Romance had become nothing but a pastime. It was the same as video games—you just played them as a way to pass the time until you died.

“Still, I think the happiest people are the ones who believe in love regardless,” Akatsuki added.

So, someone who knows that relationships don’t last forever and are more than just romantic involvement, but persists in believing in love?

“Y’know...sometimes you actually sound like you know things.”

“Yeah, and more often than not, you act like you don’t know anything.” She



grinned teasingly and began wiggling her butt, far up my thigh. *Crap. If she keeps moving like that, she's gonna notice that I—* “I knew from the start, you little pervert.”

I had no words. All I could do was look away, but she took this chance to turn towards me and seductively whisper in my ear. “Do you wanna do something we can’t tell our parents?”

I already had my answer. “No...”

“It’s not good to hold it in, Ko-kun,” she said in a sweet voice.

“I’m gonna rub your tits, you little—”

“Whoa! You’re getting big for me? Aw, thanks!”

One thing’s for certain: you should never never date a clingy girl without loads and loads of consideration.

## A Shapeless Creator

**Mizuto Irido**

About a week after I had started tutoring Isana, the two of us decided to visit an art college’s campus.

“I detest studying!” Isana burst out.

The first picture we posted was steadily gaining positive traction. It was honestly going almost *too* well, especially considering the fact that it’d been her first post. However, this put Isana in a good mood and enabled her to finish her second drawing by her deadline. I’d also been able to slowly but surely get her studies back on track. Unfortunately, it wasn’t smooth sailing from there, because before too long...

“I feel as if I’m being suffocated with how I’m being monitored and managed day after day! I wish to draw! I wish to read light novels! I wish to play video games! I wish to take a nap! I wish to stay up late!”

For a ball of desires like Isana Higashira, asking her to follow a schedule was like asking her to drink poison. So with that in mind, I decided to take her out

for a change of pace. It just so happened that there was a college nearby hosting a guest lecture by a game creator, so I took her there.

“I’ve never been to an event like this before. Have you?” Isana asked.

“Nope. Same boat. I’m not even the type to go to autograph signings or anything. But it’s not bad to go to these kinda things every now and then, right?”

“Indeed! I get a strong feeling that this will be infinitely more educational than anything I could glean from a textbook.”

I’d discovered this lecture by pure chance online. Apparently, the lecturer was one of the producers of a game that Isana liked, which is why we’d decided to attend.

Though a producer was completely different from an illustrator, hearing from a real professional in the industry might still serve as some kind of inspiration. If this ended up invigorating Isana, making her more motivated to draw and study, then it’d make things easier for me. After all, she really was a lot to deal with.

We looked over the map of the campus near the entrance and then made our way to the lecture hall. This would be the second time I stepped foot on a college campus, but it still felt so strange to me. I wasn’t sure how to describe it, but it felt much more “lived-in” than a high school campus. College campuses had their own unique characteristics, as compared to high school campuses, which were strictly regulated by adults.

Part of the reason the campus felt so unique might’ve been because this was an art college. There was a lot of art hung up and statues (although I wasn’t sure what they were modeled after) around, which had all most likely been done by the students here. It almost felt like we were walking around a school that was getting ready for their cultural festival.

“Whoa...”

Isana looked around the cluttered campus with wonder. If she wanted to pursue higher education, I was sure art college would suit her best. We were still two years away from making that choice, but I was certain that we’d be

walking two different paths. Though I didn't have anything concrete planned, I intended to go to Kyoto University.

At our school, being the second best in your grade essentially guaranteed that you had a ticket to Kyoto University. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that it'd be an instant yes if you applied. That's how confident I was. Getting in probably wouldn't be a problem, but I didn't know what to major in. At the very least, I knew I wanted to do something literature-related, although the only reason was that I liked reading—nothing else.

When Isana decided what path she was gonna walk, I'd need to straighten up and figure out what I wanted to do in my uncertain future.

"This is it," I said as we reached the lecture hall.

After entering, I noticed that there were a good number of guests spread out across the tiered seats facing the blackboard. Before coming, I'd taken into account the time we would waste trying to navigate this unfamiliar campus. Judging by how many people were already here, it'd been a good call to come here early. Seeing that the back row was still empty, Isana and I found two seats next to each other and sat down.

"Whew..." Isana let out a strange noise as she stared at the ceiling. "Mizuto-kun, there are monitors hanging from the ceiling."

"Yeah, it's probably so that people in the back can see the blackboard. Or maybe that's where they show slides."

"Oh! That makes sense. After all, this is much more spacious than a high school classroom."

The capacity for this lecture hall was probably at least a hundred or so. It was in a completely different league than a high school.

After a bit, the lecture hall began to gradually fill up with people. By the time people stopped filtering in, eighty percent of the seats were taken. While the majority of the crowd was around my age, I saw some older guys that were probably over fifty and some kids who were likely in middle school. I'd been worried that we might've stood out as high schoolers with college students around, but it seemed that I hadn't needed to.

When it was time to start, the doors by the stage of the lecture hall opened, and a man in a suit walked in, accompanied by a woman who looked like someone who worked at the college. Though the man was wearing a suit, he wasn't wearing a tie, and he had a businessman-like aura around him. He was forty or so. He'd probably left some of his chin unshaved for fashion reasons. He looked like the exact kind of person who appeared in written interviews. Though it was my first time seeing him, there was something about him I couldn't shake.

"Hey, Isana..."

"Yes?"

"Have I seen this person before?"

"Hm? You've probably seen him in some kind of interview. He participates in all kinds of talk shows and interviews."

"I don't think that's where I know him from..." If anything, it felt like I'd met him in person before.

When it was time to start, the man picked up the microphone from the table. "Good afternoon, everyone. I'm so honored to be here. I'm Ryosei Keikoin—the real one," he lightly joked, eliciting a laugh from the crowd. *Did someone try to impersonate him?* "It's pretty common that people misread my name as 'Suzunari,' but it's 'Ryosei.' Word of advice, if you have a child, give them an easy-to-read name."

After some light conversation to warm up the crowd, the game creator, Ryosei Keikoin, began his lecture. His professional journey was remarkable. Right after graduating college, he helped make a browser game, which became hugely popular despite coming out during the heyday of the genre. He worked as a game director, a producer, and then a company director, helping to expand his company until he decided to leave it, entrusting the future of the company to the younger generation. Currently, he was working with a few elite friends in the industry to make indie games.

*Browser games, huh?* Hearing this made me think of what Yume had told me. Her dad had been some kind of creator. She wasn't sure what exactly he'd helped create, though, since there was no trace of anything he'd worked on in

her house. What if he'd worked on a browser game? Then, it would make sense that there were no copies lying around, since they were digital-only.

"I don't have the talent to make things," he continued. "That's why I chose a path where I can help those with talent shine. There are many talented individuals in the world, but many of them are crushed before they can even realize it. My job is to create a space for them to utilize their abilities to their maximum potential and put them out there for the sun—the users—to shine on them."

I'd only intended on accompanying Isana here, but before I knew it, I was listening intently to his lecture. I was so engrossed that it wasn't until the lecture ended that I realized there was something about him that I couldn't get out of my head.

## **Unease in My Daily Life**

### **Yume Irido**

Today was our day off from school, and I was at a café, participating in a study session with Maki-san, Nasuka-san, and Akatsuki-san. Second semester finals were approaching fast, and the range of topics covered was going to be much broader than the midterms, so it was important that we did our best to come up with countermeasures.

Since school wasn't open today, we'd decided to come here instead to study. Well, there was that, but I also had a personal reason. Something was bothering me, so I couldn't focus at home. Having someone else around helped.

"How's it going?" Right as I finished explaining how to solve a math problem to Nasuka-san, Suzuri Kurenai came over in her waitress outfit.





“Yo! It’s going!” Maki-san replied in an energetic voice.

The café we were in was the one that President Kurenai worked part-time at. It was the very same place where we’d had our welcome party for the student council. Pretty much, we’d been looking for a place to hold our study session when President Kurenai came in and happily offered the café where she worked. It was a lot quieter than a family restaurant or a food court, so it was the perfect environment for studying.

“I gotta say, I never expected to see the student council president herself working a part-time job—and in such cute clothes!”

“Heh heh. They *are* cute, aren’t they?” She smiled proudly. Her uniform fit her so well, it was like it had been made for her small body.

“About that, I’d appreciate it if you keep knowledge of this café to yourselves. It’d place an unnecessary burden on the owner if we got more students who essentially only order water in here.”

“You got it!”

President Kurenai then went to refill our waters. We’d already finished the coffees and black teas that we’d ordered.

“Are you gonna be okay, though?” Nasuka-san asked nonchalantly. “Doesn’t working cut into your study time?”

“I study regularly, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Now that I think about it...I don’t think I’ve ever seen you cramming or stressed before tests,” I mumbled.

President Kurenai giggled teasingly. “I’m the type that plans out their summer homework.”

*Then why on earth haven’t you made a plan about Haba-senpai?* I decided to keep this firecracker of a question to myself.

Akatsuki-san sprawled out across the table. “Senpai, tell me the questions from last year,” she groaned. “I can’t take this anymore!”

“No can do. Or rather, there’d be no point. Our school has perfect

countermeasures against trying to use previous year's tests."

"Aw, man!"

"You should do what you can on your own. You even have my student council's prized secretary here to assist you. Should make the tests a breeze," she said in a slightly joking tone before returning to the employee area.

"You hear that?" Maki-san grinned. "'Prized secretary.'"

"Stop it. I don't do anything special. All I do is take notes of meetings." I gave a vague semblance of a smile.

I also updated the home page, created the student council mailer, helped write summaries, and eventually, I would be editing the student council bulletin. My current tasks were nothing compared to what President Kurenai and Aso-senpai did on the front lines, dealing with committees and other club presidents.

"Don't sell yourself short!" Maki-san insisted. "You're doing great! Isn't it so cool how you clack away at the computer?"

"Well, I guess I have gotten faster at typing."

I'd honestly only ever used computers in classes. *Mizuto has his own, though...*

"Either way, you're top of our grade! Help me!" Akatsuki-san had become a zombie from studying and began clinging to me from her seat next to me.

"Okay, okay. Let's start by picking up our pen, huh?"

"Waaah! My fingers hurt!"

"Don't worry—they haven't fallen off, so you can keep going."

"Ooh! Spartan instructor-trainer Yume is also really good!"

"Uh-huh," I said, comforting her one more time.

My mind was skipping to the event that was waiting for me after finals. I would be meeting my biological dad with Mizuto, who had surprisingly agreed without putting up any sort of fight. I couldn't help but wonder what it meant to him. Did he see it as an annoyance, or... *Urgh! It would be so nice if mom was*

*coming with us too! I know dad said that just Mizuto and I are good enough because he'd feel bad for Mineaki-ojisan if mom came too, but still...*

In the first place, what did dad have in mind, inviting Mizuto? Was it normal to want to meet the son of the guy your ex-wife married? I knew that if I were him, I'd never want to. I wouldn't know how to act around them.

Despite being the person with connections to both sides, I felt like the odd one out. I couldn't help but sigh.

"Yume-chan?" Akatsuki-san asked, concerned.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'm fine."

I drank the water that President Kurenai had poured for me and tried to pretend like there wasn't anything I was worried about. I inadvertently felt like I wanted to compete against Higashira-san. *I really wonder how meeting my dad will go...*

## Coincidence

### Mizuto Irido

Once the talk was over, we exited the lecture hall.

"That was quite interesting! I don't play indie games too much, so it was all very new to me!"

"Yeah."

It certainly had been quite interesting. I felt that the talk had more relevance to what I was trying to do with Isana than anything she was working on.

"Hey, do you have any plans for your art?" I asked. "Like, do you wanna draw for light novels, games, or maybe design Vtubers?"

"Hm... I haven't really given it too much thought. Oh, but I would like to draw a dirty doujin."

"Should you really keep bringing that up? Maybe when you're eighteen."

"Heh heh... I eagerly anticipate two years from now."

First of all, I knew there was no chance in hell she would actually wait. Not with the way she talked about things. *I think it's best to not talk about that topic anymore.*

“Actually, wait. Could you even handle promoting your doujin? You’d have to act as a salesgirl and all.”

“Well, of course not. It goes without saying that I will request the aid of cosplayers.”

“Yeah, and you lack the social skills to do even that.”

*Sounds like a job that'll be pushed off onto me. I can see the future now: I'm gonna be negotiating with cosplayers to help promote my friend's erotic doujin. What the hell kinda situation is that?* To begin with, I would've had to have read said friend's erotic doujin. That situation in and of itself made my head hurt.

“Well in any case, this all depends on you increasing your skills. And don't forget you gotta get past finals too.”

“Urk... Please do not remind me!”

Regardless of what path Isana decided on, she couldn't flunk out of high school. Even the lecturer today, Keikoin-san, had a fairly impressive academic history.

“Hm... I really feel like I've seen him before,” I mumbled.

“Huh?”

“Are you sure we haven't seen that Keikoin guy somewhere before?”

“Uh, are you presuming that I've seen him before as well?”

*Right. Why did I ask Isana? Did I see her at the same place I saw him?*

“Hm?” Right as we stepped outside of the building, I saw the very person we'd been talking about, Ryosei Keikoin, checking something on his phone.

He looked up and as soon as he saw us, he muttered, “You two... Oh! I knew it. We met at the Rakuro cultural festival.”

Suddenly, it was like a dam had opened, and the memories came rushing in. *Oh, right. When Yume left to go to the bathroom, leaving me with Isana, he*

*asked where our class was.*

“What a coincidence. Thanks for your help back then,” Keikoin-san said, gently smiling.

“Huh? Huh?” Isana confusedly looked back and forth between my face and Keikoin-san’s.

“We met him at the cultural festival,” I reminded her in a low voice. “Remember? He asked us for directions and then when he left he called you a ‘wonderful girlfriend.’”

“Oh! He’s *that* guy! Oh!” She sounded relieved.

It seemed that she’d finally remembered. I couldn’t blame her for taking this long to remember. It wasn’t easy to recall people from such short exchanges.

“You...remember us?” I asked.

Keikoin-san shrugged, smiling cynically. “I’ve gotten good at remembering faces thanks to my job. It was nagging at me during the lecture, but seeing you two up and close like this jogged my memory.”

Wow... I had difficulty remembering people’s names and faces, so to me, his memory might as well have been a superpower.

“The two of you are high schoolers, right? If you’re coming all the way to an art college for a lecture, you must be extremely passionate about all this. Are you looking to become game developers?”

“Not really...we’re just taking a breather from studying for finals.”

“Finals... Oh, right. After not being a student for so long, I completely forgot about how things go.”

“What brought you to our cultural festival?” I asked.

“I got an invitation from a friend. When you get to my age, schools become somewhat of a holy land. It was a golden opportunity for me to understand youngsters. Also...I happen to have somewhat of a connection to Rakuro.”

*A connection? I don’t think he said anything in his lecture about the high school he went to being Rakuro.*

“My turn to ask a question.” *When did this become a turn-based game?* “You say this is your way of taking a breather, but this is a very peculiar way of accomplishing that. There must be plenty of other places for you to have a date. From my perspective, one of you—most likely your girlfriend—suggested this.”

“Wha—?” Isana strongly trembled from her position of half hiding behind me as she listened to our conversation.

“She seems like she would be interested in creation. Am I right?”

I felt a little hesitant. I wasn’t really trying to hide what Isana was into, but was it okay for me to speak for her like this? I would’ve deferred to her, but Isana practically retreated into her shell when meeting someone for the first time. But my hesitation only lasted for a moment. There were two reasons. The first being that even if I didn’t spill the beans, it seemed that he already could tell. The other...

“Yes, you’re right. She draws. I thought that this might give her some inspiration, so I brought her to the lecture.”

My instincts were telling me that this was a golden opportunity. Based on his work history and the contents of his lecture, I knew that Ryosei Keikoin was a pro at discerning talent in others. This was a chance for him to assess Isana’s talent. No ordinary high schooler would find themselves in a situation like this.

Needless to say, there was a risk, but I got the feeling that he wasn’t the type of person who would stamp out the dreams of young talent. In conclusion, this wasn’t a bad bet to take.

“Oh?” Keikoin-san shifted his eyes to Isana who reactively hid farther behind me. “I see. An illustrator, huh? I’ve always unconditionally respected those who can draw.”

“I think she’s pretty good, especially for a first-year in high school.”

“Wai— Mizuto-kun?!” Isana’s face turned a bright red and she tugged on the hem of my clothes.

*It’s clear as day that you’re talented. Why are you being so bashful?*

Keikoin-san smiled, bemused. “If it’s okay with you, could I see some of her

art? I love seeing the work of younger talent.”

*He saw right through me, but that’s perfectly okay. “Can I, Isana?”*

“U-Uhhh.”

“You already posted it so anyone on the internet can see it. Adding one more person to the pile isn’t a big deal, right?”

“Having someone view your artwork right in front of you, however, *is* a big deal...”

“No need to be afraid!” He chuckled. “I’m not an editor or anything, and this isn’t an interview. I’m not such a twisted person that I’d derive joy from disparaging a high school girl who I’m now only meeting for a second time.”

He really understood what artists were so scared of. I felt like my initial read of him had been accurate.

“You said you posted it, right? Is it okay if I ask for your handle?” he asked.

“Isana?”

“U-Urk... Okay...”

I told Keikoin-san her handle and he quickly looked it up on his phone. “This account, huh? Hm...” His eyes slightly narrowed as he looked at it.

There were only two pictures uploaded to her account so far. It was very insufficient for a portfolio, but this was just an extension of our introduction. Even so, his eyes were filled with seriousness.

“Can I...ask just one thing?” he said, finally looking away from the screen towards me. “I have a question about the first picture—the one about the girl with the broken heart. Were you the one who suggested posting it?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I see... Hm. Yeah. You have a good eye.”

*Hm? Why am I the one getting complimented?*

“This is a really exciting piece of art! It’s still rough around the edges, but that’s just a testament to how much more room there is for you to grow! This really shows your good instincts on how to depict emotion. Then there’s this



second picture. You really hit it with the full range of your libido. I don't see any hesitation at all. That's really valuable for artists."

Isana let out a strange-sounding moan so soft that only I heard it. *She's embarrassed, huh? Look, you're getting praised. You should enjoy it.*

Keikoin-san suddenly reached into his suit's pocket, dug around, and then brought out his business card. "Ah, there it is. Let's start over. I'm Ryosei Keikoin," he said, presenting me with a stylishly designed business card. "Sorry I'm only now formally introducing myself. Would you mind telling me your names?"

"Mizuto Irido," I said, accepting his card.

I nudged Isana with my elbow. "I-Isana Higashira!"

Regardless, it seemed like he'd been able to hear her without any issues. "Mizuto Irido-kun and Isana Higashira-san... Okay, got it," he said, giving his temple a few light taps. "Hm?" He knit his eyebrows.

"Mizuto...Irido..."

"Yes?"

"Oh, nothing," he said, grinning like a kid on a new game's release day. "Wow, coincidence upon coincidence. This is why humans are so interesting." *Uh...what?* "If you have any questions, feel free to contact me with the information on my card. You especially, Mizuto-kun. I get the feeling we'll be meeting again in the not-so-far future." He cynically smiled after saying that strangely shady line. "I have no clue why, but I'm often called 'shady.' I thought this was a great opportunity to play the prophet, so I did. Well, I'll be seeing you around," Keikoin-san said before quickly walking away.

All we could do was watch him as he disappeared into the distance.

"Don't people call him shady because he says things like that?"

"I wholeheartedly agree." Isana nodded.

I tilted my head as I looked at the business card I'd gotten from him. *I'm not sure if it's okay to trust him or not...*

# Reunion

## Yume Irido

“Mm... Good enough, I guess,” I said after looking over the outfit that I’d put together for Mizuto.

I’d made him wear a white dress shirt and a simple jacket. It was casual, but not *too* casual. He didn’t look like he was trying hard or anything either. Not to toot my own horn, but I’d come up with a perfectly balanced outfit.

“Why are you acting all high-and-mighty when *you’re* the one making me play dress-up?” he groaned.

“I only picked out an outfit because you weren’t even trying to think of one.”

“It’s just dinner, right? What’s there to think about?”

“He got a reservation at a nice restaurant. There’s no way you can show up in one of your worn-out fleeces.”

With finals safely behind us, it was finally time for us to meet with my dad. According to what mom had told me, after we met up with him in front of the station, he was going to take us to an expensive restaurant where adults would normally go for dates. With that in mind, I determined the kind of outfit that would be suitable for the occasion and picked out a more mature, light, winter dress.

I hadn’t asked too many questions about him up until now, but I was starting to wonder if my biological father was rich. Mom said she would often bill dad for expenses, so he must’ve been making a lot of money.

“Be careful you two, okay?” mom said as we stood at the doorway, ready to leave. “I really should go with you two...”

“He said that he’d feel bad for Mineaki-ojisan, right?” I reminded her.

“Yeah. He has a point, so I can’t really say anything, but he...” Mom awkwardly smiled as she trailed off.

I couldn’t imagine paying this much consideration for someone’s new partner after being married to them for how many years. If Mizuto got a new girlfriend,

I wasn't sure if I would be able to be nice to her. Too many complicated emotions would come up. I didn't get the feeling I'd be able to keep a calm head.

"Well, we'll be back later," I said.

"Okay. This must be awkward for you, Mizuto-kun, but you should at least enjoy the food. It's supposed to be really good!"

"All right."

Then the two of us left. It was just about nighttime. The sky was basically dark now. I could feel the biting winter cold of December nipping at my cheeks. I tugged on the coat I was wearing and looked at Mizuto. As usual, his face made it impossible to tell what he was thinking.

"Are you nervous?" I asked.

He glanced at me before responding. "Are you?"

He didn't *sound* nervous. He seemed the same as usual, in fact. On the other hand, I...

"Yeah... I might be a little nervous."

I couldn't remember the last time I'd met my dad. In novels and dramas, there were a lot of dads who'd periodically check in on their daughter after separating from their wives, but I'd never had that kind of reunion. I couldn't help but think he was uninterested in my life.

And maybe I was the same. We'd lived in the same house, sure, but it was so many years ago that I could hardly remember a thing. Sometimes, mom would talk about him, but she might as well have been talking about a stranger.

Back in elementary school, we would sometimes have assignments for which we'd have to ask our dads about something. I always struggled with that. I had no emotional attachment to the mere idea of a father.

So what was the purpose of today? What could he have possibly wanted with Mizuto and me at this point in time? I couldn't come up with any theories at all, and that made me strangely tense and nervous. I'd blurted out my invitation as a way to compete with Higashira-san and close the distance between him and

me, but any calculations I'd made had been blown away.

We finally reached the meeting place, without having a single proper conversation. We'd come here before. Kyoto Tower Sando had been the place I'd waited in front of for my date with Mizuto. The city had been completely enveloped in a Christmas aura. Christmas songs were coming from practically every conceivable angle. Beyond the restless crowd, there were plenty of people just looking at their phones while killing time.

We were supposed to let him know when we got there, but before that, someone caught my eye. There was a guy wearing a spiffy coat standing in front of the thick silver pillar. Seeing him brought back my memories.

"Dad—"

"Keikoin-san?"

Right as I called out to him, Mizuto had suddenly called out a name too. *Huh?* The man looked up from his phone at us. Then he smiled teasingly.

"See? What'd I tell you, Mizuto-kun?" my dad, Ryosei Keikoin, said.

## The Gaze's Direction

### Yume Irido

Dad led the way to the restaurant at the top floor of a nearby building. Up here, we got a full view of the city and Kyoto tower. It was totally 'grammable, but my mind was too jumbled to care.

*Why do dad and Mizuto know each other?* I got my answer after we got to the table and dad took off his coat.

"I met Mizuto by complete coincidence the other day when he came to a lecture I was giving at a college. It really shocked me when he told me his name. After all, he had the same exact name as your stepbrother."

"A college lecture?"

"Oh, right. Now that I think about it, I've never told you what I do for work. I'm a producer at a game company. Every now and then, I get requests to give

lectures at art colleges and the like.”

*Video games?* I’d always more or less assumed that his work had something to do with the entertainment industry, but still... I glanced at Mizuto, who was wearing a blank expression.

“You’re...interested in games?” I asked him.

“I just went with Isana to take a breather from studying,” Mizuto reluctantly explained.

*Hm? Wait a second. Doesn’t that mean Higashira-san’s met my dad too? So not only does her mom see them as a couple, but now my dad’s seen them together too?! Does that mean he thinks she’s Mizuto’s...?* I instantly grew flustered. *Wait, no. Calm down. It doesn’t matter what my dad thinks Higashira-san is to Mizuto; I barely know him. It’s too soon for me to think of this as a setback!*

“Oh, right. Mizuto-kun,” he called out as he wiped his hands with the wet wipe provided. “I saw she posted a third picture. I can tell she’s getting better and better. I’m really impressed that she was able to put out something that good, especially during finals season. Could I chalk that up to your great management skills?”

“No, it’s all her talent. I’m just the one pestering her to get it done.”

*Uh...huh? What’s this about management?* “Wh-What’re you doing with Higashira-san?”

“Well...”

“He’s supporting his friend’s activities as an artist.” During Mizuto’s hesitation, dad answered in his stead. “If my eye for talent is right, then she’s gonna develop into an amazing artist. It’s hard to believe she’s only a first-year in high school.”

I shot Mizuto a glare. “Weren’t you her tutor?”

Mizuto averted his eyes, seemingly feeling uncomfortable. “Natora-san only asked me to tutor her. Managing her was my idea.”

“I...see.”

I knew that Higashira-san drew, but I didn't know she was so serious about it. It was true that if Higashira-san wanted to get more into drawing, she'd need someone's support. And of course, naturally, that someone had ended up being Mizuto.

But still, judging by his tone of voice and attitude, I could tell he felt guilty about it. *Does he not want me to know that he's working with Higashira-san like that? But why?*

"Well anyway, go ahead and order whatever you like. Don't worry about the price. After all, I'm the one who invited you both out here on my own whim."

The prices of the menu items were frightening, but Mizuto and I eventually placed our orders, while dad ordered wine for himself. After the waiter left, I nervously began to ask a question.

"Um... Would it be okay if I asked...what today's meeting might be in regards to?"

It was weird for a child to address their dad so formally, but I didn't feel like we were close enough that I could speak to him casually. This whole ordeal had me at a loss.

He didn't seem to pay any mind and softly smiled. "Sure. Let me explain." He loosely put his hands together on the table. There was absolutely no trace of a ring on any of his fingers. "Back in April, I heard from Yuni—I mean, Irido-san—about your new life. She was telling me how she no longer needed child support from me, but...she also told me that you now had a sibling the same age as you. She told me that despite the two of you supposedly being at a difficult age, it seemed like you were getting along a lot better than she'd ever imagined. But..." He slightly tilted his head. "I'll be honest. The two of you are smart. There's no point in trying to be roundabout because you'll see right through me. When she told me how well you two were getting along, I couldn't help but think that it was strange for a guy and a girl the same age to be all buddy-buddy after suddenly being thrust into a situation where they're forced to live together. That is, unless they were already friendly prior to living together."

My heart skipped a beat and I stopped breathing for an instant. Mizuto also stopped blinking and pursed his lips.

“It wouldn’t have been unnatural for the two of you to get along down the road, but right out of the gate? It’s a little suspicious. No matter what, the start of a relationship like yours should have been awkward, filled with the two of you trying to feel each other out. But Irido-san didn’t mention even one instance of the sort. Due to my work, I’m prone to automatically latching on to these kinds of inconsistencies. If Irido-san was telling the truth, then what could the reasons be? Ultimately, I came up with three possibilities,” he said, holding up three fingers. “One: the two of you already knew each other.” Then he folded his ring finger. “Two: your stepbrother is a very strange guy.” He folded his middle finger. “Three: both of the above.” He folded his index finger.

He was acting like a detective straight out of a mystery novel. Regardless of his clichéd movements, he was right on the mark. We had known each other before we started living together, and Mizuto *was* a very strange guy. That’s why the two of us had been able to act like siblings on great terms from the get-go.

Both Mineaki-ojisan and mom had probably been so relieved that they’d overlooked it. But as an outsider, dad had been able to remain clearheaded and analyze the situation, helping him realize that Mizuto and I weren’t *just* stepsiblings.

Right around this point, the waiter came back with our drinks. He placed an iced tea in front of me, an oolong tea in front of Mizuto, and a wine glass in front of dad. He picked up his glass and lightly swirled the maroon liquid around.

“In any case, I just thought it was very intriguing.” He tilted the glass towards his lips, wetting them. “I’m not looking to act like your father after all this time, but I am genuinely curious what kind of strange guy my daughter is living with. I invited him here out of pure curiosity,” he explained. “To be honest, at first, I was content just checking on the two of you at the cultural festival, but unfortunately, neither of you were there when I stopped by your classroom.”

“Huh? You came to the cultural festival?”

“Yeah, I got an invitation from a friend. Oh, but I did happen to run into Mizuto-kun and Higashira-san while I was there. I had no clue that the very guy I

was looking for was standing right in front of me.”

I looked at Mizuto next to me with surprise.

“I never would’ve guessed that you were her dad either,” he said.

*If he was with Higashira-san, then this happened when the three of us were walking around the festival together, right? Could they have run into him right when I left to use the bathroom?*

“So anyway, that’s why I wanted to meet the two of you. It ended up taking two months for me to do so, though, because it was hard to find time.”

*I...see. I think I get it now.* Dad took another sip of wine before glancing at Mizuto, who was quietly drinking his oolong tea, and then he smiled at me.

“He’s very interesting, Yume. He has the levelheadedness of an adult yet also a fiery passion that contradicts that calmness. He’s both a realist *and* a romantic. I don’t want to sing my own praises, but I feel like he’s really similar to me.”

While I felt that his description of Mizuto was spot-on, it also felt that he’d only really scratched the surface of Mizuto’s character. At the very least, when he silently cried while we watched the fireworks—when I made up my mind about dating him again—I didn’t see him that way.

“I can see why Irido-san doesn’t feel anxious about having him around. You should be thankful that he’s the guy who became your brother.”

“Yeah...”

“Do you have any plans for the future, Yume? I hear your grades are pretty good,” dad asked.

“No...nothing in particular. Right now, I’m just enjoying being on the student council.”

“Oh, that’s good. It’s the privilege of students to have a myriad of options available to them. You should enjoy your time as much as you can.”

Nothing about the tone of his voice or mannerisms made it obvious, but I could more or less tell he wasn’t all that interested in me. To be fair, I felt the same about him. Knowing that he didn’t really care didn’t stir anything inside



me. I knew that he was more interested in Mizuto. Right now, the most important thing to me was my relationship with Mizuto. It was really strange. Though he should've been the biggest outsider at this table, for some reason all eyes were on Mizuto Irido.

## **The Main Story of Life**

### **Mizuto Irido**

"I'm going to use the restroom," Yume said, standing up from her chair.

We'd finished dinner and had been chatting for a bit. Now that she'd left, it was just Keikoin-san and me at the table. In typical circumstances, the two of us would be in an awkward position, but there was no trace of any discomfort in Keikoin-san's face. He looked right at me with his usual all-knowing smile.

And then, he spoke. "It seems like you have feelings for Yume," he said almost matter-of-factly.

The hand holding my fork froze. I focused my eyes towards the middle of the table before responding. "What...makes you think that?"

"I wasn't planning on prying, but I can't help myself since you're involved." A troubled expression crossed his face before he continued. "This is more conjecture than deduction, but my thought process is as such: It's strange for high schoolers who are emotionally volatile to be so friendly with each other immediately after meeting. So, maybe their whole treatment of one another is an act. If so, then if they so desperately feel the need for others to believe that they're friendly, to the point that they have to put on an act, does that mean that they're actually not on good terms? Nevertheless, if they're able to speak to each other behind-the-scenes to the extent that they can communicate this in secret, then what is their exact relationship? You see where I'm going with this?"

"Yeah..."

He really had seen through everything. He'd been able to discern the truth in such a short amount of time. Despite living under the same roof as us, neither dad nor Yuni-san had managed to pick up on anything like Keikoin-san had.

“Judging by how the two of you are now, I can surmise that your relationship’s been repaired to some extent, or maybe you’re even back to dating again.”

I quietly put the silverware I was holding down on my plate. Most likely, this was what he’d actually wanted to talk about today.

“Didn’t you assume that Isana was my girlfriend?” I asked.

“I did when I met you the first time. But I changed my mind after meeting the two of you again the other day. The way you look at her isn’t like someone in love—it’s someone looking at talent. Put another way, you were looking at the person controlling your destiny.” I stayed silent. “Mizuto-kun, you and I are very similar. You can pretty much say we’re birds of a feather. People like us don’t want to be the main character. We want to seek out those who could become the main character and make as amazing a story with them as possible—*that’s* what’s most important to us. To that end, you’re okay putting your own life on the back burner. But you wouldn’t be sacrificing yourself or leeching off someone else. In a sense, it’s the ultimate form of egotism.” I still had no words. “You understand, don’t you, Mizuto-kun? Now that you’re trying to help Higashira-san’s talent blossom, everything else—even your own emotions—seems so unimportant, doesn’t it?”

*I want to be by Yume’s side. I want Yume to be by my side. I’ll accept nothing less than that. I don’t want anyone else besides her.* Though I was very sure about my feelings, there was something else inside me that’d changed. *No, that’s not it. Nothing changed; I just came to realize the truth.*

It wasn’t until I saw that picture Isana drew that I understood what kind of person I was—a person who didn’t look at himself at all. Right now, I was still wavering. I hadn’t gotten any results from managing Isana just yet, so I didn’t know the taste of victory. If or when I did...there’d be no turning back. Everything else would go down in priority. I could instinctually tell that’s what would happen.

“What I’m going to say now is just me talking,” Keikoin-san began in an almost bitter tone. It felt like he was telling me my future. “I vividly remember what happened when Yume was born. I couldn’t get away from work, so it was a few

days before I actually saw her.”

*This matches with what dad told me.* Yuni-san had been uneasy because her husband hadn’t come to see his own child.

“I had a lot of friends who got married before I did,” he continued. “Every last one of them told me that the minute they saw their child’s face, they felt as if they were ready to devote the rest of their lives to them. I agree that, as a species, that’s the correct response, and I’d hoped that I’d feel the same. Despite being a guy who couldn’t even be there for the birth of my own child, I hoped that I’d be able to be a normal husband and father.”

*I know the rest.* If things had gone that way, Yume and I never would’ve dated nor would we have become stepsiblings.

“When I saw her, it was as if I were looking at someone else’s child—I felt nothing.” He narrowed his eyes as if he was trying to endure some kind of pain. “Back then, I hated myself so much that I could’ve thrown up.”

This was the first time I was seeing raw emotion from him. His usual all-knowing smile was nowhere to be seen.

“I was forced to think about my own despicable personality,” he said. “Believe me, Mizuto-kun, every human has a moment when they feel a calling. It’s when you feel certain about what shape your happiness takes. I’m sure that for most people, it’s the moment their child is born.”

*“Calling.” “Shape of happiness.” These are such simple words, but they give structure to the murky instincts in my head.*

He continued on as I remained silent. “But I missed that moment. In game terms, it was as if it’d been decided that her birth wasn’t a part of the main story of my life. Because of that, having a child ended up being more like a side story.”

I’m sure it’d all been out of his hands. Whether he’d tried his best or not didn’t matter—he was simply that kind of person. He was destined to lead this sort of life. The emotions that came up based off of that couldn’t be controlled by his own will.

I was certain that everyone wanted to be a good parent when their child was

born. Of course they did. There's no way that they wouldn't. Even if, in reality, they weren't a good parent, they still hoped that they could be. It didn't come off as some kind of pathetic excuse. It was simply the unfortunate reality of things.

"As soon as I realized what kind of guy I was, I decided to do my best to put the least burden on my family. I hired someone who specialized in childcare, and I tried not to burden my wife to even make me a single meal. But...that all ended up being completely different from the kind of family she envisioned." The lonely smile on his face made it look as if he was laughing at himself. "Our happiness each took completely different shapes."

Keikoin-san's ideal future most likely lay with his work. But Yuni-san's lay with her family. This was obvious from how she acted at home. Yuni-san might've been busy with work, but she still made lunches for both Yume and me. I could tell that doing typical mom things brought her so much happiness. It was also obvious from how touched she'd been when we gave her a present for Mother's Day. Yuni-san most likely held the idea of a family close to her heart. But Keikoin-san couldn't match that desire of hers.

"I didn't want to waste her life anymore, so I, fairly quickly, made up my mind to separate, but she beat me to the punch. I immediately agreed to the divorce, but when I did, she was the saddest I've ever seen her. Even now, I can't wipe away that guilt I feel."

I suddenly remembered the moment I broke up with Yume. We'd both looked relieved, as if a heavy weight had been lifted from our shoulders. But somewhere inside, I was thinking that if I'd just had it together a little more, things wouldn't have ended that way.

"I have no right to call myself her father. That's why I gave up my parental rights and had Yume take Yuni's last name. Then, I agreed to quietly pay child support. That was the least I could do to atone for them getting involved in the mess that was me. It's horrible and uncouth to think that money can solve anything, but I didn't know how else to take responsibility..."

Keikoin-san closed his eyes for a bit before giving me a serious look. These were the eyes of an adult. It was the look that someone gave when they were

earnestly looking at the person in front of them.

“This might be the first time in my life that I’ve said the unvarnished truth about all of this. Do you understand why I’m telling you all this, Mizuto-kun?” *I do. I understand all too well.* “If you plan to stay by Yume’s side, you’ll have a responsibility. Normal high schoolers don’t need to think about that kind of responsibility...but you two are in a unique environment where failure is not an option. Both your romantic relationship and your family life hangs in the balance. That’s why for Yuni’s sake as well, I decided to put my foot down a bit and see your determination for myself.” *I don’t want to understand. I want to stay ignorant to all this.* “You might have Yume meet the same fate as Yuni.” *Everything was decided the moment I laid eyes on Isana Higashira’s picture.* “Mizuto-kun, you know what the shape of your happiness is, don’t you?”

## **We Aren’t Looking at the Same Future**

### **Yume Irido**

I’d listened to their entire conversation and was left speechless. When I came back from the bathroom, it looked like the two of them were talking, so I impulsively hid and...eavesdropped, hearing every last word.

Suddenly, Akatsuki-san’s words from when Higashira-san asked Mizuto out over half a year ago came to mind. He really wasn’t particular about the “relationship” label. If he were to date someone, it’d just be someone he wanted to be with. But that’s how he felt about the person I used to be. That’s how the person he used to be had felt. It was possible that he no longer had interest in being with anyone at all.

Dad had said that we should enjoy the vast number of choices afforded to us—as if he didn’t have those options, as if he’d already made his decision, and as if there was another person just like him.

I stayed silent. *I’ve already proved that. I made the choice to change while he continued to take the loner route. Remember? Because of that, we fought and broke up.* The shapes of our happiness—our ideal futures—were obviously completely different. I’d known that for a while...

# My Soulmate

## Mizuto Irido

“Say ‘hi’ to Irido-san for me. Be careful getting home, okay?” Keikoin-san said before disappearing into the night city.

After seeing him off, Yume spoke up. “Let’s go home.”

“Yeah...”

We walked through the Christmassy city, heading back to the same home. The two of us were stepsiblings. Above all else, we were two family members living under the same roof. That’s why I couldn’t be thoughtless with my actions. I couldn’t stay a child who could backpedal on things. I had to think about my family and my future, and *then* take action. I’d thought about this for a long time. I just hadn’t come up with an answer until now.

“Hey...” Yume suddenly called out from a little behind me. “Have you already thought about what you’re going to do when you grow up?”

I glanced back behind me and saw that she was looking up at me expectantly. “Where’s this coming from, all of a sudden?”

“Dad asked me that, remember? So I wanted to ask you too.”

I looked away from her and gazed up at the night sky. I exhaled, releasing a light cloud of white. “I don’t know,” I said, watching my breath melt into the night sky. “Honestly, what I’m doing right now is so fun, I really couldn’t care less about the future.”

“What are you doing right now?”

“Trying to foster Isana’s talent.” I said this so casually that it was hard to imagine I’d been so hesitant to say anything up until now. “Her talent’s the real deal. It’s only been two weeks since we seriously started, but she’s gotten better. She’s getting more praise online too. That makes me so happy, and it’s so fun that I can’t help myself.”

She was getting more active followers on the art site where we posted her work and had also opened a Twitter account. She didn’t have many followers just yet, but they were slowly but surely increasing day by day. She’d already

gotten over a hundred likes on her first picture. Seeing these results appear before me made her progress seem *real*, and I couldn't help but feel excited.

"This might be the first time that I've felt like I've wanted to do something," I said.

It was as though I'd been reading books all this time to try and find myself. No matter how much I absorbed other people's lives, I couldn't find anything that excited me in real life. This was the first time that I'd desired anything. My heart was screaming that it wanted to know how far Isana Higashira could go.

"That's why, though I'm not a hundred percent sure yet, if there's a path where I can be useful to that end, I might not end up going to Kyoto University," I said as lightly as I could. "You're planning on going there, right? Being at the top of your class *and* a student council member at Rakuro means that your acceptance is pretty much guaranteed. We might end up at different schools. Finally, right?" I smiled at the irony.

I'd applied to Rakuro for the express purpose of going to a different school from Yume. She ended up thinking the same thing, which led to us going to the same school anyway. And now, we finally weren't thinking the same way. We were going to end up at different colleges. Although, this was still a whole two long years in the future. She had so many options open to her, whereas I only had one. There was no way our paths would overlap.

*Yeah... It all makes sense, whether I want it to or not. I've accepted it. I'm sure of it. I understand how inevitable it is.* The fact that I could understand this so clearly proved that what Keikoin-san had said had been right. The shape of my happiness had been decided. Though I might've had feelings for Yume, I had no motivation to build and successfully maintain a family with her. I understood why I'd hoped that things would stay the same between us for a little longer. It was because, if we went any further, I'd end up realizing that I'm incapable of making Yume happy.

My frozen breath melted, and with it, so did my childish dreams. The two of us had been strung along by the trap that a higher power had set up. But now, it had all finally become clear that we weren't each other's soulmate.

"No." I felt someone grab my right hand. I felt cold, almost frozen, slender

fingers firmly wrap around my hand. “No. I don’t want that.” It almost sounded like the cries of a child, but her words were so clear. She looked at me, desperation on her face. “I don’t want to be without you.”

“You...”

There was no room for interpretation with her words. She wasn’t trying to coat her words with a joking tone, nor was she trying to pretend I’d misunderstood her. Every last word of hers had been meant to convey a clear message.

Even so, she shook her head. “I won’t say it. I won’t do that for you. This time...you have to be the one to say it.” *That’s right. You were the one to say it back then.* “That’s why,” she whispered, gripping my arm with all her strength and moving her face so close to mine that her cold breath could flow into me. “I...definitely won’t let you run away.”



## Chapter 3: War against Worldly Desires

### I Made Up My Mind Long Ago

Aisa Aso

The plan was working. Every time I met up with Senpai, I gradually reduced the number of pads. Finally, I wasn't wearing any at all...although I *was* using a bra designed to make my boobs look bigger. Either way, it didn't seem like he had any idea that the size of my boobs had decreased. And now, at the end of today's date...it was finally time for the fateful moment.

"You...wanna come over to my place?" he clumsily and bluntly asked. It was easy to tell what he was thinking.

I couldn't really rag on him, because my head was filled with the same dirty thoughts. "Yeah...I'll go."

When I got to his room, I was surprised by how clean it was. I'd gotten a peek before we started dating, but I could've sworn that it had been a lot messier. *Does that mean he purposely cleaned up for this?*

"Y'know...it's a lot cleaner in here than I thought it'd be. That's surprising."

"Shaddup."

As usual, I teased him, he brushed me off, and I giggled. It would've been really embarrassing for either of us to jump right into setting the mood, so instead the both of us did our best to act like normal.

I looked at his bookcase, his desk, and all around his room. Then I casually sat on his bed, and we watched a video together on my phone. During that time, we slowly moved closer to one another, and eventually, he put his large hand over mine.

"Ah." My heart beat loudly.

My heart was pounding in my ears, but I still squeezed out the courage to

lightly lean my shoulder against his. He then proceeded to gently grab my shoulder. I raised my head to match him, and our eyes met. We looked at each other, reading each other's intentions before our lips met.

“Mm...”

We'd already had our first kiss during our first date. This had been before Suzurin and the others had brought up the idea of reducing the number of pads I had. I'd been teasing him as usual and then he'd stolen my lips as if he'd been trying to seal off my mouth. When he'd let me go, I'd just spaced out.

“You really like this kinda thing, don't you?” Senpai had said, shifting his eyes a little from embarrassment.

He knew me so well. I loved how after acting smug, I'd get embarrassed and innocent, so much that my head felt like it was going to explode. This kiss would lead to the next base, where we'd allow touching, acknowledging and accepting one another. After that long kiss, all that was left was to signal that we were mentally ready to proceed to what came next.

We both went silent. The only sound came from my heart beating out of my chest. My eyes darted from side to side, but I somehow managed to move my petrified hands to my blouse and undo the first button. I lowered my hand and left my body open to him. He picked up on my intentions and slowly began unbuttoning the rest with his rugged fingers.

Now, my blouse was open, and I could feel his eyes on my torso, covered by just my bra. It felt like my brain was about to overheat. Then, one by one, he began taking off each article of clothing that had been protecting my body. It almost felt like some kind of sacred ritual—one that linked our existences together.

When I heard the click of my bra's hook coming undone, I knew we were reaching the climax. The straps became loose around my shoulders, falling past my elbows. I took a deep breath and shakily moved my hands down from where they'd been holding the bra in place.

The next moment, my bra hit the floor with a light thud. Senpai's eyes slightly widened, and he gulped. Every last inch of my naked torso was entering his eyes. I wasn't hiding anything from him anymore.

“U-Uh, Senpai...” Even at this point, I couldn’t help but make up a stupid excuse. “M-My boobs look smaller without my bra, so, um...”

“No,” he quickly shut me down, averting his gaze. “They’re beautiful, but it felt kinda creepy for me to say that, so...I’m sorry.”

*Oh, jeez, this guy...* His height might’ve led others to believe that he’d been popular enough to have been with a girl or two, but he was a total virgin. *I can’t keep up with how in love with him I am.*

“Senpai...?” Regaining some of my composure, I grinned teasingly. “It’s your turn now. Arms up. Come on. Reach for the sun.”

“What am I, a kid?”

I wasn’t sure if it was because he was nervous or something, but his quip didn’t have the usual force behind it. I took off his shirt, then his pants. I could almost feel myself drooling over his body, which had been toned when he played basketball. It was really magnificent. His body was hard, but it felt springy when I pushed against it. I got the sense that I could touch his body forever and never get tired of it.

Lastly, my eyes fell to the boxers he still had on. I still had my panties on too. I looked up at him and we exchanged glances. We’d made up our minds. We each took off our last piece of clothing and stared at each other’s bodies for who knows how long. This sight was something that we would only show to each other—because we were a couple.

Senpai was naked, and so was I. *Heh heh...what is this situation?* Though my mind was a storm of arousal, practically paralyzing me, as time passed, I began to slowly get used to it. When I did, I began to find this situation kinda amusing.

I nervously wrapped myself around him. In doing so, places that wouldn’t usually touch rubbed against each other. It felt ticklish but also warm. I was so happy that I found myself giggling and kissing Senpai.

He embraced me snugly in his arms. And then for a little bit, we tickled each other on top of the bed like kids. Before I knew it, I was on my back with Senpai on top of me. I could see myself in his eyes. He could probably see himself in mine as well.

“Um... Do you have one?” I nervously asked.

He silently nodded, reaching out to his nightstand before pulling something out of an open box. This tool would connect us even if we weren’t adults. But there was something that I was a little confused about.

I couldn’t help but ask as he rustled his hand in the box. “It’s...open?” *Why’s the box open? This should be his first time.*

“Oh, yeah... Well...” His expression filled with panic and he awkwardly looked down. “I...used one for practice.”

My lips curled into a smile. “You’re so cute, Senpai.”

“What else was I supposed to do?”

Thanks to his practice, the preparation went smoothly, and now we were all ready. The springs of his bed creaked. He put his hand next to my face and looked at me with a serious expression.

“You’re sure...right?”

*Do you even need to ask?* “Yeah...”

Senpai sat up. I relaxed my body. I’d made up my mind long ago.

“Aaaaaaahh!”

But just because I made up my mind didn’t change the fact that painful things are still painful.

## Reports Are Mandatory

### Yume Irido

After finals ended, our school entered its supplementary class period. For the majority of the students, it was effectively winter break already, but the student council still had some work to take care of before the year ended.

That’s why we had all gathered in the student council room, save for Aso-senpai, who came in a little late.

“Morning, everyone.”

At first, she just seemed a little quieter than usual. Gradually, we figured out what had happened just by observing her expression, her mannerisms, and the alluring aura around her.

Asuhain-san and I looked at each other while President Kurenai narrowed her eyes and glared at Aso-senpai. Haba-senpai acted indifferent and continued to work without stopping. Meanwhile, Aso-senpai remained silent, keeping an air of mystery about her.

We worked diligently for an hour.

“Let’s take a break,” President Kurenai proposed. She and I both stood up and grabbed Aso-senpai by the arms. “Huh? What?”

“Let’s,” President Kurenai started.

“Chat,” I finished.

We dragged her off away from the student council room, with Asuhain-san nervously following behind. Now in the girl’s bathroom, the three of us cornered Aso-senpai by the sinks.

“Spit it out. It’s obvious you’re dying to tell us what happened with you and Hoshibe-senpai,” President Kurenai said directly.

“Huh? Well...” Aso-senpai said, fidgeting with her hair as if she was conflicted about what to do. “Nothing really happened... There’s nothing really that needs to be reported. After all, we only did things that are normal to do when you’re in a relationship.”

“Wha—”

“No way...”

Judging by the way she was acting, both President Kurenai and I could guess what Aso-senpai was hinting at. Asuhain-san, apparently starting to catch on, silently turned red.

A leisurely smile appeared on Aso-senpai’s face. “It’s really no big deal! Buuut thanks! It’s all thanks to the advice you guys gave me! From now on, I’m gonna be cheering you guys on!”

“And now you’re pitying us?!” I exclaimed.

“You’re a genius at getting other girls to hate you, you know that?!” President Kurenai scolded her.

Aso-senpai grinned, proudly displaying her sense of superiority.

“Uh, um, ah,” Asuhain-san stammered, her face flushing deep red.

*I mean, seriously, already? They haven’t even been dating for a month!* It seemed that President Kurenai’s read on their relationship progressing faster than a normal one because of how long they had had feelings for each other was right on the money.



“Hmm, well...” Aso-senpai tilted her head as if she was trying to suggest something. “Aren’t you curious about...how it feels?”

President Kurenai and I gulped at the same time. *Of course we’re curious. Why wouldn’t we be?* Never in a million years did I think that Aso-senpai would be the one telling me about how it feels. She’d been naive and innocent not too long ago.

“Maybe if you say, ‘Pretty please with a cherry on top,’ I’ll tell you. It’s *super* embarrassing, but if you beg me, I guess I’ll have to tell you. After all, you’d be *begging*.”

*I can’t believe she’s going to be the one to...*

President Kurenai and I swallowed our pride and lowered our heads. “Pretty please...with a cherry on top.”

“Okay, twist my arm, why don’t you?” Aso-senpai said happily. “Well, how do I put it? Hm, I guess in one word...it’s warm?”

“Warm?”

“Like, I guess it’s the warmth from the body? But you can feel it all across your body... Parts of your body that don’t usually touch, *touch*—and then you’re like, ‘Holy crap, that’s allowed?!’ You really feel so special. You’re, like, aroused, but at the same time you feel safe... It’s a strange sensation. Heh heh, sorry. My cheeks are burning up.” Aso-senpai was practically beaming.

When she had first brought it up, I had been pretty irritated, but seeing her like this genuinely made me happy for her.

“And?” President Kurenai quickly pressed on. “People say it hurts at first, but how was it? Were you okay?”

“Well... Uh, well...” Aso-senpai’s eyes darted back and forth.

President Kurenai’s eyes narrowed as her lips curled into a smile. “Hey, Aisa, we’re friends, aren’t we? Remember all that advice we gave you? Remind me again, who’s it thanks to that Hoshibe-senpai said yes to you in Kobe?”

“All of you...”



“Then I think you *do* have an obligation to tell us what happened. You have to give us the play-by-play—and you can’t skip on even the tiniest detail.”

Aso-senpai groaned, tears welling up in her eyes. Then in a voice so soft that it sounded like a mosquito buzzing, she said, “It hurt so much that I let out a crazy gross scream.”

“Ah...” The three of us, including Asuhain-san, reacted at once. Now, we all knew that Aso-senpai had screwed up. Aso-senpai looked up, tears in her eyes. “It’s impossible not to! Not just for me, but for everyone! I *guarantee* that you’ll all do the same!”

“Even if you try to drag us down with you, it doesn’t matter. The memory of your first time has been set in stone. There’s no changing it, so you should just accept it.”

“Stoooooop! I can hear my dreams crashing down!”

Apparently, reality wasn’t a carbon copy of the romance seen in manga. Not that I had any plans to do *that* anytime soon, but I was starting to get a little bit scared too.

“Good grief. I’m a little relieved to know that you choked, just as I thought you would.”

“I don’t wanna hear that from a virgin like you!”

President Kurenai’s face froze, and she fell silent. Aso-senpai had obtained the ultimate word to shut her up. Aso-senpai wailed while clinging to Asuhain-san.

“It’s not like I wanted things to end that way! I wanted to valiantly grin and bear the pain, but it *really* hurt!”

“I don’t know how much it hurt, but I think giving birth is even worse, Senpai,” Asuhain-san said, not relenting on the facts.

Aso-senpai’s wails turned into pitiful moans. Possibly actually feeling bad for her, President Kurenai warmly patted Aso-senpai on the shoulder.

“But aren’t you happy that Hoshibe-senpai’s enough of a gentleman to stop when you said it hurt?”

“Yeah...”

“That’s right,” I chimed in. “Hoshibe-senpai’s feelings about you won’t change, no matter how much you screamed.”

“Yeah...”

Aso-senpai squeezed Asuhain-san’s small body and caressed her head. “After that, he held me and patted my head for about an hour, so...”

We all went silent. And just like that we were no longer in a consoling mood.

“Okay, we’re done here,” said President Kurenai, standing up.

“Let’s get back to work, President Kurenai,” I agreed.

“You should hurry up too, Senpai.” Asuhain-san nodded.

“Huh?! Why are you all acting so cold all of a sudden?! Why?!”

*Even after all that, it still ends with you gloating about your love life.*

## A Sign

When all was said and done, though, I still had something else to ask Aso-senpai.

“Um...Senpai?”

“Hm? What’s up, Yumechi?”

Aso-senpai had stopped acting all high-and-mighty as we walked back, so I quietly approached her after confirming that we were alone.

“There’s something I want to ask you,” I whispered.

“Oh?” Aso-senpai’s eyes twinkled and she began whispering too. “Something about doing the deed?”

“Yeah...”

“Lay it on me!”

I panicked and put my finger to my mouth. “Shhh!”

This topic wasn’t exactly appropriate to talk about in the middle of a hallway, so we moved to a corner.

“So, Senpai...” I started, fidgeting.

“Yeah? What is it?” she asked in a gentle tone. She’d switched from being an arrogant upperclassman to one that was good at taking care of her underclassmen, as though she was giving me a push.

I mustered the courage to squeeze out what I wanted to ask. “How did you...seduce him?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, how did you get Hoshibe-senpai on the same page as you to...you know? How did you bring it up?”

“Oh?” She faintly smiled, as if she’d guessed everything on my mind. “So, let me guess. You have plans?”

“W-Well, not ‘plans,’ per se, but I’m just kinda curious how you get the other person interested into doing...that.”

“Mm-hmm. Very interesting. Okay, I one hundred percent get it. My feelings on this are as complicated as a unicorn, but I can’t refuse a request from my cute underclassman!” Aso-senpai puffed her chest out in a way that made me feel like I could rely on her for an answer. “Well, actually, Senpai was the one who seduced me, so...yeah!”

“Oh...”

“Hey! Don’t act so disappointed! For the record, I *let* him seduce me, okay?! I *let* him!” Aso-senpai frowned, dissatisfied. “Ever since we started dating, Senpai’s gotten more insatiable, but if I hadn’t given him a sign that it was okay, it would’ve taken a lot more time for us to get there!”

“A...sign?”

“Well, it depends on the situation, but...what I did was guide him into inviting me with my words and actions. Kinda like baiting him.”

“Baiting?”

I tilted my head at the unfamiliar use of the word.

“Hm...how do I explain...” Aso-senpai pondered. “Okay, take this for example:

the two of you are walking side by side.”

“Uh-huh.”

Aso-senpai lined up next to me. “And then you casually bump the back of your hand against theirs.” Aso-senpai’s hand lightly touched the back of mine.

“What would you think if I kept doing that over and over again?”

“That you want me to hold your hand?”

“Exactly! That’s one type of sign. It’s different than just asking to hold hands, y’know?”

*She has a point... It would feel like I’m being baited, in a sense, because she’s giving me a sign of her intentions. Didn’t I do something similar when I was dating Mizuto?*

“In other words, you can pretty much convey that it’s okay to touch you without using any words. I demonstrated with my hand right now, so it was pretty PG, but imagine the nape of your neck, thighs, or breasts...”

“Such a turn-on!”

“Exactly!” Aso-senpai proudly snorted. “Aside from giving signs that it’s okay to touch, you can also give signs that it’s okay to look. This is a pretty obvious one, but you could be like, ‘Phew, it’s hot,’ and tug on the collar of your shirt, exposing your cleavage.”

“I think I get it! You’re lowering your usual feminine defenses on purpose!”

“Yep! It’s best if you don’t do it all the time though, otherwise you’ll just be seen as a dirty girl.”

I suddenly remembered when Mizuto and I had just started living together. I’d teased Mizuto while wearing nothing but a bath towel. Thinking back, that had been the most dangerous encounter we’d had—the closest we’d gotten to crossing a line. On the other hand, when I barged in on him taking a bath, he became extremely guarded. I had probably overdone it. What I needed to do was be casual, but also give a clear sign. If I could do that...

“Essentially, it’s the same as those femme fatale moves I taught you before! You should do things that you can only do in front of the person you like! But

this time you shouldn't try to hide how you're feeling. Make it painfully obvious how into them you are! Got it?!"

"Yeah! But Senpai, can I ask one more thing?"

"Hm?"

"What should I do if the person I'm pursuing is extremely dense and doesn't catch on to what I'm doing at all?"

"Well..." Aso-senpai shrugged, throwing her hands in the air. "At that point, your only option is to take off your clothes and get on top of them."

## Suppression Is a Cradle of Progress

Mizuto Irido

*"I...definitely won't let you run away."*

A day had passed since Yume had made that declaration.

The amount of determination I'd seen in her eyes, the resolute tone of her voice—it was all so vivid. I couldn't get it out of my head. Even so, after getting home that day, she hadn't tried to take any kind of action. This morning, too, she'd left to go to the student council without doing anything else. I felt like I was in limbo.

It was in this state that I found myself in Isana's room once again.

"I've completed another illustration. Please take a look!"

This was the reason she'd invited me over. It wasn't like I *had* to go all the way to her place just to look at her art, but she apparently enjoyed seeing my reactions in person.

"That was quick. It's only been like two days since your last one."

"Heh heh. Thanks to the freedom I experienced at the conclusion of finals, I actually ended up spontaneously drawing...three pictures."

"Three?!"

*Doesn't that mean she essentially drew a picture and a half each day? There's*

a limit to how much of a second wind you get from a sense of freedom. The crazier thing was that each of them was fully colored. *Is this actually physically possible, even?*

At any rate, I sat cross-legged on her messy floor and looked at her tablet. The first picture was of a girl getting ready in the morning, tying her hair up as she turned towards the viewer. Isana typically used pictures she took of herself in various poses as reference material, so more often than not, the characters she drew had large breasts, but this one's were much more modest. I was curious about whose perspective the viewer was supposed to be seeing. Judging from the low angle, I thought it might be a cat's point of view or something. You could get a glimpse of her panties under the legs of the shorts she was wearing.

The second picture was of a girl in the middle of changing out of her sailor uniform. She'd already put on her gym shorts, but she was in the middle of taking her shirt off. The shirt was just about at her neck, revealing a finely detailed white bra underneath.

The third picture was a girl in nothing but her underwear lying face down on the bed while playing around on her phone. The school uniform that she'd just changed out of was on the floor, making me think that she was too lazy to finish changing.

My suspicions were confirmed—Isana was extremely talented at drawing bras and panties. Honestly, she was practically as good as a professional artist.

"Impressions? They're all very adorable, right?" Isana asked, grinning.

I nodded. "Yeah. I can tell how absurdly horny you were during finals."

"Urk!" Her face went red, and she gave me a look that said she couldn't believe that I'd seen right through her.

I narrowed my eyes and looked at her. "You were able to restrain yourself from drawing a panty shot at the start, but with the second and third picture, you gradually began to lose restraint."

"I-It's not my fault! Isn't it such a waste for me to hide their bodies with clothes after drawing them?!"

Isana's process for drawing was to start by drawing the character's body, add

on underwear, and then clothes. The process itself was fairly normal. One could say that it's the basic way to draw a person, but in Isana's case, she'd occasionally draw nudes of characters that couldn't be posted. It was hard to deal with the realism that came from her being a girl, drawing these naked bodies and then happily smiling while showing them to me.

This time, at the very least, it looked like she'd been able to hold herself back from drawing the girls naked, instead leaving them in their underwear. *I bet that if we went into the drawing program and deleted the "Underwear Layer," there'd be something very detailed drawn there, not covered by a mosaic or a black bar.* The picture would've triggered an NSFW warning real fast.

"Well, Keikoin-san did say that one of your talents is that you're able to pour your libido into your works. But, like, when did you get so good at drawing underwear?"

"I stared very closely at my own while drawing! I memorized the very minute details of the patterns by tracing them with my pen, so by the time I drew the third picture, it wasn't difficult at all!"

*Huh? Your own?* I looked at the second picture with the dazzling, flower-patterned bra. *You wear this kind of bra? I know it's kinda late in the game, but don't you have any shame?*

"Personally, I'd like it if you paid close attention to the wrinkles in the panties! The butt in the third picture was something that I tried very hard to get right by posing and taking a picture—"

"Okay, okay. That's enough! I get it. You've gotten really good at drawing underwear!"

Any sense of humiliation flew out the window when she got really excited about something. *Now that I think about it, maybe she's always had the makings of a creator.* Excluding the fact that I kept imagining Isana wearing the exact same outfit, the third picture of the girl in her underwear had a sort of unique feel to it.

"Y'know, despite this girl being in nothing but her underwear, the picture doesn't feel that dirty."

“Huh? You think so?”

“More than anything, I feel a sort of realness from it. It’s like you drew a real girl and not just a beautiful character. There’s a rawness to it.”

“Well, of course you get that sense. She’s based on my exact nature, after all. As soon as I return from school, I remove my school uniform and laze around in naught but my underwear.”

“You modeled this off yourself?!”

“Typically, the color of my bra and panties don’t match; however, it’s more pleasing to me as a viewer when they are, so I made them the same color! But also, the mismatch is very good in its own right... Hm, decisions, decisions...”

The fact that they could use themselves as models was a great advantage to female artists. Thinking like that, Isana, who possessed the mentality of a male otaku, had the best model to work off when drawing beautiful girls.

“Actually, can you draw guys? I’ve only ever seen you draw girls so far.”

“Huh? Obviously, I don’t.”

*What do you mean “don’t”? Shouldn’t it be “can’t”?!*

“I’ve seldom found myself hooked by any series in which handsome guys make an appearance... If I were to attempt depicting a male, I would need a model...”

“A model?”

Isana grinned and pointed at me. “In order to understand human anatomy, a nude sketch is essential!”

“In your dreams, idiot! Also, what would you get out of using me as a model? It’s not like I have a good body.”

“That makes it better, actually. I can avoid depicting a high schooler who is strangely toned for their age despite supposedly being normal.”

“What’s wrong with that? If girls can be randomly slim, then guys can be randomly buff.”

“I’ve yet to receive my reward for timely completion of my picture! I deserve



this!” *Crap...that’s right. I forgot.* “At any rate, I will need to receive permission from Yume-san, so thank you in advance for your modeling.”

“What makes you think she gets to decide what I can do with my body?”

“In that case, would you like to have Yume-san sit in? Wait, no, that might not be such a great idea. I’ve heard that you’re not supposed to provide stimulation to your nude models.”

“And what exactly do you think might be stimulated? Spit it out, you pervert!”

“Well, you know... Heh heh... If you *want* me to see it, then I’d be overjoyed...”

“Creep.”

If our genders were reversed, what she said would amount to a fireable offense in the workplace. Besides, I’d been living with my ex for over eight months now. There was no way that I’d slip up like that. *Who do you take me for?*

## Alert

It was night by the time I got home. I walked into the living room and saw Yume, still in her school uniform, under the kotatsu.

“Welcome home.”

“Thanks...”

She greeted me normally, but I couldn’t stop thinking about what her words yesterday meant. Yume had said that she wouldn’t say “it.” Thinking back to that time during the fireworks at the deserted shrine, it became painfully obvious what she was getting at and how long she’d been feeling this way. But now, she was just nonchalantly loafing in the kotatsu. I had absolutely no idea what was going through her head.

“You haven’t changed out of your uniform yet?” I asked, trying to fish for information.

“My room’s too cold, so I thought I’d stay here while it warmed up,

but...before I knew it, I couldn't bring myself to leave," Yume said as she grabbed a tangerine.

"Those aren't the words of an honor student."

"There are days when even I can't be bothered to change, you know?" I couldn't help but remember the picture Isana had shown me of the girl in her underwear. "Join me?" she asked, lifting up the blanket.

Yume wasn't wearing tights or anything, so I caught a glimpse of her porcelain thighs. I looked around and saw that she'd messily thrown her tights behind her on the couch.

"I'll pass..." Despite usually being so well put-together, she was eerily defenseless today. "I don't need to wait for my room to get warm since I don't need to change."

"True. You don't have any concept of outdoor versus indoor clothes."

"Why should I take time to pick out an outfit just to go to Isana's house? At her worst, she doesn't wear anything but a shirt, you know?"

"I do that too sometimes when I'm in my room."

*No way... She dresses like Isana?*

Yume giggled teasingly. "Wanna see sometime?"

"Yeah, and get you pissed at me? No thanks."

I'd tried to make a comeback, but Yume continued to smile. "I wouldn't. Not if it's you."

*This is a trap. I don't know how, but it has to be.*

"Don't fall asleep in there like last time," I said before choosing to strategically retreat.

I left the living room, went up the stairs, and headed to my room. *Seriously, what's going on with her? Is she not scared? She hasn't stepped on the brakes. Did she lose her self-awareness?* Was this what she meant when she said, "I won't do that for you"?

*No, I need to calm down. This is no different from usual. This exact situation*

*has played out so many times over the past eight months, and every time it just ends up being as simple as her toying with me. I know better than anyone how ill-equipped in both technique and courage she is to seduce me. But...why is my heart beating so hard?*

## Initiative

After dinner, I checked Isana's Twitter account on my computer. Out of the three pictures that she'd drawn, I'd decided to upload the one of the girl getting ready in the morning today. It hadn't been that long since it'd been posted, but it was getting more engagement than the others had, receiving over a hundred likes already. Her follower count was also going up right before my eyes.

*Not that I didn't already know, but...the power of eroticism is strong.* It definitely played into Isana's motivation, but she needed to wait two years before she could start drawing dirty things for real.

At this rate, she'd have a pretty good following by the time she posted all three pictures. But the question was how to cater to all those followers. Were they more interested in emotional drawings or horny ones? Going off of general demand, the correct answer would be horny art, but despite Isana's personality, I felt that her instincts were better for emotional pictures. So what was it going to be? Following popular demand or her talent? It was a tricky question.

In the midst of my thoughts, my phone began to ring. *Hm? Who's this? Isana?* But when I picked up my phone, I saw it was Yume. *Huh? Isn't she supposed to be taking a bath?*

"Yeah?"

"What took you so long?" Her voice echoed.

*Why are you calling me from the bath?* "What is it?"

"I'm out of conditioner. Can you bring me a new bottle?"

"Why me? Can't you ask Yuni-san—"

"Just do it!" she said before hanging up.

*What in the...* I briefly considered calling her back, but I could already see her

refusing the call, and I didn't want to deal with all that. *I'll just bring it to her.* I walked down the stairs and grabbed the brand of conditioner Yume used on the shelf of the changing room. *Washing her super long hair must require a lot of this...* That also must've been why there were so many bottles of it and why I knew exactly where it was.

I walked in front of the frosted glass door. "I'll leave it here."

Just as I called out to her and was about to retreat, I heard the door open. It was just about ten centimeters, but from that little crack, I could see Yume peeking out at me. Her hair was wet, and sticking to her shoulders flecked with droplets of water. Everything below her shoulders was hidden by the door, but through the frosted glass, I could see the curves of her body.



Yume looked up at me as my jaw was practically on the ground.

“Thanks.”

She grabbed the bottle with her dripping hand and shut the door behind her. She walked away from the door, her silhouette becoming more defined, and I heard the water start running. My heart was beating out of my chest. I’d been caught so off guard that my heart might’ve been beating even harder than that time she’d barged in on me taking a shower.

## Attack

“Watch out! The enemy’s Stand is attacking!” a guy yelled, a serious look on his face.

I was watching an anime that Isana had recommended to me, and it felt incredibly relatable. I, too, had just endured an attack, and it hadn’t been one that was visible and easy to confirm. Rather, it had been casual and undetectable. Seriously, how shrewd of her.

Did she really think I’d lose my self-control that easily? I’d been living in this abnormal environment sharing a roof with my ex for months now. I wasn’t gonna be broken by one or two of these attempts. Put simply, the reason I was watching an anime had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that I was so thrown for a loop that I couldn’t focus on the words I’d tried to read in my books.

*I can’t make Yume happy. Not just Yume, but anyone I date. I’m just not suited for romance.* It was fine back in middle school. I had been able to just throw myself into romance and not think about anything else due to my immaturity and rashness.

But now, I’d learned about something even more interesting than romance. I’d awakened to the fact that I could easily toss my emotions to the wayside. At the very least, if we hadn’t become stepsiblings, I wouldn’t have had to think so hard about things like the future. It was way too heavy a burden for a high schooler.

But we *were* family. I might have liked her, but I had no plans to stop being

her family. Being in a relationship would've meant disclosing our relationship to our parents, and if we ever broke up, it would be needlessly difficult. We didn't even have the option of being a divorced couple. We'd drag both Yuni-san and dad into our mess whether they wanted to be or not.

If things were going to end badly between us again, I needed to be prepared. I needed determination stronger than when one says their vows, or when one lays everything on the line and proposes. I needed the determination to share the rest of my life with her. Taking all that into account...I didn't feel like I could trust myself. I couldn't trust Mizuto Irido with Yume Irido.

"You awake?" I heard a knock at my door, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I hadn't even realized that I was already in the middle of the next episode. I paused the anime and turned around.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Can I come in?"

"Uh, it's night. Didn't we agree not to—"

"I'm coming in," she said, opening the door.

At this point, I was used to seeing her in these pajamas. It went without saying that she wasn't in the kind of nightwear that Isana would wear.

She walked in and shut the door behind her before sitting in my desk chair. The entire time, I cautiously followed her with my eyes.

"As I was saying, didn't we agree not to go to each other's room at night?"

"It's okay. I told mom I was going to your room." Then she showed me a few pieces of paper she was holding. "I told her that I'm gonna review the finals with you, and she was all like, 'Wow, it's so convenient to have a classmate as a sibling'!"

*How carefree of Yuni-san...* Maybe that just showed how much trust she had in me.

Yume flashed me her patented honor student smile. "Aren't you lucky? You get to review with the number one student in our grade."

“Yeah, yeah. So sorry that I’m only second in our grade.”

My placement was partially due to me helping Isana, but still, I thought I had studied a decent amount. Despite that, I ended up second again. I didn’t really have the same kind of fire to take the top spot as I had previously, but it did kinda annoy me when she acted superior to me like this.

“I got a question wrong in Modern Japanese,” she said. “You got a hundred, right? Can you tell me what I did wrong?”

“Aren’t *you* supposed to be teaching *me*, O holy top student?” I had a feeling she was plotting something, but I didn’t have any pretext to get her to leave my room without it becoming a whole thing. “Fine.”

“Yay,” she said softly before easily navigating past my towers of books to plop down on the bean bag chair that I’d gotten as a birthday present. Then, she moved to the edge of it and tapped the open space next to her. “Come on!”

“You...want me to sit there?”

“Well, unless you have your answer sheets handy, this’ll be faster.”

*She has a point... I don’t even know where they are.* “I can just stand behind you and look at your sheets.”

I still had no clue what her plan of attack here was, but I stood up and walked behind the huge bean bag chair that she was sitting in. But as I did...

“Hup!”

“Agh!”

As soon as I got close to her, she pulled me by the hand, forcing me onto the bean bag. I’d just barely been able to avoid crashing down onto her, but I was pretty much pressed right up next to her. She put her arm around my shoulder as if she’d caught me and flashed me a proud grin.

“Weakling.”

“Shut up...”

*It doesn’t look like she has any intention of letting me get away.* I gave up and straightened myself up. As I did, I unintentionally pressed against Yume’s boob



with my elbow.

I froze as the sensation struck me. *Sh-She's not wearing a bra?! Is it because she's in her pajamas? No, wait. Isana told me that there are bras for when you sleep. She's not as lazy as Isana, so I don't think she'd slack on doing that, but...*

"So yeah, it's this question..."

Yume didn't seem startled or even cognizant of me grazing her boob. She kept her shoulder glued to mine and began showing me the test question. I used every ounce of my will to focus solely on the test.

"Where did I go wrong with the modern translation of this?"

"Classic Japanese? Oh, yeah. This is probably..."

*I'm honestly impressed by how smoothly I'm talking despite my head being all messed up.* Even now, my eyes kept curiously flitting towards the swellings on her chest. The collar of her pajamas was slightly looser than it usually was. Because of that, I could easily see her cleavage by looking down into her pajama top. Yume's chest had kinda flown under the radar because of how ridiculously large Isana's was, but Yume's wasn't exactly small. She was in a completely different league than when we dated. It's the mystery of secondary sex characteristics.

According to the information I got when we went to buy swimsuits, she wore a C-or D-cup. No, wait. That might've been a little too small. In that case, she might've been...an E-cup?

When she leaned over, *they* moved slightly with her too. My eyes couldn't help but be drawn to her distinct cleavage being made naturally, without the support of a bra.

Then I remembered what Isana said about me not being able to be a nude model if Yume was present because it'd be too much stimulation. *No. I won't react. I definitely won't. Dammit... I hang out with someone who has even bigger boobs than this, so why am I bothered by Yume's?!*

"So that's it... How did you get the answer so easily?" she asked.

"Classical Japanese is just old Japanese. Can't you more or less just read it?"

“No. That’s why it’s on a test,” she said, looking at me through half-closed eyes. “Well, anyway, it’s your turn. Where’d you mess up? Math?”

“Yeah, actually... There was a question where I kept getting a weird number no matter how many times I redid my calculations.”

“Heh heh. That happens all the time with math tests. Sometimes you get crazy numbers for the denominator. Which question was it?” Yume asked, showing me her math problem sheet.

As she did, she leaned towards me, her boobs nearly pressing against my arm. Finding that unwise, I moved away a little while pointing to the question.

“Oh, this one?” she said, not sitting back up.

I didn’t move a muscle, staying in that position while listening to Yume’s explanation.

“And that’s that. Got it?”

Her breath tickled the nape of my neck. I persevered and was somehow able to regain my calmness.

“Yeah...”

“Mm. We got so few questions wrong that we can count them on our hands. This doesn’t make much of a review session does it?”

Yume finally sat back up and began flipping through her answer sheets. I heaved a sigh of relief, but it seemed that it was premature. Just as I did, Yume shot me a glance. *Crap.*

Though I’d somehow been able to keep my poker face this entire time, for just one instant, I’d let my guard down, and she’d seen everything.

The corners of Yume’s mouth curled. “Well then...” Out of nowhere, Yume positioned her lips right next to my ear. “I guess I’ll leave things at this for now,” she whispered, sending a sweet electricity across my brain.

Yume stood up with a grunt as if to leave those words with me as a parting gift. “Well,” she said, leaning over to meet my eyeline.



“Good night!” she said sweetly, posing in a way that was clearly meant to show off her cleavage.

Though her chest was unguarded, it was an incredibly sharp weapon. Yume lightly trotted out of my room, leaving behind both the warmth from where she’d been sitting and me, still unable to move. *I’ve been attacked. There’s no doubt about it.*

## Monopoly of Worldly Desires

### Yume Irido

I heaved a long sigh, put on my night bra, then crashed onto my bed and buried my face in my pillow. *That was so embarrassing!!!* Being in front of Mizuto braless and in my pajamas was already a lot, but being that close to him while in that state was in another league entirely! I’d felt as if fire was gonna burst out of my head every time my boobs touched him! *I’m so glad I practiced getting the right angle so he couldn’t see everything!*

More importantly, it was good that it was winter because my clothes were thicker. Thanks to that, even if I wasn’t wearing a bra, my...well, it was harder for certain things to poke out of my shirt. I wasn’t confident that I would’ve kept my calm if they had.

It was probably because I couldn’t clear my head of those kinds of thoughts that I got so flustered and panicky. *Back when we were helping Higashira-san, I feel like I remember Akatsuki-san saying something about suppressing one’s embarrassment when trying to hit on a guy.*

I was gradually raising my tolerance for this stuff. I needed to suppress my embarrassment. I was done acting like an honor student in front of Mizuto. I was going to be just a woman, trying to attract the man in front of her, and I wouldn’t stop until he pounced. It was working—it had to have been. If I kept it up, his calm face would be wrought with lust. Even right now, he must’ve been replaying images of my cleavage, the sensations from my boobs, or sound bites of what I’d said in his mind...

“Heh heh...”

*I'm gonna make all your worldly desires about me before the New Year's Eve Bell wipes them all away.*

## Sorry to Bother You Two

**Mizuto Irido**

I needed stronger mental fortitude than ever before. It was like Yume had become a different person entirely. She hadn't slammed on the brakes like I'd expected her to, acting as if she'd simply been toying with me. No, she had simply pushed further and further. So, in order to withstand her relentless attacks, I needed to travel deep into the Amazon—aka Kawanami's place.

For one, I needed to reduce the amount of time spent under the same roof as Yume, what with how she had been acting. I also wanted to get a hint on how to boost my mental fortitude. I mean, Kogure Kawanami's situation wasn't all that different from my own, right? In terms of living in close proximity to a girl, he was the veteran. Surely he could give me some sort of hint as to how he managed it.

"Hm? Oh, hey, 'Sup, Irido-kun?"

The person who greeted me at the front door to the Kawanami household was Akatsuki Minami, wearing shorts and a hoodie. I immediately checked to make sure I had the right apartment number.

"This *is* Kawanami's place...right?"

"Yep," she said, tilting her head.

Then from behind Minami-san, I saw a frantic Kawanami poke his head out. "Why are *you* answering the door?!"

"I always answer when you can't. Or what, were you gonna answer the door from the bathroom?"

"I told you to go home since Irido was comin' over, didn't I?!"

"It's my prerogative to chill wherever I feel like when we don't have school."

"It so isn't when the place you're chilling *isn't* your house!"

They were bickering like an old married couple. *They're just like a couple that's living together... No, that's exactly what they are.* I'd known that their relationship was on the mend, but they had apparently made a big jump when I wasn't looking.

"Well anyway, come on in, Irido-kun. We just ran outta snacks, though, so we don't have anything to put out for you."

"*You're* the one who scarfed 'em all down! Don't blame me if you put on weight!"

"Oh, so sorry, but I've got a high base metabolism!"

"Well... Sorry to bother you two, I guess," I said.

This was probably the first time in my life I'd said "Sorry to bother you" and meant it in a literal sense, not as a formality. As we walked to the living room, Minami-san grabbed a game console off of the table and lay down on the couch. She was totally acting like this was her own house. I'd never seen Yume relax like this, and she *actually* lived in our house.

"Is Minami-san...always here?" I asked Kawanami.

"Whenever she's not out hanging with friends, she's here. Making food's a pain in the ass for her, so she comes over to mooch off me instead."

"Hey, I make food for you too...every now and then, at least."

"If I'm not careful, she'll end up sleepin' here because it's too much trouble to go back home. Who the hell stays over at someone else's place when they live *right* next door?!"

They were more or less living together. That became even more true if I factored in the fact that both of their parents were barely ever home. It was essentially just the two of them living together.

"Can you even relax like this?" I asked Kawanami in a whisper.

"Hell no."

The two of us were whispering back and forth when Minami-san, who was still playing her game, called out to Kawanami. "Hey, why don't you at least give him some tea? There should be some in the refrigerator."

“Thanks for reminding me about something I was already gonna do. Irido...mind goin’ over to my room?” he asked as he disappeared into the kitchen.

“Sure,” I said before heading to his room for what felt like the millionth time.

As soon as I shut the door behind me, I heard voices from the living room.

“Oh, so you can’t relax?”

“Huh? You could hear us?!”

“How exactly can’t you relax? Like this?”

“Stop! The tea’s gonna—”

Curious about the commotion outside, I cracked the door open, and saw Minami-san with her arms wrapped around Kawanami’s neck. *Sorry to bother you two...* Once again, I meant this in a literal sense and from the bottom of my heart.

## A Guy’s Way to Hold Back

“Recently, it’s been a lot more comfortable to hang out with guys,” Kawanami said, gulping down his tea. “I just *know* if I share my problems with other people, they’re gonna tell me how lucky I am, but it’s seriously draining to be around a girl all the time. You know what I mean, right?”

“But you prefer it when I’m with Yume, don’t you?”

“Not *her*. I’m talkin’ about Higashira.”

“Oh, gotcha. Yeah, at first, it was kinda draining, but I’ve gotten used to her, so I’m pretty okay now.”

“That’s amazing... Did you train at a temple or something?”

*If I had, I wouldn’t exactly be coming to you for help, now would I?* “You have a more unique set of circumstances than I do. For Yume and me, our parents come home, so we have a certain set of rules we follow, and for Isana, we only ever hang out at school or walk home together.” *I’ll keep the fact that I’ve been going to her house frequently to myself.* “But the two of you are actually in the

same house without your parents around. Living like that as if it's normal is weird to me."

If they were together, it might have been a healthy dynamic, but from what I could glean from their words, they weren't. In that case, he had to have been holding his instincts back from being unwittingly stimulated.

"The trick is to keep your hands to yourself," Kawanami said in a meek tone. "If I let my guard down just even a little, the dam will burst, which is exactly what she wants."

"Personal experience?" I asked in a low voice.

Kawanami scratched his nose as if to not commit to an answer. *Looks like a yes. So there was a time where you were completely unrestrained?* I glanced at the door.

"In your case, at least, it shouldn't be a huge deal if you get back together," I said. "Minami-san's sorry for what she did back then, right?"

"Yeah, but it's not that simple." He made a frustrated face and looked at me, a serious air surrounding him. "Do you know there are guys in this world who, out of the blue, call the girl they broke up with just a few months ago? Why do you think they're calling them?"

"Because they broke up with their new girlfriend?"

"Exactly. It is one hundred percent about lust. I'll do whatever it takes not to become that kinda guy."

"I'm right there with you."

It's simple when you're dating for the first time because your motivation for being with the other person is because you like them. But it's more complicated if you're getting back together. How are you supposed to act when the two of you already broke up once? You don't want to go back for familiarity or comfort; that would make you no different from any old animal.

"But I guess it's best to disperse that lust in a healthy way, right?" Kawanami said.

"Don't look at me."



“You struggle with this topic, eh?”

“It’s weird to talk about it outright,” I countered.

Kawanami rested his head in his hand. “Isn’t it hard to live with a girl you’re not even dating—y’know, in a lot of different ways?”

“Yume doesn’t really pry into my business. But I can only imagine how bad Minami-san is.”

“Yeah... I can’t even count how many times she’s dug through my computer, even though I change the password on it.”

*What is she, a hacker? Who are you, Minami-san?* “Why do you even have those kinds of pictures when you’re not eighteen?”

“I don’t lie about my age or anything. There’s just a nice person who’s really passionate about distributing this stuff on LINE and Discord.” He looked triumphant as he said this.

*I guess it’s normal for high school guys to be like this.* I should’ve been the same, but for some reason, I couldn’t get into it. After all, the really passionate person on my end distributing that stuff was a girl.

“Now that I think about it, we’ve never talked about this kinda stuff,” Kawanami said. “Okay.” He grinned. “This is a great opportunity, so how about I share some stuff with you?”

I didn’t even have an opportunity to stop him before he stood and went to his desk. He pulled out a dictionary from the shelf and retrieved several folded pieces of papers that’d been sandwiched in between the pages.

“What are these?”

“Cutouts from magazines...well, copies of them.” He spread them out across the table, revealing pictures of pin-up girls in skimpy swimsuits. “This is my strategy—catch her attention with the computer and phone, but keep the real stuff in paper form. People tell me that physical porn is outdated, but just like with games and everything else, the meta’s always changing.”

“This is an incredibly stupid battle you’re fighting.”

“This one here’s a clipping from a manga magazine, so it’s on the more PG

side. I have the real good stuff in a much more difficult-to-find place. Oh, but I'm obviously not gonna go *that* far." An eerie smile crept across Kawanami's face. "So, which one do you like? This girl, right?" He picked out a pin-up girl with long black hair wearing a white bathing suit, posing in a way that emphasized her boobs. "She's the same kinda pure type as Irido-san."

Kawanami smiled at me expectantly, but I really couldn't care less. Yume was cuter. They weren't even in the same league.

"Aw come on man, give me *something*. Well I guess Higashira has a crazier body than most pin-up girls, so maybe this isn't enough stimulation for you."

"I don't really look at Isana like that."

"You might wanna be a gentleman, but lust is something you gotta tame. It's not something you shove into a corner. If you keep forcing yourself to look away from the truth, it'll really come back and bite you on the ass." *I'm not trying to forcefully suppress it or anything.* "Hm...then what about some 2D girls? Maybe a dirty isekai manga?"

Probably happy to be able to have this kinda dirty talk with me, Kawanami began opening up his collection for me to see. He began showing me picture after picture, recommending all kinds of definitely age-restricted dirty pictures. But no matter what he showed me, I had no reaction. Maybe it was because of that, but Kawanami began to gradually increase the intensity, going from barely SFW things to straight-up porn.

"Look! Check out this girl; she's totally got an alt account! She has the biggest tits out of any girl in my collection!"

"Whoa, her boobs are huge!"

*You did, in fact, go that far.* But also, I guess I'd pushed him this far because I was too stubborn to react to anything he showed me. Either way, as a result of both of us being so immersed in our own goals, we hadn't realized a certain presence behind us. Minami-san hadn't made a single sound when she entered.

Kawanami went pale as he saw her. "M-Mina..."

"Oh, so you're in a big boob mood today?" she said, smiling while quickly nuzzling against Kawanami. "That's okay, but where's that picture I gave you?"

I blinked. “The *what?*” *Not of her body, right?*

“It’s not what you’re thinking!” Kawanami blurted out. “Yeah, it’s a dirty pic, but she’s not in it! I swear! Don’t say things that can be misinterpreted!” he snapped at Minami-san.

*I’m relieved to hear that.* Minami-san giggled, bemused. “But y’know, Irido-kun, you’re wastin’ your time if you’re lookin’ for a replacement for Yume-chan.” She wrapped her arms around Kawanami, as if to catch him, and looked at me. “After all, Yume-chan in the flesh is a lot cuter and sexier than any picture you could get from a pin-up girl.” *I know that all too well.* “It’s like he’s purposely refusing the meal the girl’s setting before him, right, Kawanami?”

“No, this is more like if there’s a banquet in hell, you should be careful.”

“Hell? Don’t you mean heaven?” Then she nibbled on his ear.

“Aghhh!” Kawanami screamed and fell to the floor.

Minami-san then proceeded to straddle him. “But judging from how you look, Yume-chan’s probably doin’ somethin’ to you, so maybe you stop being so stubborn and just go with it? You know she’s not the type of girl who’s able to fool around, right?” *I do. That’s why it’s such a problem.* Minami-san turned around to look at me, a very frightening grin on her face. “If you do anything to hurt Yume-chan, I won’t forgive you, ’kay? Don’t forget it.”

“I’ll...make sure I don’t.”

Hearing my answer, Minami-san gathered up all the pictures Kawanami had laid out on the table. “You should make a ranking of the hottest pictures!” She couldn’t have said anything more frightening.

*Should I leave? I really feel like I’m bothering them now.* I got up and went towards the door, but just as I went to reach for the knob, I turned around.

“I’ll say this as a thanks for the warning, Minami-san.”

“Hm?”

“You’re interpreting what he’s saying wrong. He’s not comparing you to hell. He’s saying that *you’re* the feast.”

As soon as I said that, Kawanami’s face turned red.

“Oh?” The corner of Minami-san’s mouth curled as she looked down at Kawanami. “So you see me as a feast, huh?”

“No! No, that was just a slip of the tongue—”

“Later, Kawanami!”

“Irido! Don’t go!!!”

I prayed for them to live happily ever after as I left the Kawanami household.

## **Beasts Are Just Biding Their Time**

There was still time before sunset, so I decided to stop by Isana’s house. She was the type to get so engrossed in her work that she’d forget to sleep or eat. Since she’d avoided failing finals, there was nothing left holding her back, meaning she was most likely throwing herself into her art.

If her parents weren’t around, she might have forgotten to eat lunch. If that happened, it fell on me to get food in her stomach.

I sent her a message and got back a response saying that she’d leave the door unlocked so I could come inside. I felt like she shouldn’t have been so trusting like that, but I wasn’t too far away, so it would probably be okay.

After arriving at the familiar entrance to her home, I walked down the hallway to her room and knocked.

“Isana, I’m comin’ in.”

Since I’d walked in on an awkward situation before, I decided that this time, it’d be better to alert her to the fact that I was here.

As expected, she was hunched over her desk, peering down at her tablet. It almost felt like a spiritual experience as I watched her move her pen with such fervor across the screen.

Realizing that the day would be over by the time she looked up at me, I decided to call out to her again. “You eat lunch?”

“Mm... Not yet.”

*Thought as much. It’s already nighttime, though.* I didn’t hear anyone in the

living room, meaning that Natora-san was most likely not around. I'd gotten permission to use their kitchen before, so I decided to whip up something simple for her. But just as I began to leave, I realized something. Isana's hair was greasy.

I moved closer to her and pinched her hair. "When was the last time you took a bath?"

"Huh?" Isana's head flew up, and she began scratching her head as if she'd remembered something. "Now that I think about it, I didn't take one yesterday."

"Take a shower. I'll make you something in the meantime."

"I don't wanna—" She began to protest, but was promptly cut off by the rumbling of her stomach. She looked down at it. "I suppose I've no choice. I'll take a slight break." She stretched and then finally stood up.

The two of us left her room, with her going to the bath and me going to the dining room. I opened the fridge and found enough rice for one person, plus a few ingredients. *Guess fried rice'll do.* I poured oil into a pan and fried some egg and scallions, and then stir-fried them with the rice. Finally, I added soy sauce, salt, and pepper for flavor.

"Mizuto-kun..." Just as I plated the simple fried rice, I heard a pitiful moan from the bath. "Mizuto-kun! Please come over here..."

*What does she need?* I walked over to the bath and saw Isana poking her head out of the changing room.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I forgot to bring a change of clothes..." *Oh, yeah. She went in there empty-handed.* "I typically change in my room, so it completely slipped my mind."

*Wait, so does that mean she's completely naked right now? I can't tell because I can only really see her head and shoulders.* I suddenly remembered Yume from the other day, and immediately cut off that line of thinking.

"Okay, fine. So you want me to bring you clothes, right?"

"Yes, please..." she said.

For an instant, I took my eyes off of Isana, who seemed very apologetic, and froze as my gaze met a certain object. Inside the changing room, there was a sink, and of course, right above it, there was a mirror. Right now that mirror was reflecting the backside of a butt-naked girl. Her skin was slightly flushed from just getting out of the shower. Her sensual back, her butt, her thighs...



“Mizuto-kun?”

“R-Right. I’ll get them right now.”

I looked away in a panic and headed for Isana’s room. *Dammit. She really does not have her guard up at all. Maybe I should give her a stern talking-to sometime.* I went into Isana’s drawers and pulled out random clothes that looked like they could be worn around the house.

Usually, I might’ve helped get her underwear too, but in my current emotional state, that felt kind of dangerous. After handing her the clothes through the crack in the door, I went back to the living room. By the time I put the plate of fried rice on the table, she’d come in wearing a winter shirt and shorts, her hair damp.

“Oh! What a tantalizing fragrance!” Isana plopped herself down in front of the fried rice. “Down the hatch!” she said, taking a spoonful.

She must’ve been pretty hungry, because she wolfed it down at a surprising pace. Seeing her eat so quickly, I brought over a pitcher of filtered water from the fridge and poured her a glass of water. She promptly gulped it down.

“How’s drawing going?” I asked, sitting in front of her and resting my head in my hand.

“I’ve begun to desire a computer,” she said as she poured herself more water.

“Why?”

“Though I’ve been able to draw with my tablet, if I’m to utilize 3D technology, then it would behoove me to have a computer with high specifications. I would also have a larger screen to work with.”

“True...monitors are pretty big.”

I had my dad’s hand-me-down laptop, but it probably really wasn’t too different specs-wise from a tablet. Honestly, a high-spec desktop wasn’t something that a high schooler could afford.

“Getting a part-time job’s...probably out as an option,” I said. “It’d take away from your drawing time and would be like putting the cart before the horse. Maybe one day we can have you earn money on art sites that offer



subscriptions to artists.”

“A subscription service! I enjoy the sound of that!”

“I’m surprised. I didn’t think you were that interested in money.”

“Premium plans are modern day fukuro-toji! By overcoming the hurdle known as payment, you are allowed a peek at paradise! It’s so wonderful...”

*She definitely doesn’t know what fukuro-tojis were back then. She’s definitely been affected by internet veterans.*

“Let’s do that, Mizuto-kun! We can post nude versions of my images that way too!”

“Not when you’re still underage, idiot.”

“Rrrgh!” she pouted.

Her NSFW works would eventually see the light of day, but right now, she needed to focus on growing her following and improving her art. We could think of how to monetize her works when we got there.

“What is 3D usually used for?” I asked.

“Primarily backgrounds. You can add all kinds of 3D materials onto the canvas to help you think of a composition, or you can trace the materials. Depending on the person, you might even use it to create a 3D doll to block in poses.”

“I see... So if you use 3D, you won’t mess up the rough sketch no matter what.”

“At first, I may develop some strange habits when using it, but I believe it’d be nice if I got somewhat good at using it. It’d also negate the need to take pictures of myself for reference!”

“True, you do use your own body in the place of an art mannequin.”

“I take pictures of myself and trace them when I’m unable to think of characters to draw.”

“This is pretty interesting. It really feels like a modern way of doing art.”

“Heh heh. I’ve almost always been a digital art person.”

“So what do these tracings look like?”

“Huh?” Isana looked surprised for some reason.

“What’s wrong?”

“U-Uh... Do I need to show you them?”

“Huh? I mean, yeah, if that’s okay.” *I’m just personally curious.*

“Oh... Well, I suppose if it’s you, then...”

*Is she embarrassed about showing something that she didn’t draw as a picture?* She took out her phone, seemingly embarrassed. *I guess the files are shared between her phone and tablet.* She flicked through her phone and then stared at the screen for a bit, her face turning red.

“I-I will wash the dishes!”

In the next minute, she disappeared into the kitchen with her empty plate. *What’s gotten into her?* I was a little confused, but I decided to look at the phone she’d left behind. The screen dimmed, though, so I couldn’t tell what it was displaying.

Then, suddenly, the phone reacted to something. I wasn’t sure if it reacted to being moved or if it was bugging out. The only thing I was sure about was that the screen of her phone had brightened and was displaying an image.

Right before my very eyes was a picture of a familiar girl with a good body who was mostly naked. The face wasn’t drawn in, but as Kawanami had said, even pin-up girls didn’t have the kind of body that Isana did. Her bountiful but beautiful spheres on her chest, her tight waist, and her alluring butt were all things that I, the person who was closer to her than anyone, knew she possessed.

That’s why I immediately extended my hand and turned off the screen. Then I finally remembered something. Back when Isana began showing me her pictures for the first time, she’d told me not to look at anything weird on her tablet.

“How could I have guessed that she’d been drawing herself naked...”

I knew that nude sketches were effective tools. I really did. But she didn’t

have to *save* them. The illustration of her naked body was burned into my head and now threatened to fill in the blanks from when I'd seen her in the sink mirror. A 3D model was being drawn in my head—complete with both her front and backside.

I didn't see Isana in a dirty way, but it was hard not to think about the things I'd seen after laying eyes on them. What if this phone didn't have just sketches of her naked body but actual...

"Thank you very much! It was delicious!" Isana said.

"Yeah. No problem."

*I'll try not to think about this anymore.*

## **Lust**

I knew immediately that this was a dream.

*Mizuto-kun...*

Lying on the bed was a naked Isana. She was shaking her body suggestively, and her expression made it seem like she was begging for something. The blood in my body felt like it was pumping abnormally quickly. I couldn't think clearly.

I stepped forward, like a moth to flame. I knew I'd get burned if I touched it, but I couldn't help myself. I slowly touched the swellings on her chest that pointed at the ceiling.

*Mm. Mizuto...*

Immediately, the image changed to Yume. My fingers dug deeper into her body. The dam holding back my lust broke from that sensation. I drowned myself in the softness that accepted me—embraced them, felt them, rubbed against them, and melted into them.

But right before I was consumed by my lust, I woke up. I felt like there was fog as I looked up at the ceiling of my room. As I vacantly stared at it, I felt an extreme unpleasantness in my chest, overcome by the worst possible feeling. I almost resented the fact that I was born male.

“Oh, you’re awake?”

Horrible timing on her part, really. Nonetheless, she called out to me, right when I wanted to curse aloud.

“Mom’s making lunch, so she told me to wake you up.”

Yume’s face popped up between me and the ceiling. She was so beautiful, I wanted to stare at her forever. There was nothing in the world I was so fond of as that gorgeous face...yet my eyes went lower, down to the swellings on her chest.

“Okay...” I finally responded in a hoarse voice, covering my eyes with my arm.

“Can you eat after just waking up?” Yume asked, not knowing the violent thoughts going through my head.

“Whatever. Just leave, okay?” I said coldly.

I seriously hated this. I curled up in my bed as if to shut her out. As long as I was like this, nobody had to know about my dirty desires. Suddenly, Kawanami’s words played in my head. *Lust is meant to be tamed. Not suppressed.*

That was probably the requirement for someone to act like a human.

## Defense

### Yume Irido

With the closing ceremony not too far off, today was the last day for student council activities. It’d been two and a half months since I’d worked up my courage and dived headfirst into the student council. Every day had been a fresh, new experience, but those days were coming to an end. It was rather moving. *I really did my job on the student council.*

Just a year ago, I couldn’t have imagined myself in this situation, but now I felt like I was in a dream. Everything would be perfect if I could just get Mizuto to fall for me.

“We’re going to have a party with the girls on Christmas,” President Kurenai

declared at the conclusion of the student council meeting. “It’ll be at my house. All of you are to finish your boy-related activities by Christmas Eve.”

Christmas Eve was a day in Japan that was mostly celebrated by couples. My most recent memory of a couple’s Christmas was two years ago when Mizuto had secretly come over to my house. That was the happiest Christmas of my life. Or at least, it would’ve been, if we’d just been able to get past that big fight we had.

But I was going to exceed that Christmas this year. I even had a present planned for him, one that had my feelings crammed into it. If that wasn’t enough to tell him how I felt, then there was nothing left for me to do.

I’d made a promise to myself that I’d make Mizuto fall for me by the end of the year. If he didn’t ask me out, then I’d ask him. But I felt like the situation had changed. If I couldn’t get this done by the end of the year, there might not be a chance for me to do it ever. By next year, he might have changed paths and wouldn’t look at me anymore. That’s why I had to catch him now, no matter what. I was definitely not going to let him get away.

*So I’m going to continue my attacks on him today!* There were disadvantages to living together, but it was nice not having to use school as an excuse to see him. As long as I got the timing right, I could even use techniques to hit on him without anyone noticing. *I’m gonna make sure he notices how much I’m into him tonight too!*

“I’m home!” I said, standing in our house’s entrance.

Of course, there was no response. The lights weren’t even on in the living room. Mom and dad were still at work, but Mizuto seemed to have been out too. Ever since the start of the month, it’d felt like he wasn’t home as much.

As I went up the stairs, I called out that I was home once more again towards Mizuto’s door. To my surprise, I heard him welcome me home. *He’s home?* I opened the door a little and saw that he was doing some kind of work on his computer. *Does it have to do with Higashira-san?*

I temporarily returned to my room and changed out of my uniform. I’d decided to act defenseless today. I put on a loose shirt and culottes before leaving my room. Then, I went down to the first floor, boiled some water, and

made black tea. I placed the pot on a tray and brought it up to Mizuto's room.

I knocked on the door. "I made some tea. Want some?"

Of course, this was just a pretense to get into his room, which was my primary objective.

"Mm-hmm..."

It sounded like he'd given me the green light, meaning I'd succeeded in my infiltration. As I entered, he didn't turn around. He stayed focused on his laptop as he thought about something. I didn't want to bother him and make him think I was annoying. That'd screw everything up.

I put the tray next to his computer and poured each of us a cup. I brought my cup up to my mouth and blew on it before sitting on his bed. I stared at the back of his head as I sipped on the tea. I didn't try talking to him or touching him. Just being here had been my objective for today.

In other words, my strategy was to act like I was already his girlfriend. If I sat here as if it were perfectly natural, Mizuto was bound to get more curious about what I was doing. We'd been able to live together without crossing boundaries up until now, so this would be effective. If I tried to interact with him at the same personal distance that Higashira-san had, something like this wouldn't have affected him at all.

After I finished my cup of tea, I stood up and put it back on the tray. Then I casually looked through his shelves and naturally pulled a book out. With the book in hand, I lay down on his bed.

I'd chosen this specific outfit on purpose. The hem of the skirt made it seem like you could almost see underneath. Thus, it would be irresistible, since it would make me look defenseless. Or at least, that's what I'd read online. So with that, I lazed around on his bed while reading.

Neither of us said a word. Thinking back, I'd always fantasized about this kind of situation in middle school. Cuddling and flirting with each other twenty-four seven wasn't bad either, but I really liked this kind of happy silence, devoid of any kind of bitterness. The reason I was always so nervous about Mizuto and Higashira-san's relationship was because of the time that they spent like this,

which was quite a bit.

The period of time when couples were head over heels for each other wouldn't last forever. I knew from experience that humans adapted. With time, one could get used to even unexpected happiness, and its novelty would wear off.

But even then, I sorta wanted things to continue in spite of that. Even if it didn't make my heart beat faster or make it stop altogether, I really wanted the kind of relationship in which I still felt happy. I wanted what hadn't been possible for us back then. For that to happen, I needed to make his heart beat, even just a little bit faster.

Before I realized it, I had raised my knees. Mizuto was near my butt. If I made him turn around right now, he might've gotten a tiny glance of my butt under the hem of my skirt that'd been raised to my thighs.

Usually, I'd correct my posture in the interest of modesty as a girl, but today...I was going to purposely pretend like I didn't notice. It's okay for him to look. If I could capture his heart that way, then he could look as much as he wanted. *Sheesh...I've become so dirty. It's your fault, you know that? I'm going to need you to take responsi—*

"Hey," he called out to me.

I looked up, over my shoulder, to turn and look at Mizuto.

"I'm gonna put the pot and cups away. You're good on tea, right?"

"Oh. Yeah. I'm good..."

Mizuto picked up the tray and left the room. The door clicked shut behind him.

I tilted my head. *Huh? Did he even look at me?* His expression had been completely normal. It was completely different from when he'd given me the conditioner or when I'd worn clothes that showed off my cleavage. *Was this not enough stimulation?* Maybe just being a girl wasn't enough anymore since he hung out with Higashira-san so often.

*If that's how it is, then what if I do this?!* The door opened and Mizuto came

back. By the time he did, I'd curled up into a ball and was feigning sleep. I opened my eyes just a little to check how he was reacting.

"Sleep in your own room," he muttered, glancing at me.

*Good. Just as planned. Now, before he goes back to his desk, I have to...*  
"Mm..." I turned over and simultaneously put my hand under my shirt. Then, I pulled it up a little, as if I was too hot. *How's this for stimulation?! Had enough?! There's no way you can ignore me now!*

If I overdid it, it'd be *too* dirty. So I pulled my shirt up past my stomach and ribs to a spot where he could just barely not see my bra. *How's this?! Do you see how defenseless the girl you think doesn't like you is?!*

I once again slightly opened the eyes that I'd closed out of nervousness. *What kind of expression is my body making him wear?*

But all my eyes saw were his back. He wasn't even looking at me. His attention was fully on his computer.

I had no words. *Why? Things were going so well not too long ago.* Suddenly I remembered while looking at him what'd happened when we were trying to get him and Higashira-san together. I remembered just how coolheaded he'd been when he pointed out that he could see Higashira-san's panties.

It was the same kind of feeling—as if he'd turned off the switch that made him see me as a girl. Suddenly, Aso-senpai's words played in my head. *At that point, your only option is to take off their clothes and get on top of them.*

## Ace in the Hole

### Mizuto Irido

I'd succeeded at taming my lust. More precisely, I had learned to adapt. I'd practiced not letting my emotions show, even if I was turned on. My main method had been to search for images on the internet—just any pictures of women—and accustom my eyes to them. Of course, it's not like I stopped feeling excited. My aim was to get *used* to feeling excited, and become able to control myself.



I'd become desensitized to the stimulation, so much so that no matter how Yume tried to seduce me, I wouldn't fall prey to it. In fact, my training had been so successful that I hated myself for lusting over her despite knowing I would never act on it. Well, at least it had the side effect of making me really good at analyzing erotic art.

"Don't you think this scenario should have a little more humidity?" I suggested. "For example, you could maybe make it obvious by having steam rising from her sweat."

"Intriguing... You're asserting that her clothes being transparent from sweat is insufficient to convey that? I see you've been training."

Thanks to my hard work, even hanging around Isana didn't get my mind wandering.

Natora-san, meanwhile, was peeking in Isana's trash can without any reserve. "Can you two just screw already? Seriously, y'all are the worst."

She could say that all she wanted, but romantically involving yourself with the person you're managing is generally frowned upon. It's not exactly a good idea.

I finally learned to endure Yume's attacks, and now, the 24th of December was quickly approaching.

"Whoa, mom...what's this?" Yume curiously stared at the cake that Yuni-san had bought and unveiled at the table.

A devilish smile crept across Yuni-san's face. "It's a bit of a grown-up cake."

"What does that mean?"

"There's alcohol in it."

"Huh?" Yume took a step back from the yellow sponge cake out of surprise. "Is it okay for us to have it?"

"Yeah, of course! It's completely legal! There's not much alcohol in it anyway."

Doubtful, Yume searched on her phone and found that according to law, "alcohol" only counts as that which can be imbibed. Basically, alcohol in edible

forms such as cakes and chocolates are exempt from that law. *Kinda feels like a loophole.*

“It’s good to have new experiences. Just make sure you don’t eat too much of it. We have a regular cake too,” dad said.

“I guess a little won’t hurt...” Yume said, now convinced.

*Well, in general, isn’t it better to have your first experience with alcohol in the safety of your own home than at a college outing? No, it definitely is.*

“Okay, then, Merry Christmas!”

And just like that, Christmas Eve at the Irido household passed by without any problems.

“Is it okay for you to neglect Higashira-san?” Yuni-san asked partway through our celebration, still believing that Isana and I were dating.

But I was already used to this, so I just tried to play it off. “Yeah. She doesn’t have any concept of seasons or holidays.”

After dinner and cake, I moved from the dining table to the kotatsu, using the sound from the TV Christmas specials as background noise as I read my book. I wasn’t sure if it was because I’d eaten cake with alcohol in it, but my body felt warm and light—and I felt like I had loosened up a bit too, somehow. It was a good feeling, so I figured I’d soak it up while it lasted.

Yume seemed to be talking to dad and Yuni-san about something at the table. *How nice of the honor student to be a good girl, chatting with her family so often.* But after a little bit, dad went to clean the bath, and Yuni-san began washing dishes in the kitchen, leaving just me and Yume in the living room.

“How do you feel?” Yume asked, coming over and seating herself in the kotatsu.

I kept my guard up, but at least with Yuni-san right there in the kitchen, Yume couldn’t do anything too crazy. “What do you mean?”

“How do you feel after eating the cake? You ate a lot of it, didn’t you?”

“I don’t feel too different. Just a little warm.”

“Oh...”

For some reason, her words sounded kinda sluggish. As soon as I thought that, Yume fell to the side and cozied her head onto my lap like a cat.

“H-Hey!”

“Mm... Yeah, you really are warm.”

The kotatsu acted as a kind of wall, stopping Yuni-san from being able to see Yume on my lap. But Yume was acting too bold just because she was out of Yuni-san’s line of sight. *The usual her wouldn’t take a risk like this. What’s gotten into...*

“Heh heh heh...”

I realized that Yume’s face was red. *Is she...drunk from the cake?* Hadn’t she just been talking her head off with Yuni-san and dad? Yet when she’d sat down next to me, she’d seemed off, as though she’d let her guard down.

“Hey, don’t sleep here. Go to your room.”

“Mm... Don’t wanna. I’m gonna take a bath.”

“Okay, then take a bath. That’ll wake you up.”

“Hey, Mizuto...?”

“Hm?”

“Can we go to your room?” she asked in a tender, pleading tone. I froze at her words. “I...have something I wanna give you. A Christmas present... I can’t give it to you in front of our parents...”

*A Christmas present?* I couldn’t help but remember the feather necklace that she’d given me two years ago. “I didn’t get you anything.”

“It’s okay. I just want to give you one.” She gripped my pants as if she was trying to hold on to them. “That much is okay, right?”

*I can’t even say no. Flat out rejecting her isn’t something I can bring myself to do. That’s how much I like her.*

“Fine. But you have to take a bath and sober up first, okay?”

“Yeah... That would be better...”

At that exact moment, dad came back and announced that he'd finished cleaning the bath.

“I'm going to take a bath,” Yume announced, slowly getting up before quickly leaving the living room and heading up the stairs to get ready.

“Phew...”

*I didn't think she'd get drunk off of that amount of alcohol. Is she genetically a lightweight? But I don't think I've ever seen Yuni-san get wasted. Wait... I paused my thoughts. Is that what she's doing?*

## **I Like You Too Much to Confess**

In the end, Yume waited until everyone took a bath and Yuni-san and dad had gone to bed before coming to my room.

“Thanks...” she said as she entered my room in her pajamas.

I didn't see a trace of the tipsiness she'd displayed earlier. “Sobered up?”

“Yeah, thanks to you.”

“You were just acting, weren't you?” Yume froze up at my sudden accusation. “It's said that your tolerance for alcohol is determined by your genes. Based on how much Yuni-san was able to drink at my grandma's and how Keikoin-san didn't turn red even a little when he drank wine, there's no way you're a lightweight.”

Of course, I wasn't a hundred percent certain, but her reaction made me confident I was right. Yume had been pretending to be tipsy. Most likely, she'd done that so she could bring up the topic of the present.

“You really don't have a tactful bone in your body, do you?” she scoffed. “You're supposed to pretend like you didn't notice.”

“Sorry. I'm trying to make sure I don't get scammed in the future.” I sat on my bed and looked at Yume, who was sulking. “So? What's the present that you had to go through all that trouble to give me?” I asked, trying to be as curt as

possible. *I'm not going to let you create a mood.*

"Right..." Yume nodded, trotting over before plopping herself down next to me.

"Hey..."

I tried moving away, but Yume grabbed my arm. "No. Don't...run away." She looked up at me with her doe-like eyes, pleading with me. "It's taking a lot of courage to even do this."

She'd already won the battle, managing to create a mood despite my efforts. As frustrating as it was, I wasn't equipped with the same frivolousness that would enable me to make light of someone being serious.

Yume rummaged in her pocket and brought out a small gift box. "Open this..."

Taking it into my hands, I noticed that while initially it appeared to be wrapped in a ribbon it was actually just drawn to look that way. All I had to do was take the lid off to open it. No unwrapping necessary. I gulped, trying to wet my dry throat.

I could instinctively feel deep down inside that as soon as I opened this, something would change. I couldn't help but be a little freaked out. I squeezed my hand to stop myself from shaking. I didn't have a choice, so I slowly opened the box.

"Ah..."

My gut had been right. Inside the box was a silver object with a wing design on it. It was a ring.

"Do you remember how I gave you a feather necklace two years ago?" Yume asked as I froze up. "I was thinking of one-upping that, so I got a wing. And—" The springs in my bed softly creaked. "It's actually a pair set." There was a determination in her voice. "If you put the two wings together, it becomes one. That's...how it is."

I suddenly remembered the Hiyoku no Tori—a pair of birds that both only had one wing, so when they were together, they could fly through the sky. It was supposed to represent a deep bond between a man and a woman.

“I didn’t buy the other one. I...want you to get it...as a present for me.”

*This... This is so unfair. You really won’t say it, will you? You’re really going to make me do it. You want me to make the decision.* She had been practically screaming her feelings in every way except using her words. *Don’t... Don’t you see how in pain I am? You can’t be this direct. It’s not fair. I want to live like you and be true to my feelings, but I can’t.*

“I...” My throat was so dry, I started and stopped so many times before I could get the words out. It was almost like my mouth was acting as a dam, keeping my words inside me. “I can’t take this...” I quietly shut the box. “I... I can’t be your wings.”

I felt so, so heartbroken. But it was the truth. Both of us knew better than anyone else. One of us asking the other out was just signaling the beginning of the end. No matter how much I liked her, these feelings would someday fade, become an annoyance to me, and then in the end, I’d only think of myself. If we broke up again, this time, we’d be involving our parents. *I know how much that would hurt you. You changed your last name for your mom’s sake. You moved into a house with your ex for her. You wanted to protect her idea of a family so badly. I absolutely do not want to see you break because of that.*

It would’ve been better if I’d never cared about her. Without that chance meeting at the middle school library, we wouldn’t have needed to talk to each other like we were friends after becoming stepsiblings, and I would’ve been ignorant of who she was and how I would feel about her. I probably wouldn’t have overthought things and would have been true to my desires.

*I like you too much to throw all these feelings I have for you at you. I like you too much to confess. So that’s why—*

“No.” Her voice rang in my ears, cutting off my thoughts.

In the next moment, I felt my body being pushed down with great force, and I found myself pinned down on my bed. Yume was straddling me like she was a chain or a weight.

“I told you...I definitely won’t let you run away.”

Yume used both of her legs to hold my arms in place, immobilizing my upper

body. Then she put her hand at the hem of her nightshirt.

“Wh-What are you do—”

“Shh! Be quiet. Our parents will hear.”

Guys tend to be stronger than girls, but leg strength generally wins out over arm strength. All I could do was watch as Yume pulled up her shirt all at once. Her chest supported by a light pink bra entered my eyes as if it'd been thrust into them. The bra had a complex lace design and decorated her white peach-color skin.

All I could do was gulp and wholeheartedly stare at her boobs that threatened to spill out, which rose and fell with each breath she took. Yume didn't stop there. She took her other hand and put it on the elastic band around her pants and pulled it down. She was wearing a pair of ribbon-adorned panties the same color as her bra. They were unreliably covering an area obviously differently shaped than a guy's.





I felt like my head was spinning. I'd seen her in a bath towel, and I'd seen her bra before, but this was my first time seeing her up close in her underwear. I hadn't stumbled into this situation. She'd done this on purpose with a clear intent. Nothing I'd seen in all the pictures I'd searched online even came close to this.

"Look at me..."

Yume was red all the way to her ears. But even so, she didn't take her eyes off of me. "I've gotten a lot bigger than I was in middle school, right? Doesn't it...turn you on?" She gripped my shoulders as if to trap me. "No, I know... You're turned on by me. I already saw...in the bath." She leaned over me, her long hair flowing around my face, trapping it. "That's why...you can't run away. You can't fool me. No matter how cool you play it...you can't fool me." She began gently caressing my face. "Or...should I take off my bra too?"

She didn't wait for me to answer. She immediately wrapped one of her arms behind her back. Right then, I was finally able to free my right hand and grabbed the band at the back of her bra.

"Please...stop," I said, squeezing out these words.

"Why?"

"I...I hate this! I don't want to see you as just a target for my lust!" Yume's eyes slightly widened and she softly gasped. "Why can't you get it through your head?! I've thought about this so much *all* this time, so why haven't you?!" I wanted to embrace her. I wanted to wrap my arms tightly around her porcelain shoulders and her tight waist. But lust didn't lead to any kind of future. "Can you just think a little?! How long are you gonna keep dreaming?! Do you remember how badly things ended in middle school?! How can you stay so ignorant?!" *It's not fair. It's so unfair! Why are you the only one who can think about nothing but the romance right in front of you?* "My head's been a complete mess this entire time! I want to know what the right thing to do is, but I haven't found even a hint of the answer! If I knew things were gonna be like this, then—" *If I did, then...* "I wish we'd never become family!"

*That's right. It's all because of that.* If that hadn't happened, I'm sure I would've said yes to Isana and would've been thinking of nothing but ways to

make her an even bigger artist. I wouldn't have been so pent-up—I would've had an appropriate outlet for my lust while being able to single-mindedly chase after what I wanted to do like a high schooler should be.

I didn't want this burden of a family or life. I was just a high schooler. I was only sixteen years old. I just happened to live in a unique environment. This was all too heavy for me.

"Sorry..." Yume said softly. It was only then that I realized that I'd said what I shouldn't have. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry I wasn't thinking enough... I-It's just that, I... I didn't want you to leave me." *No. No, no, no. I didn't want to make you cry!* "Sorry..." She got off of me and fixed her clothes. "I'm... I'm so sorry," she muttered, quietly running out of my room.

I couldn't even take a single step. All I could do was stare blankly at the ceiling light. *Ah... Ah... Rrrrgh!* I grunted as I hit the bed with all the strength I could muster. There was nothing I could do.

# Chapter 4: End of Olden Days

## Determination and Courage

### Tohdo Hoshibe

Up until recently, I never cared about Christmas. It was a holiday for a religion I had no affiliation with—a celebration for some guy I had no ties to—so of course I didn't. To me, it was a weird day when couples would get all lovey-dovey and single people would be strangely loud. That's all it ever was.

Just a month ago, I never would've expected that I'd be walking through the town with my girlfriend on Christmas. Oh, how one's perspective can change. Last year, I couldn't have cared less about Christmas, but this year, it felt like it was a holiday specifically for us.

"Phew... It's already pitch-black out, huh?" Aisa said, looking up at the sky.

We were already well into winter, so the sky had darkened some time ago. But in the midst of looking at the Christmas lights and eating, we'd never had a chance to look up at the sky. That's how easily Aisa Aso drew my eyes to her.

The time we were spending together was coming to an end for today. It was getting late, so I needed to get her back home. But even though I knew that in my head, I didn't put it into words.

*Do I want to stay with her that badly? Wow, look at me. I'm such a big guy and yet here we are. The disparity is palpable.* Even if she were to start pouting, there wasn't much left for us to do. We'd already gone through all the Christmassy things to do. The only thing left was...

"Hey, Senpai?" Aisa tugged a little on my hand as she held it. "There's somewhere...I want to go."

*Right now?* I turned to ask her this out loud, but as I did, I saw her covering her mouth with her scarf, her face red. From her expression, I immediately got what she was trying to say. Her face was filled with determination and courage.

“Will you...let me have a do-over?”

## Girls' Christmas Party

### Yume Irido

As expected, President Kurenai's house was as luxurious as the houses you saw on TV. There were three floors and a three-car garage.

“It's because this is my parent's home. It's not something I deserve praise for, but...fortunately, the living room is spacious.”

I couldn't even guess the square footage of the living room. I'd lived most of my life in an apartment, so when I moved into the Irido household, it had been a bit of a culture shock. But this was on an entirely different level.

It was a normal house in the sense that it had a living room, a dining room, and a kitchen, but each was about twice the size of what was at the Irido household. You could comfortably fit twenty people in here for a party.

It made sense that President Kurenai had said that we were welcome to bring friends.

“Aha ha ha! It's so frickin' big!”

“This is America. We're in America!”

“What the heck do you think America is like?”

Akatsuki-san jumped from place to place, Maki-san was astonished, and Nasuka-san calmly quipped at her. I'd invited them partially because I'd had to prioritize the student council until now. I'd worried that bringing them here might not have been okay, but it seemed like I hadn't had to worry about that at all.

Just as Maki-san had said, the living room was spacious, just like in American houses, and in it were some girls that were probably friends of President Kurenai and Aso-senpai. I was a little surprised to find out that Aso-senpai actually had girlfriends, but the bigger surprise came from the number of friends that President Kurenai had. *Six? Seven? Eight?* There were some who were high schoolers and others who were in college, and someone who looked

like an adult. There was even a girl who looked like a foreigner. But among all of them was a small girl who looked out of place.

“Good evening, Asuhain-san.”

“Oh, Irido-san. Hello.” Asuhain-san looked at me, a slightly relieved expression spreading across her face.

She must’ve not been able to bring herself to have President Kurenai pay her attention in the middle of her going around and greeting her friends. Asuhain-san didn’t know anyone else here, so she must’ve felt lonely. At the very least she was the same age as my friends and I, and she’d met Akatsuki-san once, so I hoped she felt somewhat comfortable with her.

“Where’s Aso-senpai? I don’t see her,” I asked.

“Apparently, she overslept. She’s not sure if she’ll make it in time or not.”

“She overslept?” *What time did she go to bed? It’s already night.*

“Oh, right. Asuhain-san, let me introduce you.” I proceeded to introduce Maki-san and Nasuka-san.

“Is there something about you that attracts people with big racks, Irido-san?” Maki-san asked, staring at Asuhain-san’s chest.

Though she’d said this, I knew that both Maki-san and Nasuka-san were good with people, so even if Asuhain-san was looking frustrated, I was sure they’d get along. Just as Asuhain-san seemed to be getting involved in their conversation, my chest suddenly felt heavy.

*“Can you just think a little?!”*

It was the first time I’d ever seen Mizuto get so angry. He must’ve felt so weak and vulnerable. In my mind, he was the ideal boyfriend, my mortal enemy, and a reliable family member. I’d never seen him scream like a kid before.

That’s how much it’d been weighing on his mind. He’d been upset enough to rip off the poker face he was so good at maintaining. He couldn’t hold himself back anymore. I...hadn’t been thinking. It was like I was a middle schooler—I wanted a romance like the people around me and had gotten all hyped up by that dreamlike relationship.

Mizuto had been right. It would've been better if we'd never become a family. We could've had a normal romantic relationship as high schoolers. I'd unconsciously been looking away from the reality of things. But somewhere in my heart, I'd known it was true. Otherwise I wouldn't have thought about just staying like this with him a little longer. *I'm an emotionally immature coward.*

Despite knowing that, I didn't think about how to make our relationship work. I made Mizuto think about it. More than procrastinating...pushing it all onto him was the most cowardly thing to do.

"Agh! Sorry I'm late!"

We were getting ready to kick the party off when Aso-senpai finally appeared. But...something was off about her voice.

"Senpai," I called out as I moved closer to her. "Are you okay? Your voice seems kinda hoarse."

"Oh, Yumechi... Well, this is... Don't worry about it. I kinda just went a little too hard."

*Was she singing karaoke all night or something?*

Then, President Kurenai came out from her group of friends. "Hey, Aisa. I hear that you were passed out until just a little while ago. I've heard of people sleeping through the new year, but this is the first time I've heard of someone sleeping through Christmas."

"Yeah, I couldn't really sleep last night... I took a nap, and when I finally woke up, it was this late..."

"Oh?" Before I knew it, Akatsuki-san had appeared behind me wearing a vulgar grin, her eyes sparkling. "You couldn't really *sleep* last night? On Christmas Eve? Hm..."

*Huh? No way.* Both President Kurenai and I looked at Aso-senpai at the same time.

"Wh-What? Jeez, guys..." Aso-senpai took a step back as if she was being overwhelmed by us.

As she did, she held down her blouse and covered her neck. She must've

thought she was being discreet, but neither President Kurenai nor I were going to let that go.

President Kurenai slightly grinned. “Looks like you had a good time last night, huh?”

“W-Well, yeah. I guess.” Aso-senpai seemed to have given up and was blushing sheepishly. And then... “It was a whole thing! I never knew that love hotels got that crowded on Christmas Eve! But it was so fun! They had things that aren’t at regular hotels! I think you should all go to one at least once in your lives!”

Thus began the turbulent one-upping. President Kurenai poked her in the forehead to stop her, and I forced a smile to play it off. Even if she’d climbed the staircase to adulthood, Aso-senpai was still the same. *But wow, last night, huh...?*

While I was showing Mizuto my underwear, Aso-senpai was with Hoshibe-senpai until her voice went hoarse. *Oh my god. Oh my god!* I was filled with both embarrassment and bitterness. Then I felt a kickback, sending me into a depression. *Why can everything go so well for her and not for me?*

“Yumechi? Earth to Yumechi.” Suddenly I came to and saw Aso-senpai’s cute face looking at me. I recoiled in surprise. “You okay? You don’t look too happy.”

“Well...”

I hadn’t said anything, but Aso-senpai saw right through me. She moved next to me and whispered in my ear.

“Did the thing we talked about earlier not work out?”

“Yeah...” I nodded hesitantly.

“Oh...” Aso-senpai sighed. “But y’know, it’s gonna be okay!” she said in a cheerful tone, squeezing my shoulders.

“Just because seduction didn’t work once or twice doesn’t mean it’s the end of the world! Just look at that girl prodigy! How many times do you think she’s been turned down by Joe-kun?”

I paused before answering. “True...”

“See?!”

“I could’ve sworn I overheard a really unpleasant conversation...” President Kurenai said, turning towards us while she was talking to other friends.

“Crap,” Aso-senpai whispered. “Just your imagination!” she chirped, trying to allay President Kurenai’s suspicions. “I mean, it took me over a year to ask Senpai out, and then he turned me down. And then I got him to change his mind, and then finally yesterday... Yesterday... Heh heh...”

Her laugh reminded me of Higashira-san’s otaku laugh. All I could do was weakly smile. “Yesterday sounds like it was a lot of fun.”

“Yeah. It was!” I could’ve sworn that her eyes turned into hearts. Her head was probably filled with nothing but thoughts of Hoshibe-senpai. Suddenly, she gasped. “W-Well, anyway, you shouldn’t worry too much. Just keep goin’ on the offense and eventually, he’ll wanna do it!”

“But...”

*He probably wants to, but with the way we are now, we don’t have the right to act on it. We don’t have the determination for what door that opens.*

“Well, I don’t really know what the problem is in your case, but...” Aso-senpai gripped my shoulders as if she was trying to pour energy into them. “If you have a good long talk with him and try to really understand him, it’ll all work out in the end. That’s what you told me in Kobe, isn’t it?”

“Oh...”

*That’s right. Why didn’t I remember that? When I saw Aso-senpai crying after being turned down, I thought that Hoshibe-senpai should have returned her seriousness with his own. And then, she faced Hoshibe-senpai seriously and Hoshibe-senpai reciprocated it with his own seriousness. Seeing that gave me courage, making me go through with what I was doing now. I need to face what Mizuto is seriously thinking with my own seriousness too.*

“I think it’s about time to kick everything off. Raise your glasses,” President Kurenai said, holding a nonalcoholic sparkling wine. “Here’s to this holy night and Aisa Aso, who became a woman. Cheers!”



“Cheers!” said the rest.

“Hey! That’s so embarrassing, Suzurin!!!”

Most likely, what I needed to become wasn’t a woman. I needed to become a person who could face Mizuto Irido more than anyone else.

## How to Win at the Game

### Mizuto Irido

“Earth to Irido. You alive?” Kawanami called out to me in an unconcerned tone when he came back, finding me face down on the ground. I gently raised my hand in response as Kawanami began rummaging through a plastic bag on the table. “I kinda just bought whatever. What’re you feelin’ more, a karaage bento or a mapo tofu rice bowl?”

“The mapo...”

“You like spicy food? That’s a surprise. Here,” he said, placing the warmed-up mapo tofu rice bowl next to me.

I slowly got up and took out the tray that the mapo tofu had been left on and then carefully poured it over the rice in the bowl underneath, dyeing it red. As I did, Kawanami unwrapped his bento and broke apart his disposable chopsticks.

“Havin’ convenience store food on Christmas isn’t too bad every now and then, right? I was wonderin’ why you asked if you could stay over here outta the blue, but...” Just like he said, I was currently in Kawanami’s room. After waking up from a short nap, I’d messaged him and come over here to run away from my problems. “Well, whatever. Feel free to hide out here as long as you want. Everyone has times they wanna run away from girls.”

“Thanks...”

“Wow, not even denying it.”

Kawanami didn’t try to pry any information out of me. He wasn’t acting like his usual voyeuristic self, perhaps because he was currently experiencing some difficulties with a girl as well. Our predicaments were similar but had a key difference: I wasn’t averse to being touched by the girl in my scenario. If

anything, being touched by Yume felt really pleasant—too pleasant, to the point that I felt like I was going to be swept away. I hated that.

I was scared that if she came at me like that again, I might give into temptation, and when I did, I'd end up in a situation I wouldn't be able to take back. I was so afraid. I knew that running away like this wouldn't solve anything, but regardless... Eating this spicy junk food without drinking water was almost like a way of punishing myself.

At the same time, now that I had some food in my stomach, I was starting to calm down, meaning I could objectively analyze myself. *It's like I'm acting as though this doesn't involve me.* Even in this situation, it was like I was trying to see this through a third-person perspective.

"If you've recovered enough to sit up, let's play one-on-one."

After finishing eating and cleaning up, Kawanami sat in front of the TV and passed me a controller.

After he shoved it in my hands, I slowly responded. "I...don't really play games."

"You'll get used to it—everybody does. Even on our Kobe trip, I was thinkin' about how for a person who doesn't play games a lot, you had a good sense of things," Kawanami said as he picked up his controller and booted up the game console.

*A game...huh? Now that I think about it, I don't know what kind of game Keikoin-san is working on.* Kawanami picked out a random game from the menu screen and told me that I should get used to controlling my character first. With that, he opened up the training mode, and I tried moving the analog sticks and pressing the buttons. *So this is how you jump, and this is how you attack...*

"You really are smart. Hard to believe you've barely held a controller before."

"Does being smart have anything to do with being good at games?"

"It does. It's pretty common for pros to have had really good grades in school. After all, people who are smart are good at figuring out how to get good at games. They instinctively know the right answers."

“Are you saying that they know how to think?”

“Exactly. Of course, precision and good reaction times are important, but that’s just enough to beat your friends. If you wanna be the best in the country or even the world, you gotta know how to think, or else you won’t get far. Did you know that in the competitive FPS scene they have dedicated analysts who analyze enemy teams?”

“Huh... That makes sense. After all, there’s a certain predictability to games since there’s a limit to what can be done in them.”

“Hm? Whaddya mean?”

“So for example, this character throws out a punch at a predetermined speed. No matter how much you work at it, they’ll always throw out the punch at the same speed. In real life, the harder you work, the faster you might be able to throw out that punch, but you can’t do that in games. Games are much more limited in terms of physical aspects, so all that’s left is to use your brain to gain an advantage.”

“Yeah, exactly! When I said you’re smart, I meant how you could understand all that in an instant.”

*If I really am smart, I should’ve been able to come up with an answer to my Yume situation in an instant too.* Well, whatever. Now that I had the basic controls down, I began fighting Kawanami. Of course, he went easy on me, but the matches weren’t even close. Once I got used to the controls, things became more competitive.

“What?! You’re using that move *now*?!” Kawanami exclaimed.

“I figured I’d counter you.”

“Seriously? It’s been like two hours and you can already read me like that?!”

Punches couldn’t suddenly get faster. In that case, all I had to do was make sure that I stopped my opponent from being able to punch. *This really is an intelligence-based sport.*

“All right, I’m switching to my main. I ain’t about to lose to a beginner.”

I thought I’d be able to put up a good fight, but since Kawanami had childishly

switched to his usual character, he was landing strings of combos on me, absolutely destroying me. *I see. So deeper knowledge of the game is needed.*

“Hold on. Let me look something up,” I said.

“You’re really gettin’ into it. You might be the first person I’ve seen lookin’ up a wiki in the middle of playing a game at their friend’s house.”

And that’s how I idly spent my time at Kawanami’s place—beating each other up on the TV screen. I felt like I’d gotten into a lot of new things recently. First, there was managing Isana as an artist, and now I was playing games with Kawanami. Up until now, I’d been spending my time in the same way, day after day—I’d go to school, read books, and then sleep. There was a small bit of time when I had a girlfriend, but even the way I spent my time with her hadn’t been too different than if I’d spent it alone. Maybe, deep down, I felt like I had to start changing things up. It’s not like I was doing it to fit in with others, like Yume had. I didn’t see that as personal growth; it was more like falling in line with peer pressure, conveniently fitting oneself into society.

No, the reason I was changing was different from Yume’s. I didn’t want to be recognized by those around me, nor did I want to fit in with society. I wanted to find what I’d had inside me this entire time and change the person I was to accept myself. I was changing myself for my own sake.

I suppose I could be described as an empty egotist. I barely had a personality, yet I fixated on myself. That’s why if I was ever forced into a situation where I had to choose between myself or Yume, I’d never choose to sacrifice myself. From the start, that was my only option, and I kept coming back to it.

Kawanami had mentioned that I knew how to think. *I see. I’ve taken the shortest route, cutting out anything unnecessary, not even realizing who I left behind.* Ultimately, all that had gotten me was to a dead end faster. *What a joke.*

“Games are really nice,” Kawanami said out of the blue in the midst of our controllers clacking. “No matter how untalkative your opponent is, you feel like you get closer to them as you play. There are people who get surprisingly competitive and others who are complete muscle-brains. You might not use those words to describe them normally, but that side of them’s deeply steeped

in their playstyle. It can take forever to learn that side of them if you're just talkin'."

"True..."

"People who have a bad personality have a bad personality in the game too. They laugh their heads off as they pick off noobs, and only ever derive joy from doing that. Games really bring out the true nature of people."

"So what? You're saying my true nature's showing right now?"

"Well, in your case, you're...serious."

"Wow, that's so specific," I said with a twinge of sarcasm.

"It is. Even if you're in an advantageous situation, you won't act like you already have it in the bag—you stay serious until the end. Until you know how your opponent's gonna react, you patiently observe them and keep your distance relative to them in mind. That tactic means you respect your opponents. That's a virtue. You'd get it if you played online for a bit. There are plenty of guys who BM and curse at their opponents." Kawanami paused before continuing. "Plus, you're really formal towards games. You're actually trying to take the time to learn how to play the game step-by-step while always calmly evaluating your own skill." I fell silent. It felt as if he'd seen through me. Had he really figured me out just by playing against me? "I bet you're like this with your real-life relationships too. You respect others and check yourself in relation to them. I think it's a very sincere and serious way to live life, to the point that I think it's really hard to live like that."

"Don't start giving me life advice out of the blue. We're just playing a game here."

"Then you should have a proper chat." Kawanami dodged my attack and countered with a powerful one of his own. "You're not gonna be able to understand Irido-san from a game."

I ran out of stocks, ending the match. Kawanami looked at me and flashed a proud smile. Seeing this, I couldn't help but sigh.

"Don't brag after beating a beginner. It's bad manners."

“I don’t consider you a beginner.”

*He’s right. I’m not. I’ve already gone through this once.* Back then, I couldn’t do anything and just passed the days by. Was I really going to let this go the same way? Was I going to repeat the same stupid mistakes I had made in middle school and then look back at this time and reminisce about how this had all been a folly of youth? How stupid. Seriously. So stupid.

“Looks like you’ve gotten used to it, Irido. You get what you need to do to win at the game now, right?”

*“Yeah...” I’m glad I read books. The words passed down across generations are important.* ““If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles,”” I quoted.

## The Feeling of Wanting Something

### Yume Irido

Even after I got back from the Christmas party, Mizuto still hadn’t gotten home. According to mom: “Oh, he’s staying at a friend’s house. Maybe it’s Higashira-san’s house, hee hee!” she giggled excitedly.

I knew there was no chance of that, though. Mizuto always told me when he went to Higashira-san’s house. I wasn’t sure exactly why he did that, but after what happened yesterday, I kinda had an idea. Him reporting to me was a result of him being stuck between a rock and a hard place.

What was it about working with her that drew him so much into it that he couldn’t resist? Why did he have to turn his back on me? I needed to know. Until I did, I couldn’t make any plans. So, I sent Higashira-san a message.

**Yume:** Can I come over tomorrow?

“Thanks for waiting!” Higashira-san said, poking her messy head of hair out from behind the door, dressed in worn-out sweats.

I was taken aback by how lacking in femininity she was. The outfits she’d wear

to our house were already eyebrow-raising, but until this moment I'd never realized that, in her own way, that had been her way of putting in effort.

"Higashira-san...did you just wake up?"

"Mmm no. I arose many hours ago. I've simply found it too troublesome to change... I apologize for greeting you with this appearance."

"No, it's okay... I'm the one who asked to come over out of the blue."

Higashira-san let me in and led me down the hallway to a door not too far away, which was apparently her room.

"Here we are. As I mentioned over LINE, I'm unable to pay you too much attention due to my work..."

"You're that busy?"

"I've a deadline to meet."

"A deadline?"

"Yes, one set by Mizuto-kun. Though we just posted an illustration for Christmas, he wants me to make one for New Year's as well. He's very spartan in his methods."

*Mizuto really is trying to manage her.* He'd mentioned it, but it didn't feel real until hearing it come from her own mouth.

"Well, thanks for having me..."

Higashira-san's room could have given Mizuto's a run for its money in terms of messiness. Unlike in his room, her novels seemed to be stuffed into her bookcases, but in place of the books that Mizuto's room's floor was littered with, she had thick books I'd never seen before and a lot of different kinds of magazines across her floor and around her desk.

Higashira-san sat in her chair and picked up her stylus. I found myself standing behind her, looking at her as she worked hunched over her tablet.

"You mentioned a New Year's illustration, but there's still about a week until then. Does drawing take that much time?"

"Oh. The illustration I'm currently working on isn't for the new year."

“Huh?”

Higashira-san continued her work without skipping a beat.

“There was something I wanted to draw before that, so I wanted to get it done before I began work on the New Year’s illustration. But then my schedule got too full.” Higashira-san chuckled sheepishly.

*She has a drawing due but is working on another one on top of that? Without being asked to? If she wants to draw two pictures in a week, then she simply needs to draw one in about three days.*

“Are illustrations really that easy to finish quickly?”

“I can complete a rough sketch in about an hour, but these need to be fully colored. When school was in session, it was quite difficult to complete them in a week’s time.”

“So why would you force yourself to draw another illustration on top of that if it’s so exhausting?”

“Huh? Is there another choice? I merely wish to draw,” she said matter-of-factly, as if it were common sense.

Honestly, though, it was in character for her. Even when I first met her, I could tell she was different from other people. The common sense she had was different from a normal person’s. Thinking about it, her unique way of thinking easily made her a type of genius.

Mizuto, being the closest one to her, had been able to discern that first. It became all too obvious now that I had given it some thought. I looked over to the mountain of thick books around her desk. I crouched down and looked at their covers.

“Oh, those books are reference materials,” Higashira-san explained before I asked. “They come in handy when I need to draw backgrounds or clothes. Pictures on the internet are convenient, but the ones you can get from specialty books are completely different in quality.”

“Did you buy them? Is your allowance enough to cover all of them?”

“Oh, no. Mizuto-kun bought most of them for me.”



“Huh?”

“I believed that simple image searches would suffice; however, he insisted that books were the best method by which to acquire knowledge. He promised to reward me if I finished my illustration by the agreed-upon deadline, but that ended up being all these books.”

I picked up the one on the top and looked at the price on the back. It was more than two thousand yen. Reading was a much cheaper hobby than buying games or going out with friends, and it was even cheaper if you bought secondhand books. But still, with the number of books that Mizuto bought, he didn't have much money left over from his allowance. It was possible that he'd used some of the money he'd saved up from his New Year's gifts, but still...was he really doing all of this just for the sake of Higashira-san's growth?

I stood up again and peeked at Higashira-san's tablet from over her shoulder. Was this called a...clean copy? Above the faint lines of the rough sketch were clear, bold lines. Before my very eyes, a female character's outline was becoming clear. Higashira-san was really good. Even someone like me who was entirely unfamiliar with the world of art could tell. *Would I understand a little more if I saw a finished product?* I looked around the room, but didn't see any completed works anywhere.

“Hey, Higashira-san?”

“Yes?”

“You post your images online, right? Could you tell me your handle?”

“Uh...” She really didn't look like she wanted to.

“No?”

“Well, I suppose it's okay, but...it's incredibly embarrassing to inform my real-life friends of my handle.”

“I've only really used social media or LINE, so I don't really understand.”

“So you haven't been tainted by the internet yet. How fortunate...”

“So, is that still a no?”

“As long as you keep it to yourself, then...I suppose it's okay.”

“You shouldn’t hide it. You’re so good.”

“Mizuto-kun has stopped me from doing so. In his words: ‘Don’t seek validation from the people around you—they’re just gonna use you. Look at the bigger picture.’”

“That definitely sounds like him...”

“I agree with him. I’m sure there was a child in your elementary school who drew something really well in art class, and then all the kids rushed over to them and asked them to draw things for them as well.”

“Yeah...there was.”

From my perspective, being good at something was enviable, but from Mizuto and Higashira-san’s perspective, it was a burden. Even if she wasn’t popular in the classroom, Mizuto believed that she could become popular globally.

After Higashira-san told me the website she was posting on and her handle, I looked it up on my phone. There were a total of eight pictures so far, and I looked at them in order of newest to oldest.

I silently gasped. To be honest, I’d had an image in my head that she’d been drawing those kinds of amateur-looking pictures that you see in the reader’s corner of manga magazines. But these weren’t in the same league as those whatsoever.

Her technique wasn’t on a professional level, but the feelings behind each picture were colorful—not literally, but rather, each picture conveyed a message or displayed her unique personality.

Even with my untrained eye, I could tell that was the most abnormal thing about her art. Furthermore, the techniques she wasn’t good with were getting better with each picture. Going back through the pictures, I saw that she’d started about a month ago. It was amazing that she’d improved this much in just a month’s time, but it was also amazing that Mizuto had guided her this far.

If Higashira-san was a drawing prodigy, Mizuto might’ve been a prodigy at guiding and nurturing that talent. When I finally got to the first picture she posted, I gulped. It was a picture of a girl with a broken heart, her expression twisted.

I wasn't sure what to say. Her expression and emotions were on a different level in terms of vividness. It might've been the least technically proficient, but it packed a much stronger punch than anything she'd drawn since. And at the same time, the face was different, the expression was different—everything about it was different from the others. Looking at this picture, I could vividly picture Aso-senpai's face as she smiled through her tears after being turned down.

That's exactly what this picture was—a recreation of that scene. The fact that Higashira-san had been capable of pinpointing someone's exact emotions and accurately recreate them in a picture was nothing short of genius. I wasn't sure what other words could be used to describe her.

It was obvious. When we went to Kobe, Mizuto had become confident that Higashira-san had a talent for art. Suddenly, I began remembering the tears I'd seen in the pages of *The Siberian Dancing Girl*.

"This is...amazing." The words just fell out of my mouth. "You're amazing, Higashira-san..."

She was so focused, I was sure she couldn't hear me. That's why I could be so honest and declare my defeat. There was no way I could win. Even if I'd been the most beautiful girl in the world, I would never be a replacement for the beauty of talent.

If there was a soulmate for Mizuto Irido, it had to have been Isana Higashira. I was just a nuisance in their story. I had no part in it. I was simply the girl that he'd dated in the past. I was simply the girl who lived with him. There was nothing special about me. I just really, really liked him. That's all there was to me. In the future, if everyone in the world knew his name, nobody would know mine. Nobody would care how I felt about him.

But... But... But still, Mizuto thought about me. Even if in his mind it wasn't an option for me to be a romantic part of his life, he didn't just throw away that possibility. He was thinking so hard about me to the point that he was in pain. Was that... Was that really something that had no value?

"Hey, Higashira-san? Can I ask you something random?"

"Go ahead."

“If Mizuto had a really important girlfriend, and she got mad and said that he couldn’t see you anymore and that he couldn’t help support you...what would you do?”

Higashira-san’s hands stopped, despite moving so purposefully before. Then, she turned around and declared, her eyes resolute. “I apologize, but I won’t relinquish him to you, Yume-san. I *need* him.”

Though she’d accepted being turned down by him fairly easily and was okay if he got a girlfriend that wasn’t her, Higashira-san didn’t back down here.

“That...makes sense.” Hearing that, I felt relieved.

Up until now, I’d viewed Higashira-san as a person from a different world, one with a completely different set of views than ours. I’d thought she was a different kind of person entirely. Her actions and thoughts had influenced me so much to the point that I couldn’t believe that I’d ever compared her to how I used to be.

But I finally understood. The things that were important to us might’ve been different, but the feeling of wanting something was the same. That’s why...

“Sorry, but I’m not giving him up either,” I declared to her as an equal. I thought of it as my way of being polite.

“You...really won’t?” Higashira-san shrank a little.

“Let’s discuss the finer details at another time. There’s no point counting our chickens before they’ve hatched.”

“That’s true... It’d be extremely pathetic if the both of us talked a big game but were both discarded by him.”

“Don’t jinx it!” I giggled.

Higashira-san chuckled as well. *I’m so glad I’m friends with Higashira-san. I’m sure we’ll both find a way forward, somehow.*

## True Kindness

Mizuto Irido

Even without classes, it was too early for the school to close its doors since teachers still had work to do. Thanks to that, I could get inside. By explaining that my stepsister, the secretary of the student council, had asked me to come here to get something for her, I was able to get the key to the student council room. It was really nice having good grades at times like these. They trusted me much more easily.

Then, I stepped into the student council room for the first time. There was a space for guests, furnished with a couch, and then a long table in the back with a whiteboard for the student council members. For starters, I made my way to the back of the room and saw some details about what were probably status updates on the board that'd been left there.

Progress on Student Council Bulletin, eSports club budget negotiation progress report, meet at 7 a.m.: New Year's Greeting.

I recognized the writing. After all, I was used to this handwriting after seeing it in her notebook when we studied together in middle school.

My eyes fell to the shelf next to the white board. There was a binder with a label "Student Council Newsletters" on its spine. I took it out and opened it. Each page was neatly placed inside, and all the student council newsletters were there. A lot of it had been typed up and printed out, but parts of the newsletters had been handwritten with the same familiar handwriting—neat, but rounded. It was Yume's handwriting.

It seemed that the newsletter was printed each week and they were all made by Yume. She might've thought that just typing out words might not have had the same personal touch as handwriting, but at the very least, it did catch the eye easier when things were handwritten.

*She's really been doing all this? I've never even tried reading these for real.* I didn't feel the same kind of emotional response that I did when I saw Isana's art. But still, I knew the person she used to be. In outdoor ed, she'd been such a flustered mess that she hadn't been able to ask anyone for curry ingredients.

But now, she was writing these printouts that everyone saw. They weren't going to touch any hearts, and they might've not been read by the majority of students, but still, I could tell just how amazing these were.

"So, it *was* you." At that moment, I heard the door open. I looked up with surprise to see a small-framed girl with a strong presence—the student council president, Suzuri Kurenai.

She smiled as she looked at me. "When I heard that a family member of a student council member had arrived, I had an inkling that it'd be you. Did Yume-kun forget something?" she asked, shutting the door and walking towards me.

I looked away. "No..."

"I didn't think so. She would've come herself if that were the case. She's a very responsible person." She walked over to the electric water kettle against the wall and opened the lid. "I just came here to grab some documents, but I've changed my mind." She shut the lid and gripped the handle. "Sit down. I'll treat you to some tea."

*Is it not just Keikoin-san? Are all smart people like this? They just see right through what I'm thinking as if it's the most natural thing in the world.* I moved to the reception area and sat on the couch. It felt right for me to sit there and not at the table since I wasn't a student council member.

Suzuri Kurenai took the kettle and left the room, then returned shortly, turning the kettle on. After a little bit, she put black tea leaves into a teapot and poured hot water inside. Yume had always preferred black tea. Did the other student council members prefer it too? I didn't see any coffee powder.

"Here you go," she said, bringing a tray with the pot and two cups over, placing it on the table and sitting in front of me. Then, she poured a ruby-colored liquid into both of our cups. "Now then." She leisurely crossed her legs and then calmly looked at me. "What would you like to know?"

She almost looked like a sage. I half expected her to say something like "I bestow upon you, O brave one, wisdom to assist you on your journey." I had a hard time with her. I wasn't sure why, though. Was it because of the way she'd had her eyes on me for some reason during the cultural festival?

I wasn't so sure. She acted like a sage who knew everything and could answer everything—her thinking always came to a stop after reaching a conclusion. For someone like me who was always thinking about things and never *stopped*, it felt embarrassing to face her.

I had no business with the sage side of her. I only had business with the student council president—no, the upperclassman of Yume Irido.

“I only know what Yume's like in the classroom and at home.” As Kawanami had said, I was sincere and serious. “Before, that was enough for me. Lately, there's a new side to her—the one where she works at the student council.” *Since I'm so sincere and serious, I'm not going to beat around the bush. I'm going to be direct.* “I want to know what she's like when she's here.”

*“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.”* I needed to know more about Yume. I needed to know what had changed and what stayed the same over these past eight months. If I didn't, then I wouldn't be able to make any kind of decision. Knowledge was important when forming a strategy. Remaining ignorant made any plan impossible.

Suzuri Kurenai smiled as if to test me and then tilted her head a little. “I believe there's a little something called privacy.”

“Even so, I need to know.”

If I hoped to become the other wing of the Hiyoku no Tori, I needed to know. Suzuri Kurenai quietly brought her cup to her mouth and sipped the tea. Then she returned the cup to the saucer and smiled cryptically as if she was trying to suppress something.

“Heh heh.”

“Something funny?” I asked.

“Oh, no. Please excuse me. I was just thinking how we're both up to no good.” *Huh? But it looks like Yume's doing her job right on the student council.* “I might never have known before I joined the student council that I'm more normal of a girl than I thought.”

“You are?”

“That’s right. I study, work a part-time job, do my job on the student council, and in our free time during student council, we talk about the boys we like. How more of a typical high school girl can you get?”

*Talking about boys? Wait, boys?*

“You have someone you like?”

“Don’t look at me with such distrusting eyes. Even someone like me can fall in love.”

I fell silent. I could already imagine that she was most likely interested in Haba-senpai, but my imagination wasn’t powerful enough to conjure up an image of her blushing like Yume. Even when we’d seen the two of them in that empty classroom during the cultural festival, Suzuri Kurenai had looked completely composed while seducing him.

“We have one guy who doesn’t really talk at all, so a lot of our conversations among the remaining girls on the student council naturally end up gravitating towards love. Aisa’s already got it in her head that she can use that time to brag about her boyfriend. I shudder to think what would happen if Ran-kun wasn’t so straitlaced.”

“Does...Yume talk about the guy she likes too?”

“I know the identity of her romantic interest, but Aisa doesn’t. Ran-kun still thinks you’re dating Higashira-san. But...it might be best if you don’t know too much. If you hear the contents of our girls’ talk, you might want to start dating one of us.”

Being told that only made me want to hear what she had to say more. But I held back, despite my hands itching to open Pandora’s box.

Suzuri Kurenai giggled. “The normal Yume-kun is very serious and calm. She’s the spitting image of an honor student. However, she becomes a different person when the conversation switches to love affairs. She becomes extremely animated when receiving advice from Aisa and becomes quiet when there’s something that catches her attention. She’s a very adorable girl. The fact that she has a guy she likes makes me so envious, I feel my brain is going to overheat.” *Why are you acting like you don’t know who she’s in love with? You*



*already said you do.* “She acted a little differently during the Kobe trip as well. It was rare for me to see her mad like that after Aisa was turned down. It didn’t stem from pity, but from her thinking that it wasn’t right or sincere. Righteous rage, I think you’d call it. That might’ve been her preference. I’m not sure where she learned that from, though.” *Sincerity. Serious and sincere.* “She’s different from other girls in the sense that she doesn’t have the same unfounded empathy or sympathy for others. That’s what I like about her. After all, that means she’s putting herself in other people’s shoes and thinking about things from their perspective. She is truly kind—not just because of some obligation to society—but because her kindness comes from the bottom of her heart. Wouldn’t you agree?”

*A kindness that comes from the bottom of her heart? Yeah, that’s true.* Otherwise, she wouldn’t have thrown away the reputation she’d built for herself right after we started school. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have supported someone else’s crush on her ex. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have been so involved in her friend’s relationship with their childhood friend. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have been able to find a lonely guy who was trying to watch the fireworks by himself. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have worried about the rumors about her ex’s romance. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have worked until the late hours of night to try and make sure her class’s stall worked out. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have been so worried about the health of her rival. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have gotten mad at the person who turned down her upperclassman. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have accepted living with her ex.

Yeah, I agreed. I had evidence. I could confirm the reproducibility. So, I should know what to do from now and when. I didn’t know what the far future held. The near future felt murky. There was just one person who was an exception. If that was the case, then didn’t it behoove me to think and come up with an answer? *I need to be a little harsh and see your determination.*

“I think that’s about all I can say on my end,” Kurenai-senpai said, placing her empty cup down. “Aren’t you going to drink any?” she asked, looking at my cooled down cup of tea.

I picked it up and downed the still slightly warm tea all at once. “Thanks for the tea.”

“Have you gotten your answer?”

“No.” I stood up. “I’m gonna keep thinking about it.”

## The Start of Everything until Now

### Yume Irido

In what could only be called a folly of youth, I had a so-called boyfriend during eighth and ninth grade. We met at school, exchanged our feelings, became a couple, flirted, got into a fight over the smallest thing, and then I began to feel more annoyed than in love, which ultimately ended with us breaking up upon graduation. Then, we became a family.

That being said, we barely had any awareness of that fact because we’d only just graduated from middle school not even a week prior. Back then, I still hadn’t gotten used to putting in contacts every morning and walking outside with my hair down. I had still been in the process of trying to change myself. That’s why moving from the apartment I’d always lived in to the Irido household happened at the perfect time.

I let out a satisfied sigh as I looked at my perfectly organized bookshelf. My room was a lot bigger than the one I’d had in the apartment, so I could fit three whole bookcases in here. If the increased space were the only thing taken into consideration, then moving here was a great idea!

But...there was an asterisk to that. It was great living here aside from the fact that *he* was in the room right next to mine. I knew it had been my decision, but I’d yet to accept the situation. At that time, though, I’d found that I couldn’t help how I acted towards him. After all, I was in a contradictory environment where I lived with the very same person I’d broken up with. How else was I supposed to reconcile these two things if not by being cold towards him?

I’ll be honest: I had *hated* Mizuto. We hadn’t liked each other one bit, or at least that’s how it felt on the surface. Even trying to analyze my feelings from back then now left me drawing a blank. It was extremely difficult to precisely explain how I had felt.

It was true that seeing his face had made me angry, but out of the blue he’d

have me swooning, leaving me feeling like we'd returned to how we used to be.

But if I hadn't been able to make it clear how I felt about him internally, I wouldn't have been able to stay sane. That's why I'd chosen to hate him. After all, we'd broken up. The reason we broke up wasn't because we hated each other; we hated each other for breaking up.

Still, something was still left between us: trust. That's why I'd agreed to live with him and become his stepsister. At the time I truly believed I'd never get back together with Mizuto. That trust was what had allowed us to become a family. Looking back on that now... Seriously, what naive thinking.

The first day after moving was filled with new experiences. It wasn't just the newfound space I had in my room. Living in a place with stairs, having meals with three other people, taking a bath and brushing my teeth right after—everything was fresh.

It felt like I was sleeping over at somebody's house. I couldn't begin to comprehend that this lifestyle wasn't a temporary one. But the newest thing out of all of that was...

“Ah.”

“Ah...”

I ran into Mizuto on the first floor. We both froze. But this wasn't just a normal encounter. We were both in our pajamas. Mizuto was wearing his ugly gray sweats. There wasn't anything uglier in this world. He wasn't really the type to be interested in fashion, but when I had been a love-addled middle schooler, he'd appeared to me as a much more handsome guy than he actually was. Now that I was seeing him for real, the mismatch between my idealization and reality was in clear view.

I never intentionally wore my pajamas in front of Mizuto. The only time he'd ever seen me in them had been when he visited me at my apartment when I was sick. My body had completely changed since then. Plus, I could barely remember what'd happened back then because of the high fever I'd had.

Despite being together so often, he'd never properly seen me in my pajamas. We stared at each other before I broke the silence, returning to my senses first.

“What’re you looking at?” I hugged myself as if to cover my chest and took a step back.

Finally, Mizuto looked away. “Nothing. Self-conscious, much?”

“You really think you can fool me after all this time? You closet perv.”

“I don’t remember ever acting perverted towards you.”

*Well, that’s because when we were still on good terms, I was still a shrimp with no curves.* “My condolences to you for not getting the chance to touch my adult body.”

“Since when did you start acting like you have self-esteem, you gloomy loner?”

“We’re living together starting today. Don’t sneak into my room, okay?”

“You kidding? I wouldn’t dream of it.”

We argued like this back and forth, exchanging insult after insult. The rhythm we did it at was new. The space between us was new. *Oh. So this is the appropriate way to act towards your ex. This is how we should act with one another from now on.*

“Later.”

“Later.”

Then we passed by each other, ending our argument, turning our backs to each other as if we were never going to see each other again. But even so, neither of us could get away without one last phrase.

“Good night...”

“Good night.”

And that’s how it all began. We began to learn who the other truly was—something we wouldn’t have had we stayed together. We didn’t know each other as boyfriend or girlfriend now, but as new people entirely.

## **My Answer to Everything from Now On**

## Mizuto Irido

In what could only be called a folly of youth, I had a so-called girlfriend during eighth and ninth grade. We met at school, exchanged our feelings, became a couple, flirted, got into a fight over the smallest thing, and then I began to feel more annoyed than in love, ultimately ending with us breaking up upon graduation. Then, we became a family.

I remember not being able to sleep well on the night that Yume and Yuni-san moved into our house. There was the nightmare of the unreal situation of living in the same house as Yume, but also the anxiety surrounding how we were going to hide our past relationship. Those thoughts kept spinning around my head, and I couldn't even sleep to get away from them.

The biggest thing that I couldn't get out of my head was Yume's appearance. She'd changed *way* too much. All she'd done was stop wearing glasses and let her hair down, so it's not like it was a dramatic change, but she looked like a completely different person than the girl I'd dated, Yume Ayai.

Even when we were dating but hadn't seen each other in a while, I'd thought that she'd grown, and that her boobs had gotten bigger. But seeing her entire appearance change this drastically really threw me for a loop. There was another big mismatch from the girl I remembered too; the way she talked so coldly to me made it hard to imagine that we'd even dated.

She was so different to the point that I'm surprised I even realized it was her when our parents introduced us to each other. But maybe that was a testament to how closely I'd been looking at her face. *No, that's not right.* What I'd been looking at wasn't her face, specifically, but her countenance. And I hadn't been looking at it but examining it.

Romance was all about feeling out the other person, figuring out what they were thinking about and their hopes and dreams. Being in a relationship involved a constant need to anticipate, imagine, and interpret all of that.

Somehow or other, I'd spent eight or so months accomplishing just that, so there was nobody better than I at examining Yume Ayai's face. But that was strictly *just* Yume Ayai.

"Agh!"

The next morning, after a practically sleepless night, I woke up early despite it being spring break, and ran into Yume, who was in the middle of brushing her teeth. For some reason, she took a step back from me, looking surprised as she looked at my face.

“Morning.”

“M-Mowrming...” she said, her toothbrush still in her mouth.

Fortunately, there was space at the sink for me. I was thinking that if all went well, I could go back to sleep, so I decided not to wash my face. Instead, I grabbed my toothbrush and the toothpaste, and began brushing my teeth.

As I did, I found something strange as I looked in the mirror. Yume kept glaring at me, her toothbrush idly hanging in her mouth. *What’re you doing? If you’re done brushing your teeth, you should rinse out your mouth.* After I finished, I filled a cup with water and used it to rinse. The entire time I did that, she just stood there, staring at me.

“Mm!” she grunted, jerking her chin towards the changing room’s door.

It seemed that she wanted me to leave. “What did I do to deserve this?”  
*Seriously, why can’t you use your hands?*

“Mm!”

“Rinse out your mouth if you have something you wanna say. C’mon, what’s your problem?”

“Mmmm!!!” she groaned, seemingly unhappy about something.

Then she desperately stomped over to the sink, spit out the toothpaste, and quickly gargled. After that, she wiped her face with a towel.

“I don’t want you to see me gargling!” she spat. “Problem?!”

“I don’t get it.”

“Spitting out water is undignified! Why don’t you get that, you idiot?!” she exclaimed before storming out.

*How would I get that? I wouldn’t know without you spelling it out for me.* No matter how much of a professional I thought I was at reading her facial

expressions...

“How am I supposed to know that if you don’t tell me?”

Thinking about it, from start to finish, the two of us were always communicating without actually talking that much. We would always try to read each other’s minds, guessing what the other person was thinking about as if it were a competition. Whenever that caused problems, we’d solve it by changing our perception of it from a problem to something else entirely.

But that wouldn’t continue forever. The longest it *could* continue was eight months. If we started in August, we’d start falling apart in April. If we started around the end of March, we’d reach our limit around December.

The hypotheticals of what if I’d gone to the summer festival with her, gotten her a Christmas present, and gotten Valentine’s chocolate from her didn’t matter. There was something that the two of us needed to do before we could have any expectations for any of that. This wasn’t a story with just blank pages. If there weren’t any words written, it was just a collection of plain paper. The first thing we needed to do was talk. If there was an answer, talking was the only way to discover it.

## **Birds Can’t Fly with Just One Wing**

When I got back from school, it didn’t seem like anyone was home. Dad and Yuni-san were probably still at work, doing their best to get through the last business day of the year. I wasn’t sure where Yume was. I didn’t know her well enough to be able to predict her actions.

But that was probably for the best. I only needed to know the essential stuff, anyway. I walked into my room for the first time in a day. It didn’t seem like anything had changed too much. I mean, of course it hadn’t. It’d only been a day. It was still overrun with books, just as messy as I was used to.

Suddenly, I recalled the latest memory I had here—Yume fixing her clothes before running out of my room while apologizing. I didn’t remember her taking anything with her, though. I looked around my bed and then lifted my comforter. I didn’t see anything, so I looked on the floor, but nothing was there

either. *That only leaves...* I got on all fours and looked under the bed. *There it is.*

I reached under my bed and pulled the object out. It was a box as big as my palm with a ribbon drawn on it. I sat on my bed and opened the lid. Inside was a ring with a wing design, still as silver as I remembered it.

I stared at it in silence, not taking it out of the box. This ring didn't suit me. But the mere action of gifting a ring must've required a lot of courage. Everyone who's been in a relationship has had that idea at one point or another, before deciding it's too early or too emotionally heavy of a gift. A ring as a gift is way too grown-up for kids.

Honestly, even if it was grown-up, it might've been exactly what Yume and I needed right now. I wasn't sure if that's what Yume had in mind, but even so, the decision that we needed to make carried a weight to it that most students wouldn't ever have to deal with at our age.

It had nothing to do with the labels of being a kid or an adult, or a student or worker. It had to do with us as people. The decision before us was about us as human beings.

Was this really love? Pining for someone and not knowing what to do with how much you cared for them definitely *felt* like love. That being said, our decision wasn't just about whether we were in love—it was something much bigger. Not only would it affect the present, but it would affect our future as well. Breaking up didn't give us an escape route anymore. Our decision was heavier than that of a married couple who could divorce and go their separate ways.

If this were a romance novel, getting together was the happy ending, but in reality, we had to think beyond that. We had to think about the future. Could we really decide the rest of our lives when we were only sixteen?

I scoffed. *What a stupid question. Of course we can't.* Thinking that we could was just proof that we weren't thinking things through. I couldn't do it. Not alone.

I took out my phone, searched for "Ring Wing," and then began looking at the different pictures and giftboxes of rings. After that, I went to my desk and pulled something out. It was a business card. The name written on it was Ryosei



Keikoin.

I called the number on it, and after four rings, I heard a click followed by the sound of a man's calm voice.

"Hello? This is Keikoin."

"It's Mizuto Irido." I decided to be as brief as possible. "Could you introduce me to a job? Ideally one that could give me a paycheck in three days."

## Seriousness with Seriousness

### Yume Irido

After returning from Higashira-san's house, I saw that Mizuto's shoes were at the entrance. As soon as I saw them, I felt a little nervous, but also relieved. We were going to continue to return to the same house. Deep down, I knew I was being clingy, but the fact that we couldn't get rid of each other even if we tried felt like salvation to me.

*Oh. So that's why...* Suddenly, it popped into my head. Things were different this time. We didn't have to make plans to meet each other. I could see him whenever I wanted. In that case, I made a conscious choice to go to my own room instead of visiting his room, even though I could tell he was in there.

I wanted to think a little. I wanted to catch up to him since he'd given this so much thought. I wanted to be by myself for a bit. I was sure that as soon as I neglected trying to think as much as he did, our relationship would be over.

And then, five days had passed. Mizuto would hurry out of the house in the morning, and I would hang out with either the student council or my friends. Even so, I didn't stop thinking about my relationship with Mizuto, Higashira-san's talent, our parents' lives, and my own future.

I couldn't even imagine taking entrance exams two years in the future, so what could I really guess about the future beyond that? Even so, I continued thinking. Madoka-san had said that it was best to steadily take care of things, like summer homework. She'd said it was important to put family, friends, and everything else aside for a little bit to straighten out my feelings.

I'd figured out my feelings, so now it was time to think about my family, friends, and everything else. But still... Even so, it was now the last day of the year, and with it, the end of the olden days of this year.

# Chapter 5: When the Hiyoku no Tori Flies

## Determination

### Mizuto Irido

“Are you ready?” It was now December 29th, and Keikoin-san was asking me this question after my third day of work.

The job he’d introduced me to was helping with miscellaneous tasks at his company. I compiled documents, managed the snacks that’d been bought, wrote addresses on packages to be sent out—pretty much everything at the company that had nothing to do with being creative. They were a small company, so apparently, having someone to take care of these things was really helpful.

This was my first job, but having experience with chores at home and assisting with the cultural festival under my belt helped a lot. Also, being able to work inside of a game company was a lot more informative than I’d initially anticipated, especially with things like learning how to make people who were too absorbed in their work actually take a break.

But those three days of new experiences were coming to an end, and Keikoin-san left me with some parting words.

“They say that three days is enough for a guy to change, but it’s almost like you’re a completely different person than when I met you half a month ago. Can I take that as you successfully clearing all the doubts from your mind?”

“No, not yet...” I shook my head. “I don’t think there’s anyone without doubts, regardless of how gifted they are. I’m sure you’ve come to realize that.”

He gave me a cryptic grin. He might’ve seen through everything. He might’ve already known what I was going to say. I might’ve been acting exactly according to his predictions, but still, I decided to keep talking. That was my way of answering his question.

"I don't think doubts are things to be cleared out of your head. I think you need to coexist with them," I continued.

Keikoin-san looked slightly surprised and paused before replying. "'Coexist'? Not overcome?"

"Yeah. Clearing your doubts or overcoming them would make you a Buddha."

He paused for a bit before snorting quietly. "You really are an avid reader. That's a very refined answer. Now that I think about it, 'determination' was originally a Buddhist word, wasn't it?"

Clearing the doubts and discovering reason was something that was far away for people like us living in this world of suffering.

"Keikoin-san, I heard from Yume that her love for mysteries was influenced by you."

"Hm? Oh, right. I was pretty into that genre as a kid too."

"What's your favorite mystery book?"

Though we both liked to read, this was the first time we'd talked about books during these three days. Keikoin-san made a difficult face and groaned.

"That's a hard one. At the very least, endingwise, I liked *Mathematical Goodbye* the most."

That was the same book that I'd been reading during the outdoor education trip when I had first interacted with Yume Ayai.

"That's a pretty chic choice," I said. "I expected you to choose a series like *The Perfect Insider*."

"I enjoy twists. Especially twists that show what scientific thinking is all about. Hm..." Keikoin-san trailed off. He might've realized that what he'd just said had the same meaning as my answer. "You got me."

"Just a coincidence."

"Let me ask you, then, Mizuto-kun. What's your favorite mystery?"

"*Cosmic*."

"Ha ha! An unsolvable mystery?" *He and I really might be similar.* Keikoin-san

took a short breath and then gazed off into the distance. “I wish I could’ve reached the same answer as you a little sooner. Getting older sucks. You start regretting everything.” Then, he stuck his hand out towards me. “Do your best. This is the only thing a boring adult like me can say at this point.”

“Thank you. I was already planning on doing so.”

We shook hands so that I could settle things between the nightmare I saw and the dream I was going to see.

# The Final Day: Part 1

## Yume Irido

I started the last morning of the year, for better or worse, normally. My eyes opened as I lay in bed, and I stared off for a bit as if in a daze. After starting on the student council, I'd been much more alert and busy, but now that we weren't in session, I was kind of slacking off.

But that was okay, especially today. With that in mind, I curled up in my bed. Strangely, as I did, I felt as if I'd become more awake. Lying around in bed got boring, though, so I slowly dragged myself out of it. As soon as I did, cold air pierced my body. I already wanted to retreat into the warmth of my comforter. But I fought that desire and turned on the heater.

*I'll go wash my face while I wait for my room to warm up.* I adjusted my messy hair and then the room in my pajamas, then headed down the stairs and into the changing room. I turned on the hot water faucet and waited a bit until it got warm enough before splashing water onto my face. After that, I used a cotton ball to dab my face with lotion, and spread it across my face. I also took the opportunity to check my eyebrows, but it didn't seem like there was anything out of place.

After letting the lotion sink into my skin, I brushed my teeth. I scrubbed hard, making sure that I got even the back of my molars. While I did, the door opened, and standing there was Mizuto with a bedhead.

I turned around and called out to him, the toothbrush still in my mouth.  
"Mowrmimg."

"Morning."

I poured water into my cup and swished it around in my mouth before spitting it into the sink. I wiped my mouth while trading spots with Mizuto. Then, I left the room without another word.

With my room now warmed up, I decided to pick out my outfit for the day. I didn't have to put too much thought into it. In the end, I went with a versatile look of a blouse paired with a comfortable long skirt. I laid them out on my bed

and then began taking off my pajamas.

*Oh, right. I need to change my bra.* I walked to my drawer to pick out a bra wearing nothing but my night bra on my top half. *I'm not planning on showing my bra to anyone, but...*

*"This is the last day, so..."*

It was the last day of the year, aka the deadline I'd set for myself. Today was precisely a day that I needed to go all out on—it was a battle. With that in mind, I took out a cute bra with an intricate pattern along its edges and the panties that went with it that I'd bought without mom knowing.

I took off my night bra and then decisively stuffed each of my boobs into the cups before straightening their shape. Just doing that was enough to make me feel tense. And that was how I started my day—the day of my battle.

## The Final Day: Part 2

### Mizuto Irido

I spent the morning lazing away rereading *The Tragedy of Y*. It was the second book in the *Drury Lane* series—a really popular series in Japan about a deaf former actor named Drury Lane who at times displayed his attention to detail and sharp logic.

Rereading the truth revealed in the finale left me with the same thoughts as usual. *If something's on your mind, you need to speak up*. I remember having a conversation with Isana about this very same thing.

“Is this similar to the OVA of *Giant Robo: The Day the Earth Stood Still*?”

“The OVA of what?”

“I’m speaking about how if you don’t leave a proper dying message, the world you leave behind will be in much peril!”

After I looked it up, I saw she was talking about an old anime—like so long ago that only old guys would know about. *What’s she doing watching this?* At any rate, poor communication led to tragedy in all eras. If half of the murders in mysteries were committed by the victim’s significant other, the other half were caused by poor communication. *Actually, I might be exaggerating a bit.*

I returned *The Tragedy of Y* to my bookshelf, then moved to my desk and opened the top drawer. There were two gift boxes about the size of my palm in there. After firmly closing my drawer, I left my room and went downstairs. I casually poked my head into the living room and saw Yume sitting in the kotatsu and watching TV, dad reading a book at the dining table, and Yuni-san boiling something in the kitchen.

“Oh, Mizuto-kun. I’m boiling udon. Would you like any?” she asked.

I tilted my head. “Do you not eat soba at the end of the year?”

“It doesn’t matter if you eat udon now and soba later. If you can eat rice for three meals a day, you can eat noodles twice.”



*I guess rice and noodles are both staples in our diet, so it's a fair comparison.*  
“I’ll have some,” I said, taking a seat at the kotatsu.

Yume, who had been there first, struck up a conversation. “Hey, when do you usually do the first shrine visit of the year?”

“Like, what specific time?”

“I’m just wondering if you go right when the year changes, or if you stay up all night and then go first thing in the morning, or take a nap and go in the afternoon.”

“I guess I’m the type who doesn’t usually go at all.”

“O ye of little faith.”

“What, are you religious?”

“Hm. I guess not really.”

There was no value in believing. A higher power was the exact reason that we’d been led around by the nose and had fallen into our unique circumstances. I grabbed a tangerine from the middle of the table before remembering that I’d be eating lunch soon and setting it back down.

“So what do you guys usually do on New Year’s?” I asked.

“Well, we’ve pretty much always gone to the shrine a little bit before noon.”

“I bet there’ll be a lot of people...”

“True, but there’s gonna be a crowd regardless, so might as well go when the year changes. That sounds more fun anyway.”

“Aren’t you going with friends this year?”

“Yeah, but it’d be nice to go as a family too.”

“Uh-huh.”

Two years... No, it had only been one year since I went to the shrine on the third day of the year with Ayai. She hadn’t had any friends, so it would’ve been suspicious if she went out to the shrine on the first day of the new year. *What kind of wish did I make for that to happen?*

“Do you have any plans with Higashira-san or Kawanami-kun?” Yume asked.

“Isana’s just like me, so she’s not going. Kawanami knows me too well to invite me.”

“Oh. Well, Kawanami-kun seems like he’d have other people to go with anyway.”

“Just like Minami-san.”

“We’re planning on meeting up at two in the morning. Wanna come?”

“That sounds about as fun as sleeping on a bed of nails.”

“Heh heh.”

“Hey, you two, the udon’s ready!” Yuni-san called out to us.

“Okay!” we both said, getting out of the kotatsu.

Regardless of whether I went to the shrine or not, there was something that the two of us had to take care of before the year ended. I wanted to clear this mess up. It was our once-in-a-lifetime big cleaning.

## The Final Day: Part 3

### Yume Irido

After lunch, I got a call from Akatsuki-san.

"Hello?" I asked as I picked up.

"Yume-chan! Now a good time?"

"Yeah."

I walked away from the table and entered the kotatsu again, my phone against my ear. I listened to Akatsuki-san as I lazed against the couch.

"Whatcha doin'?" she asked.

"Just ate lunch."

"Oh! What'd you have?"

"Udon."

"Instead of New Year's soba?"

"No, it's more like the appetizer to that."

"Oh? Interesting."

"What about you, Akatsuki-san?"

"I'm just havin' some fried food."

"Did you make it?"

"Nope. My mom did! She offered to at least make food on New Year's Eve." *I guess Akatsuki-san's parents are home today even though they're usually never around.* "Whatcha watchin' to pass the new year by?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like on TV or streaming."

"Hm...nothing in particular."

"You don't even watch Kohaku?"

“I don’t really know the people who participate in it.”

“Oh, right, you don’t really listen to music.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to believe I’m a high school girl.”

“True. You rely on me to pick out songs at karaoke.”

“Thanks again for that...”

“Ha ha ha!”

“But I guess at the very least I watch a countdown.”

“So that’s important to you?”

“Yeah, doesn’t it really make you feel like the new year’s finally begun?”

“I get what you mean!”

“If the year changes without you even noticing, it feels like you missed out.”

“Hard agree.”

Mizuto left the living room and I heard him head upstairs. “Last year, I only realized it was a new year because of the LINE messages I received,” I said.

“Are you the type to try and say it as fast as possible?”

“Isn’t everyone?”

“It’s hard because of all the messages!”

“Yeah... I might just keep it to in-person greetings this year.”

“True! We’ll see each other soon anyway.”

“At two, right?”

“Yep! Oh!”

“What?”

“That’s why I called you!”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah! So, apparently Nasuka-chan’s mom is gonna drive us, so we’re thinkin’ about goin’ all the way up to Kitano Tenmangu. What do you think?”

“That sounds great!”

“Oh, sounds like somebody’s hyped,” Akatsuki-san said.

“I’ve always wanted to go there, but it’s kinda far.”

“True, it takes an hour if you’re walking. So, you in?”

“Yeah!”

“Okay! We’re gonna meet up at the crossing at Karasuma Oike.”

Mizuto returned to the living room with a book in his hand. He slowly walked over to the kotatsu before entering it. I could feel his toenails around my lower leg.

“By the way, is it okay that Kawanami-kun’s not coming?”

Mizuto opened the book he was reading. It was *Sora Tobu Tori: The Bird Who Flew*.

“Hm? Why do you ask?”

“I was just wondering if you weren’t gonna use the first shrine visit of the year as a date opportunity.”

“Oh, no! Definitely not!”

“Why not?”

“He’d definitely run into someone he knows. Well, me too.”

“Ah...”

“What’s that ‘ah’ for?”

“Just impressed by socialites like you two.”

“This is normal!”

“But with all the people at Kitano Tenmangu, wouldn’t it be hard to tell who’s there?” I asked.

“Well, I guess...”

I slowly leaned forward and looked at the book Mizuto was reading. “What about you?”

“Hm?”

“I hear that Irido-kun spent the night at Kawanami’s on Christmas.”

“Oh, so I guessed right.”

“You didn’t know?”

“I knew he wasn’t home at least.”

“Irido-kun really just doesn’t get it! How could he have left you all by yourself on Christmas?!”

“I wasn’t alone. Remember? We were at President Kurenai’s party.”

“Yeah, but still...”

It felt like Akatsuki-san was being strangely roundabout. It was as if there was something she was worried about but was finding it hard to bring up.

“Is there something you’re dissatisfied about, Akatsuki-san?”

“Mm... I wouldn’t say I’m dissatisfied...”

“Is it because you couldn’t spend time with Kawanami-kun?”

“No! It’s more like...” And then, she spilled. “It just seems like you and Irido-kun are worryin’ about somethin’, so I was just...concerned.”

*Akatsuki-san’s so nice. Even though the Christmas she wanted to spend with the person she liked was interrupted, she still worried about us.* “It’s okay.” I made sure to say this in a clear tone to make sure that my best friend didn’t worry about me. “I’m sure things’ll be okay.”

I didn’t know what the future held, but for Mizuto and me right now, I was pretty sure nothing bad would happen, though I didn’t have any basis for that confidence.

“Okay. All good, then...” Akatsuki-san said, not pressing any further. “So I’ll see you at two! Karasuma Oike, okay?”

“Yep. Got it.”

“Careful of the streets at night! You should have Irido-kun walk you there!”

“Yeah...” *That’d be nice.*

“Later! Bye-bye!”

“Bye-bye.”

I waited for her to hang up before lowering the phone from my ear. Just as I felt a little exhausted from the phone call and leaned back against the couch, I heard *him* call out to me in a low voice.

“Hey...”

“Yeah?” I looked over at Mizuto while relaxing against the couch. He’d closed his book and was silently staring right at me.

“Hey, Mine-kun? It’s okay to put white miso in our ozoni, right?”

Mizuto remained silent as our parents spoke.

“Hm? We don’t have any strict traditions, but my mom used white miso.”

Our silence was overridden by the conversation between our parents in the dining room. Mizuto glanced at them. *Is this something that he can’t talk about in front of them?* He looked back at me, opened his mouth but then immediately shut it and then looked down. Then he looked at me again and finally spoke.

“If you’re going out for the first shrine visit of the year, you should take a nap while you can.”

“I...should?”

“You usually sleep early, don’t you, Yume-san?”

“*Yume-san*”? That was what he called me in a family setting. Suddenly, the nervousness I’d felt dispersed and my head felt light. Maybe it was because my stomach was full or because of the warmth from the kotatsu, but I could feel my eyelids getting heavy.

“Don’t sleep here.”

“Yeah...”

“When you’re done with your nap...” I woke up a little. “Lend me some of your time.”

*Yeah...* I replied in my head, but it seemed like it had gotten through. I got out

of the kotatsu. “There’s...something I want to talk with you about too.”

*I also want to apologize.* We made sure to speak in low voices, but I still glanced over to look at our parents. It didn’t seem like they were listening to us.

“Could you lend me a book from this author if you have any, Yume-san?” he suddenly asked, holding up *Sora Tobu Tori*.

“Yeah, I’ll bring it to your room later.”

This was a camouflage, just in case. So that it wouldn’t be weird for us to be in the same room by ourselves. I left the living room, climbed the stairs and went to my room. Since it would be annoying if my hair got messed up while I napped, I tied it up. *I’m...gonna change my clothes later anyway, so I guess it doesn’t matter if they get wrinkled while I sleep.*

I lay down on my bed and looked up at the ceiling, sighing. Then, I thought about what was to come, and about us.



# Hiyoku no Tori: Part 1

## Mizuto Irido

In the Japan of old, marriage was a union of two houses. Traditional Japanese households had essentially the same structure as companies, with the father taking the role as the president. When two families married, it was like a merger of two companies—a strategy to increase the economic power of your family. The fathers would always decide who their children married. Back in the day, there were even schools for women that taught things such as flower arrangement and how to play the koto—essentially, women learned how to act as wives.

From the perspective of someone who lives in an age where you're free to marry whomever you're in love with, it was really an unfair system. But to a person of old, the system was logical.

Divorce wasn't simple. Even if there was something that you didn't like about the other person, you had to suck it up and endure. The mere act of living together was supposed to bond you with your spouse.

Could I really say that the past way of doing things was better? In the present day, romance was already extremely annoying, and on top of that, you had to choose someone using your own judgment and then build up a relationship from scratch. Could I really say that the present way of doing things was better than the past, when your family decided who was a good partner, and you didn't have to think about any of those things?

I wasn't sure. It was hard to say without experiencing any of this for myself. At the very least, in that case, I knew I wouldn't have any freedom with my life. After all, I'd be entrusting the huge decision of my marriage partner to somebody else. It'd be easy, but I would be trapped.

Being free, on the other hand, was *not* easy. Isana Higashira was proof of that. Despite being the most free out of everyone I knew, she had to shoulder a lot of problems that most high schoolers didn't.

For example, she couldn't find a partner in phys ed, she didn't have anyone to

discuss homework with, and she struggled to find anyone to lend her their textbook. It was simple to write her off as a loner, but by removing relationships with others from her life, she was able to grow her talent, which was obviously something that nobody else had.

Not all loners were like that, but if you didn't allot all your resources to being personable with other people, there would be space to pour those resources into other things. That was the cold hard truth. Everything was a trade-off—the law of equivalent exchange.

To be free like she was required a lot of effort. Not being bound by common sense or convention was easier said than done. So could one start building all that up from scratch by their own power?

Nobody knew the answer to that. Pioneers were only revered when they succeeded. It's impossible to even tell if what was perceived as a success would still be perceived as such many generations later. For example, there was the famous explorer Christopher Columbus...who was also a genocidal monster.

You won't know until you try. You need determination to try. And determination involves pushing doubts away and rationalizing your decision, but it has to be based on more than just lip service.

Who could guarantee that Yume and I would stay together forever? We'd already broken up once. If we were going to date for the first time now, we might've been able to make promises towards a reckless future. After all, we wouldn't know any better. We wouldn't have the experience. But that was not our reality. We knew that love eventually ended. We knew that love eventually cooled off. Eternal love wasn't possible. There probably weren't any exceptions. No matter how I thought about it, it was impossible for two strangers to get together and not come to hate each other at least once during the decades that they're together.

But even so, could I, Mizuto Irido, say that I could assure that wouldn't happen? In sickness and in health, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, could I promise to love and honor her for all the days of my life? Could I promise that as a mere high schooler? Could I promise that with true sincerity?

What a stupid question. I'd asked myself this question over and over again

and I'd come up with the same answer each time. That's why I could be so sure that it was a stupid question. Of course it was. There was absolutely no way that I could.

## Hiyoku no Tori: Part 2

### Yume Irido

Sixteen years. It had been a mere sixteen years since I was born into this world—since Mizuto was born into this world. Only sixteen years. Counting from the day we met, we'd known each other for three years, and that was being generous. There were couples who didn't get married after dating for even longer, so how could we promise to be with each other forever after a mere three years?

It'd just be lip service, just a temporary lapse of judgment. I knew for a fact that our adolescent brains would just be toying with us. That kind of ending is wonderful in romance novels. The characters' love for one another is in sync, they pledge their eternal love to each other, and on the next page, you jump to the wedding scene, after which they live happily ever after.

But reality is different. If anything, the fact that romance stories end at the marriage scene makes that fact even clearer. There wasn't any drama after getting married. The kind of love that makes your heart skip a beat, the kind of love that makes your chest hot—after the book ends, it doesn't exist. After you reach the peak of the mountain, all that's left is the descent. But nobody would want to watch a previously dramatic tale of romance go stale while slowly declining. That's why romance stories end at the marriage scene.

The last page of a romance story was almost like a picture in an album. It was a preservation of the relationship while it was still beautiful—frozen in time, and left behind by the flow of it. There was no such thing as "forever." The only thing that existed was endless change.

Only the people who could overcome all that change could end their lives happily. The more I thought about it, the steeper the path seemed. A lot of thought and preparation would be required to overcome the tightrope of life.

Sixteen years wasn't nearly enough time. And it goes without saying that three years wasn't either. Most likely, a lot of adults would say the same thing. We needed to think more. We were still just kids. It wouldn't be too late to

think about it after becoming adults. Everyone would warn me about being too hasty if I made a move now.

It would've been easier if I could just ignore that logic. I could just let myself get drunk off of the feelings I had in the moment and let myself be immersed in my own fantasy. That night on Christmas Eve, one week ago—if we'd kept those hot emotions going, I'm sure that it would've felt incredibly good. But that wasn't real. Christmas, night views from restaurants, those kinds of special atmospheres weren't the kind you should make promises in because there was no way they would last.

What was necessary for us was being in an everyday setting, just living our normal lives as we usually did—but with determination.

That's why I didn't make plans for a date with him on the day of our showdown. I didn't want some kind of special atmosphere that'd make a special memory. I wanted someone who could be the other wing I needed to fly past the final page of our story.

## Hiyoku no Tori: Part 3

Mizuto Irido

The Hiyoku no Tori was a bird that originally only possessed one wing, but once it became one with its lover, it flew for the first time. Was I a Hiyoku no Tori? I never thought I was. I thought I'd continue living life alone until my dying breath. But in that case, why did I cry when I was watching fireworks with Yume that time?

I still didn't really understand what I'd been feeling back then. Had I been happy? Relieved? At the very least, I knew I hadn't felt *negatively*, but it was impossible for me to accurately analyze my emotions.

Would Yume know? Would the girl that kissed me when I was crying know? People didn't know as much about themselves as they thought. Even Keikoin-san didn't know what kind of person he was until his own daughter was born.

I already knew what path I wanted to walk, but I couldn't pay attention unless I had someone else look at me. Was I being soft? Was I trying to be like those old households, trying to construct a family around myself? No. I knew who I was and who she was.

I knew her as a person who used to have difficulty talking to people, and now she'd become a person who did exemplary work on the student council. She couldn't be just boxed into the category of a good wife and smart mother. Not for my sake or her sake, but for *our* sake. She needed both wings.

## Okay, My Mind Is Made Up

Yume Irido

I opened my eyes.

## It's Time to Talk

Mizuto Irido

I closed my book.

## Sibling Meeting: Introduction

### Yume Irido

It was about five in the afternoon. After waking up from my nap, I untied my hair and ran a brush through it. I did it carefully, over and over again until not a single strand was out of place. After a while, I heard a knock on my door.

“Yeah?” I put my hairbrush down and opened my door. Standing there was Mizuto, as expected.

He looked at my face as if he was checking me. “Now a good time?” he asked.

“Yeah. I’m awake now,” I said as I fixed my bangs.

Afterwards, I checked the hallway behind Mizuto and confirmed that our parents weren’t around.

“Come in,” I said, moving aside and letting him in, shutting the door behind me.

He walked deeper into my room and sat by the table on top of the rug. At first, I thought about sitting at the table too, but...

“Ah.”

“Hm?” Mizuto turned around to face me.

“Is it okay if I get some tea first? I’m kinda thirsty after just waking up.”

“Right...go ahead. Could you get me a glass too?”

After that, I left the room and went downstairs. Mom and Mineaki-ojisan were relaxing under the kotatsu in the living room and didn’t really pay me any attention as I entered. I took this chance to swiftly grab two cups and take out the premade roasted green tea. Then I brought everything back up the stairs.

I grunted as I put the tea and the cups on the table. I sat across from him and poured myself a cup of tea. After I put the bottle of tea down, Mizuto poured himself a cup as well.

I downed about half of it instantly, but Mizuto didn't touch his at all. *This might be a long conversation.* Though he hadn't taken a sip yet, I figured it might end up empty by the time we were finished talking.

We sat in silence for a bit, the ticking of my clock the only sound in our ears. I was looking for the right time to begin. I was waiting for my breath to steady, because it was my job to start the conversation.

I took my hand off my cup on the table and gripped my skirt. Then I looked right at Mizuto and spoke.

"I'm really sorry about Christmas Eve," I said, lowering my head. "It was really rash of me. I didn't know how hard you were thinking about all that..."

Thinking back to how I'd behaved, I could only think that I'd been rash and blind. I'd misinterpreted the advice that I'd gotten from Madoka-san four months ago when she told me that I needed to evaluate my feelings. She'd told me that I didn't need to think about my family and friends, so in the end, I really only thought about myself. As a result, I'd pretended not to see all the glaring problems staring me in the face, which led me to acting hasty. What would I have done if I'd actually succeeded in seducing him? The thing tying our relationship together would've just been lust, which neither of us wanted to be the thing tying us together.

"I'm sorry too..." Mizuto said abashedly as my head still hung over the table. "I pushed you into a corner with the ambiguous way I was acting. I should've expressed my opinion sooner."

"I'm the one who didn't even try to ask," I said, raising my head and leaning over the table. "You tried to tell me with your actions, but I just said 'no' and pretended like I couldn't tell what you were doing."

"But there was still an opportunity to reason with you, if I'd just stayed calm. I know how you can go crazy when you're at your wit's end."

"Then it's my fault for going crazy!"

"It's not that easy to change your personality!"

"Of course it is! If I tried enough, I could've!"



“All that’d accomplish is destroying who you are!”

We both suddenly fell silent and stared at each other. Mizuto looked like he’d been caught in a lie. Most likely, I had the same kind of expression.

“What the heck? Here I thought this conversation would be more serious,” I said.

“That’s my line. How’s this different from usual? Actually...” He paused, smiling slightly. “This feels kinda nostalgic.”

*He’s right...* It’d been a while since we’d argued like this. This past month I’d been so focused on making him fall for me that I was always putting on appearances for him. I hadn’t tried facing Mizuto with who I really was.

I leaned back and lightly exhaled. “Then...how about we start this discussion for real?” This time, I wouldn’t put on airs or be wishy-washy. “What do you think will happen if we date?”

## **Sibling Meeting: Regarding after We Date**

### **Mizuto Irido**

“I don’t think anything would really change,” I said. Yume listened to my words, straightening her back. “The frequency with which we’d see each other wouldn’t change. Neither the way we refer to each other nor the way we talk to each other would change. At the very least, on the surface, everything would more or less be the same. That’s my prediction.”

“So what would be so bad about us dating?”

“The thing that’ll change isn’t something that’ll happen when we’re dating, but when we break up. Try thinking back to when we dated. Those love-addled idiots turned into people with a thorny relationship.”

“‘When’ we break up?”

“You can’t deny the possibility, can you? We’ve already broken up once.”

“So, what? History’s bound to repeat itself?”

“Who knows? I don’t, but it’s too risky to just toss the dice and hope for the

best.”

“That’s true. It’ll be bad for our parents if we aren’t on good terms.” Yume tilted her head, shaking her long hair. “But I’ve been thinking...”

“About what?”

“About how we’ve fought in front of our parents before.”

“Oh yeah...that was back during the first semester midterms, right?”

“Yeah, but when that happened, neither of our parents said anything about getting divorced, right?”

“That was just one fight we had,” I said.

“Thinking back, that was a display of one of your bad sides. You just assumed what I felt and tried to resolve things without even talking to me. Objectively, anybody would say you’re crazy for that.”

“Shut up. Would it have been better if I’d been direct? Did you want me to just come out and say, ‘Hey, just because you’re not the top student in our grade doesn’t mean your friends’ll like you any less, so there’s no need to study yourself to death’?”

“Yeah...that would’ve been pretty uncool.”

“Exactly.”

“But in the end, you just wanted to show off, didn’t you?” I fell silent. “I’m the same. That little speech I gave right after starting school, defending you, was something I did by my own decision. Same as when I went after you during the fireworks.”

“Both of us really like showing off to each other too much.”

“Yeah,” Yume agreed.

“We can’t keep doing that forever.”

“Yeah.”

“Fine... Sorry for not communicating enough. What else?” I asked.

“Well, going back to the topic at hand, I was thinking that fighting as siblings

every now and then is a part of the family that our parents envision.”

“The kind of emotionally fueled arguments and awkwardness broken-up couples have aren’t even remotely the same as the fights that siblings have. Don’t even try to equate them. It’s like how on social media you’re always shown all these accounts with black profile pictures that announce they broke up with someone.”

“Huh? I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I searched “breakup” on Twitter and showed her the accounts of broken-up couples in the suggestions. “Whoa...”

“Do you really wanna pretty much keep showing this fake act to Yuni-san for the rest of her life?”

“B-But...that’s exactly how we were when we first started living together.”

“Back then, we kept quiet about our past relationship because it had nothing to do with our family.”

“But you’re saying if we date, it won’t be the same?”

“Regardless of the timing, we’d have to tell them eventually. If we kept secretly dating, what would we do if they discovered us at a bad time? *That’d* be the worst.”

“What kind of bad time?”

“Well...”

It was hard to come out and say I was referring to what she’d tried to do with me on Christmas Eve. Yume looked away from me with embarrassment as she thought of the answer. But I mean, with a topic like this, it was unavoidable.

“Or what? Are you planning to date and not do anything?”

“W-Well, uh...” Yume began fidgeting and clutching her body. I looked at her with a serious expression. “No...that wasn’t my intention.” She kept looking away but managed to squeeze out the following words. “But yeah...I would do...something.”

“You’ve got quite the dirty mind, Ms. Honor Student.”

“Shut up! Just because you’re good at hiding your thoughts doesn’t mean you can talk down to me!”

“Let’s ease up on the unjustified slander.”

“You really think that you can pretend otherwise?! You had a *huge, hard* reaction to me in the bath!”

“Urk!” *I really slipped up back then.*

“If we end up dating again, you’ll probably be the one who has difficulty holding back. Akatsuki-san told me that it’s impossible for guys to hold back from doing dirty things.”

“She really loves filling your head with the most useless thoughts.”

“But thinking about it like that, it’d be hard to keep that kind of physical relationship secret from our family forever.”

“It’s gonna be hard no matter what we do. Keeping a secret from your family’s hard.”

“So, what are you saying? It’s better to tell them and get their permission?”

“Well, we’d wait a bit to see how things are going between us. If things seem stable, then we can talk about maybe telling them, but this is just a hypothetical, okay?”

“I know. Do you...think they’d be okay with us dating?”

“No clue. I don’t have any experience with having a kid and seeing that kid date my stepkid.”

“True... It’s hard to know how they’ll react...”

“It’s beyond what we can imagine. We’re getting into unknown territory.”

“So what if, hypothetically, we get their permission...”

“You’re adding a hypothetical to a hypothetical?” I asked.

“What else am I supposed to do? Anyway, what would happen next?”

“You mean what’d happen if we could date without having to hide?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s for you to say. What do you want?”

“Well...you know, don’t you?”

“You wanna repeat our middle school relationship?”

“Wh-What are you trying to make me say?!”

“What *I’m* trying to say is that nothing’ll change just by us dating. I’m borrowing Isana’s words here, but the only thing that’ll change is whether or not we can do dirty things.”

“That’s not true...”

I decided to challenge her on that. “Then why don’t you tell me what’ll change?”

“You’ll be my boyfriend, and I’ll be your girlfriend.”

“Huh? Tautology?”

Yume shook her head. “Those labels are important. I want to be the one filling the single seat in your heart.” I remembered those words. They were the ones I’d used when Isana had asked me out. “Both you and Higashira-san might think that nothing really changes when you start dating someone, but I don’t. Dating someone is special. You become irreplaceable. You become *special*.”

“In what way? How?”

“It’s not quantifiable.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Why not? It’s almost sickening how perceptive you usually are, but you can’t get this?”

Her tone seemed accusatory, annoying me a bit. “How am I supposed to understand when your explanation sucks so much? Why don’t you try being a little clearer with your words?”

“I’m telling you—it’s not something that you can be specific about! Just get it! You *had* a girlfriend, didn’t you?!”

“I can’t understand something I fundamentally don’t get! Don’t try to push your feelings on me and think I can! You’re seriously *such* a girl!”

“This has nothing to do with gender!”

Realizing she'd raised her voice too much, she gasped and covered her mouth. I lowered my breathing and listened to see if there was anyone outside the room. If we got too heated, our parents would hear us. After staying silent and still, I was fairly confident that they hadn't come to check on us or anything. We exhaled and looked at each other.

“Let's calm down,” she said.

“You're the one who exploded.”

“Thanks to who? Urgh! This is pointless!” It seemed that the amount that she could hold her ground also showed how much she'd grown up. “At any rate, it's special to me. But more importantly...” She paused before continuing. “I want it to be special...” she clearly declared. “Because I want seriousness to be returned with seriousness.”

*Seriousness with seriousness, huh? I'm still not completely clear on what she's trying to say, but I think I'm starting to get it.*

“Then I'll take this opportunity to come clean about something.” In order to return her seriousness with seriousness, I decided to be direct with my words. “I'm probably the type of person who doesn't like to be tied down.” Yume silently gasped, but I continued. “Regarding that: judging from my experience in middle school, you're the type of person who gets clingy when you get emotional. Thoughts?”

That's how we had gotten on bad terms in the first place. Though my actions had been the cause of her reaction, for half a year, she held it against me that I talked to another girl, even a little. Right now, I already had an objective. Could she really say that she wasn't going to get in the way of it? She couldn't. Especially not considering that it'd already happened once.

“It'll be fine...as long as you don't cheat,” she said, as if she was sulking. *See? This is what I'm talking about.*

“What's classified as ‘cheating’ in Yume's world? Talking to other girls?”

“I don't think like that anymore!”

“So then, what?”

“Urgh... Mm... You can’t hold other girls’ hands.”

“What about being in a room with them?”

“A-As long as you don’t lay even a single finger on them.”

“How would you even confirm that? Would you examine them for my fingerprints?”

“Argh! You’re talking about Higashira-san, right?” She downed the rest of her tea as if she’d become impatient and then slammed it on the table before staring at me. “I’ve finished my investigation, so let’s have a thorough discussion regarding her.”

## **Sibling Meeting: Regarding Isana Higashira**

**Yume Irido**

“Recently you’ve been spending a lot of time in Higashira-san’s room, haven’t you?” I was fully aware that I sounded like a girlfriend accusing her boyfriend of cheating. “At first, you said you were her tutor, but it seems like you’re taking care of her too?”

“How do you know about that?”

“She told me.”

“You went to her place?”

“Yeah. She showed me her art too.”

“And...?”

“There’s just one thing I wanna ask.” I thrust my finger towards his nose. “Do you really have confidence that you’ll never lay a hand on Higashira-san?” He clammed up. “Cat got your tongue?”

“Just let me think a bit.”

“So there’s a need for you to think?”

“Yeah. There is...”

“Wow, that was honest.”

“I’m just not trying to hide anymore, not at this point. I’ll come clean. There was a time that I lusted after Isana. I mean, of *course* I did.”

“Don’t try to make it seem matter-of-fact.”

“But you know how defenseless she can be, right? It’s impossible *not* to think about that kinda stuff. Even *I* don’t have my lust completely under control.”

“Higashira-san trusts you as her friend. Isn’t it rude of you to look at her like that?”

“I know... That’s why I never let it show. Do you know how much worse she is in her house?”

“Worse? In what way?”

“Last time I went over, I saw her butt in the mirror, and she didn’t even notice...”

“Huh? What?!”

“I told her to take a shower because she hadn’t taken a bath in a hot second, but she forgot a change of clothes, so she called me over to ask me to help her get some. When she asked me through the door, she cracked it open, and I could see her in the changing room mirror.”

I thought back to when I saw Higashira-san naked at Arima hot springs. My eyes had been automatically drawn to her boobs, but her entire body was fleshy and soft. Her butt was also probably...

“So hot...” I said.

“Why are *you* getting turned on?”

I gasped and quickly covered my mouth. *No. No. No. I’m nothing like Akatsuki-san or Aso-senpai!* “Anyway...” I got back on track. “You’re in the same room with her almost every day. Do you really think you can keep your hands off of her?”

If I were a guy, I wouldn’t be able to hold back for even a full week. Heck, I’d probably have touched her by the third day. Akatsuki-san and Aso-senpai



probably wouldn't have lasted a full twenty-four hours.

Mizuto rubbed his neck in thought. "I don't think I'd touch her. That's all I can say, based on my intentions."

"Your intentions?"

"I mean that I might touch her by accident. Like, for example, if in the future she starts drinking, and is a bad drunk, I'd have to be the responsible one and take care of her, right? I wouldn't be able to avoid touching her then. I might even need to help her change..."

"That essentially boils down to you just happening upon a lucky, perverted situation, right?"

"There's nothing lucky about that."

"Really?" I stared at him, narrowing my eyes. "Can you really, truly say that?"

Mizuto let out a sigh and looked down. "You really want to be thorough with this, huh?"

"Yeah. I told you, didn't I?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't see it as lucky. If anything, I'd feel incredibly guilty. I might feel just a twinge of happiness, but still..."

"See?"

"See what?"

"If you feel like that, you might end up touching Higashira-san by your own will."

Right now, Mizuto had a huge obstacle before him—touching a girl's body. When we dated, I didn't let him do that even once, but what would happen after he cleared that obstacle? What if he got used to it and then went after his closest friend, Higashira-san? It wasn't completely impossible.

"I'm not a fortune teller..." Mizuto said in a tired voice. "But anyway, you and me getting back together is just a hypothetical situation in the first place."

"Yep. Just hypothetical."

"I don't think I can completely deny the possibility of a world where I

accidentally cheat on you with Isana. Neither of us would mean to, but there are times when people lose themselves to temptation.”

“Okay...”

“If that happened, there would only be two things I could do. One: keep saying that I wouldn’t do anything with Isana. Or two: completely cut things off with Isana, friendship and all.” I fell silent. “But I have no intention of ever taking the latter option. If it came to that, I’d rather...”

“Not date me, right? I know.”

“Just hypothetically.”

“Yeah. Hypothetically...”

I didn’t want to steal Higashira-san’s best friend from her. If it came to that, I wouldn’t want to date Mizuto either. I didn’t want to think that I was so selfish.

“Ultimately, the only thing I could do would be to keep saying that I wouldn’t do anything to her and get you to believe me. If some kind of technology’s invented in the near future that measures interaction with the opposite sex, you can feel free to use it on me. But without that, it’s impossible to completely deny the possibility of something. You get what I’m trying to say, right?”

“Probatio diabolica, right?”

“Yeah. Even detectives who investigate infidelity can’t investigate fidelity.”

He was so right that it kind of irritated me. *Doesn’t he know that girls don’t want fixes, they want to be on the same wavelength? Shouldn’t he know? We dated.*

“So then, hypothetically...” I continued.

“Yeah, hypothetically.”

“If you did lay hands on Higashira-san, not by your own will, but by complete accident, what would you do?”

“Hypothetically, right?”

“Yeah. Hypothetically.”

“Hypothetically, I’d...” Mizuto sipped his tea. “Actually, what would you want

me to do?”

“I’m asking *you*...”

“But ultimately, this is a question of what would satisfy you, right? Then that would mean you get to decide the penalty.”

“You really only talk in solid arguments...”

“This is just a hypothetical. Don’t let it bother you.”

“Well, I guess in that case...”

“Yeah?”

“I’d want you to maybe...touch me the same amount?”

Mizuto blinked and then his lips curled into a teasing smile. “You dirty girl.”

“I-It’s just an eye for an eye!”

“Did your idea for punishments start and end in Mesopotamia?” he sighed heavily and then looked at his hand. “You know, when I went with Isana to the manga café...”

“Huh?”

“I accidentally touched her boob. So in that case, would I need to touch yours?”

“Well...I guess...yeah...” I slowly lost steam, and as I did I realized something and tilted my head. “Wait...in these situations, aren’t you the only one being rewarded?”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking.”

“Forget it! Never mind!”

“We’re just talking hypothetically here. No need to get so flustered.” Mizuto put his elbow on the table and rested his head in his hand. “Anyway, I’d just show you my sincerity with time and money in that situation. Makes sense, right?”

“If you have an answer, just say it from the start...” I grumbled.

*Money and time? Money aside, I’d be happy with time. I’d want him to spend*

even more time than he spent on Higashira-san...hypothetically.

“There’s no telling what the future holds,” Mizuto said, looking at the remaining tea in his cup. “It just ends up being hypothetical after hypothetical guesses. But even so...there’s something that I’m sure about.” I looked right into Mizuto’s eyes. “Let’s stop talking about hypotheticals and talk about reality.”

## **Sibling Meeting: Regarding Our Lives from Now On**

**Mizuto Irido**

“You saw Isana’s art, right?” I idly touched the top of the cup while asking Yume. “Do you understand what I’m aiming for now?”

“First...let me apologize,” she said, shifting uncomfortably as she looked down at the middle of the table. “I...heard your conversation with my dad. I know what you’ve been worried about.”

“Oh...”

I’d had a feeling that’d been the case. Otherwise, there wouldn’t have been a reason for her to have gotten so desperate to the point of coming on to me like that.

“I think I was trying to pretend it wasn’t real, honestly. I just hated the thought of not being more important than whatever you were single-mindedly pursuing.” I stayed quiet and continued to listen. “But in the end...I should’ve known that even if your feelings didn’t change, it wasn’t me or Higashira-san that you were trying to give a seat to in your heart—it was *something*.”

*Not a person, but “something,” huh? I wanted the seat in my heart that I mentioned to Isana to be occupied not by someone, but something. I wanted Isana’s talent, her growth—her story.*

“Seeing her art in person, I thought there was no way I could win, but...” Yume paused to prepare herself before continuing. “There was value in trying. Despite knowing I’d lose, I knew there was value in trying to win anyway. After all, you were seriously thinking about me.” Yume smiled, but it was without joy, resignation, or relief. Rather, her smile seemed... “That’s why I trust you.”

...Trusting. "I'm not immature, anxious, or paranoid anymore. I will *always* believe in you...or at least, I think I will."

I snorted at the last few words she'd tacked on. "You okay being so unconfident? Aren't you gonna be the next student council president?"

"M-Me?! Why?"

"What do you mean? It's so obvious that President Kurenai wants that to happen. We talked a little about what you're like when you're at the student council not too long ago."

"Huh?" Yume had a look on her face as if a dirty secret had been uncovered. It seemed that their gossip about romance had indeed been Pandora's box. *Good thing I didn't open it.*

"Don't worry," I said. "I didn't pry too much. She said that you're a kind girl at your core. It was as if she envied you."

"President Kurenai envies...me?" Yume asked.

President Kurenai and I were rather similar. Being considerate of other people was a special skill in and of itself. That was especially true from the standpoint of egoists like President Kurenai and I who had little to no interest in others. People like Yume were so bright to us, we had to squint.

"I don't know how you see yourself, but if a ball of talent like her said that about you, then she scouted you for a reason. You should take that fact into consideration and reevaluate your own worth."

"That's easier said than done! I don't have any talent like Higashira-san, and I'm not nearly as smart as President Kurenai!"

"I'm saying that there are things you can do that the two of them could never do." I rested my hands behind me, taking a more comfortable position. Then, I remembered the first time we interacted with each other on that night during outdoor ed. "I'm sure you understand the bitterness of not being able to do things that other people can." I was sure she'd understand, as someone who'd found it so difficult to even do something as simple as asking others for curry ingredients. "You've overcome those difficulties. Because you knew the bitterness of not being able to do something, you worked so that you could do

those things. That's the sign of people who are able to do things from the start as if it's natural."

"Huh? H-Huh? Argh! Don't try to confuse me with sophistry!"

"I wasn't trying to." *Maybe I should've phrased it differently.* "I've never envied you once. I'm sure that President Kurenai doesn't want to be exactly like you either. But even so, I think the way you live is something difficult to do. In other words..." *Oh, I get it now.* "I respect you." *Finally, it makes sense.* The biggest requirement for the Hiyoku no Tori to fly wasn't being blindly in love or having eternal love. It was respect—not neglecting the other person. *Wow. I can't believe how simple it is.*

A lot of people had made it sound so easy, and it was. This was a sturdier foundation of trust than anything. I'd been tunneling on the wrong thing this entire time. Kawanami had said something similar before about the answer being in me the entire time. Like this, we wouldn't be the Hiyoku no Tori, but the happy blue bird that flew to freedom.

"Respect..." Yume mumbled, reflecting on what I'd said. "I...respect you too."

"Thanks."

"I really respect Higashira-san too..."

"So?"

"Oh." It was as if she'd found the answer to a puzzle she couldn't solve this entire time. Her face brightened. "Ohhh." Her face relaxed as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

This was how she came up with the answer. A temporary answer. We'd probably spend our entire lives thinking and updating our answers.

"Yume," I said.

"Yeah?"

"I'm probably gonna go to Kyoto University."

"Huh?"

"Keikoin-san gave me advice. He told me that I can reach for the highest

academic heights as I can, and as a result, I'll find the people with the highest talents. That way, I'll get closest to what I want."

"Oh. Then, I—"

"Will you come with me?" I asked.

"No... I'm going to think about it after I become student council president. My point of view will probably have changed by then."

"That's a pretty big goal. But...I think it's a good one."

The two of us would walk our own paths. We had our own wings that would take us through the sky of life. But it'd probably be much more efficient to go through it as two instead of one. That's all there was to this. That's it.

"Well then, here," I said, pulling a gift box out of my pocket.

"Huh?" Yume's eyes widened. "Isn't that the one I— Wait, the color's different."

"This is something I bought yesterday."

"Yesterday?" I placed the box in front of Yume. She gently touched it. "Is this...?" she mumbled. Then she looked up at me, working up the courage to ask me something. "Can I...open it?"

"Of course." There shouldn't have been any need to explain what was inside the box. It went without saying that there was a ring with a wing in it.

"Wh-What?! Th-This—"

"It was a lot more expensive than I thought. I was running low on money after buying books for Isana, so I had to rely on my connections and get a part-time job."

Yume stared at the ring in the box, her shoulders trembling. I grinned at her while resting my face in my hand, getting ready to get my revenge for what she did on Christmas Eve.

"Want me to put it on for you?" I asked.

"Huh?!" Yume's head snapped up and she looked at me excitedly, but she gradually calmed down and her eyes slowly fell before she closed the box that

she'd been handling so preciously. "Not yet..." I could hear the determination in her voice. "I'm...going to wait until we talk to our parents."

*"Right..." Then I'll keep my ring sealed in my desk too. I'll keep it there until I can wear it without shame.*

"But..."

"Hm?"

Her passionate eyes burned holes into me. "I...might want this in words."

*Yeah. It's important to see things through. We're going to end the relationship we've had and start a new one.*

"Yume, I—"

"Yume! Mizuto-kun! Dinner!"

The two of us fell silent as Yuni-san's voice interrupted us. We looked at each other. It couldn't have been at a worse time, but there was no helping it. Before we were Hiyoku no Tori, we were siblings.

"Let's go," she said.

"Yeah."

And with that, we went down the stairs together to the living room.

## **My Feelings Are Decided**

### **Yume Irido**

There was a special on the TV about advice for the new year. After finishing dinner, I'd taken a bath, and before I knew it, there was only half an hour left before the new year. I was sitting on the couch mindlessly staring at the TV. I would've sat in the kotatsu, but I was worried about falling asleep.

Thanks to the nap I took, I wasn't all that tired, but eating and taking a bath automatically made me feel drowsy. Mizuto was sitting a bit away from me on the couch, and was leaning against the arm of the couch. Mineaki-ojisan and mom were sitting in the kotatsu, watching TV, laughing at the comedians' jokes.



There was a half hour before the year ended. I'd promised myself that I'd ask Mizuto out if he didn't ask me first by the end of the year—and he had yet to do so. Though we might have been on the same page and we probably felt the same towards each other, the actual words had yet to be said.

We should've learned. There was a limit to how much you could sense from others. That's why words were necessary. We needed clear, precise words. But we were slowly drifting towards the new year without our feelings being put into words.

## **My Words Are Decided**

**Mizuto Irido**

One day, I received a love letter from Yume Ayai. There hadn't been any string of words I'd been more nervous reading than those. But even so, she must've been even more nervous, watching me read them. She looked stiff as a board, like she could've keeled over at any moment. That exact image never left my mind.

The nervousness I sensed from her right now was probably different. The nervousness that had filled Ayai back then had most likely stemmed from her unease. Currently, I was anxious from the sense of duty burdening me regarding the decision I was about to make that would stay with us for the rest of not just my life, but Yume's, dad's, and Yuni-san's. This decision would affect all of our lives. It felt like the weight increased with each passing minute.

I could faintly hear the New Year's bell in the distance. When it rang a hundred and eight times, would my worldly desires be cleansed? Would I be rid of my doubt and be left with just logic? It was a stupid image. After the 108th worldly desire, I'd just have 109.

*Are you prepared?* I asked myself, but it was a stupid question. My answer was clear. I knew exactly what my answer was going to be.

## **I Steadied My Breathing**

**Yume Irido**

“Hey everyone, there’s just one minute until the new year!” the announcer on the TV said.

## **I Sat Up Straight**

**Mizuto Irido**

“Just ten seconds left!” the announcer said. “Nine!”

I put my hand over Yume’s.

“Eight.”

Our parents’s eyes were on the TV.

“Seven! Six!”

I leaned towards Yume’s ear.

“Five! Four!”

“I love you,” I said.

“Three!”

Yume’s hand trembled.

“Two!”

Our parents’s eyes were on the TV.

“One!”

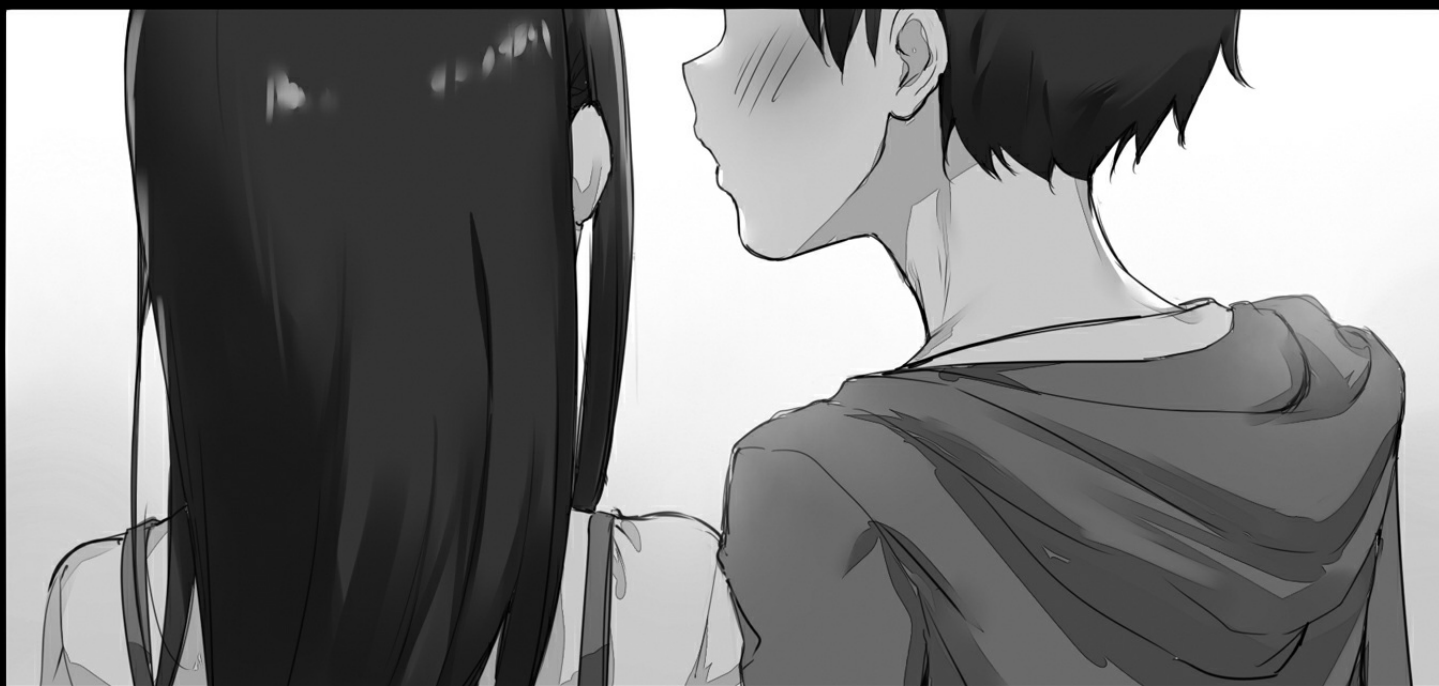
Yume’s head slowly moved back.

“Happy New Year!” the announcer said.

I looked at Mizuto’s face from a close distance.

“Happy New Year!” mom said to Mineaki-ojisan.

“Whoa! My phone’s notification sounds are going crazy!” I said before moving my mouth near Mizuto’s ear. “I love you too.”



Then I quickly pulled away from him.

“Happy New Year to you two too!” mom said, turning back towards us.

“Happy New Year, mom.”

My phone continued beeping.

“Happy New Year, Yuni-san,” Mizuto said.

Then, the two of us slowly let go of each other’s hands.

“Oh, right. It’s okay to eat soba when the new year starts, right?” mom asked.

“Yeah, sure. You prepared it, so it’d be a waste not to,” Mineaki-ojisan said.

Mom got out of the kotatsu and quickly shuffled over to the kitchen.

They were celebrating the new year on the TV while getting ready to go to the next segment. I looked down and smiled at all the notifications I’d gotten. This was how the new year—*our* new year—started.

*How’s that, Yume Ayai? I won.*

# Final Chapter: A Proposal Isn't Enough

## Outside the House

**Mizuto Irido**

"Okay, I'll be back later!"

"Have a good time, Yume! Be safe too, Mizuto-kun!"

Yume and I walked out of the house into the night. It might not have been snowing, but our breath was white. I kept my hands shoved into my pockets and gazed up at the twinkling stars.

Yume giggled, in a good mood, quickly moving to catch up to me. "Our parents didn't notice at all." Then, she peered up at me like a kid who'd successfully pulled off a prank.

I frowned. "It would've been horrible if they had."

"I was so shocked. I didn't think you'd be so courageous."

"Everyone has a time in their life they wanna play the brave hero."

"Just make sure you don't get so brave that you swim around in a big tank of water, okay?"

"That's a 'zero,' not a 'hero.'"

Yume giggled as we walked under the cold sky. After a little bit more of walking, we'd reach a major street and be greeted with crowds of people. But until then, this empty world belonged to just the two of us.

"We're both on the same page about keeping 'us' to ourselves right?" I asked.

"Yeah. It's not like I'm on the fence about telling them just yet, but..."

"But what?"

"It's kinda fun keeping secrets, isn't it?"

I exhaled, seeing Yume's shoulders tremble slightly. "You've become such a daredevil. Is that thanks to President Kurenai?"

"Who knows? She's much more of a coward than you might think."

"*She* is?"

"Surprising, isn't it?"

"I can't imagine..." *It's weird for present me to say this, but I really don't understand girls.* "But anyway, we'll stay a family for a little while longer."

"You sure?" Yume tilted her head and lightly spun herself to be in front of me and looked up at my face. "We're family even...outside of our house?"

There wasn't anyone around. The only thing illuminated by the streetlights were me and Yume. There wasn't a single person in this world who thought we were just siblings.

"Your brain really is perverted," I said.

"Look who's talking."

I put my hand around her waist, covered by her thick coat. Yume raised her head a little and closed her eyes as if she were entrusting the next move to me. Though this was a first, it felt nostalgic. We'd done this so many times before and we were going to do this many times in the future. I slowly put my lips on hers. Though I didn't want to leave the softness of her lips, I slowly moved back, and then we stared at each other from close proximity, our white breaths mixing with one another.

"I'm so glad that I got better at this while we were in middle school." Yume smiled with her eyes.

"Who do you think was the one who helped you get better, you clumsy girl?"

"Hm...who indeed? I don't remember."

"Want me to help you remember?"

"Mmm... I'm not sure if I'll remember from doing it just one more time."

I pressed my lips against hers again. This time, I pressed much deeper and held her tighter. *I'll keep doing this as many times as it takes for you to*

*remember—no matter how long it takes.* Our past bonded us. We weren't just siblings or a couple or spouses. We needed words to define us, but there weren't enough to do so. There wasn't just a single word that was enough to show our determination.

*A proposal isn't enough.* Our time together would show, and our lives would answer.

"So we're keeping our parents in the dark, but what about everybody else?"

"Like who?"

"Like Akatsuki-san, Kawanami-kun...everyone who cheered us on."

"Telling Kawanami sounds like more trouble than it's worth, but if you tell Minami-san, he'll automatically find out about it."

"What about Higashira-san? Should I tell her?"

"No..." I took off my gloves and pulled my phone out of my pocket. I opened my chat with Isana. "I will. I can show that I'm at least that dependable a guy."

I thought of what to write, but I didn't think there was much meaning to put too much thought into this, so I wrote a simple message.

**Mizuto:** Happy New Year

## **Creation**

**Isana Higashira**

**Mizuto:** Also, I've started dating Yume

The new year had barely begun before my heart was struck by a shocking revelation from a chat on my phone.

I released a meaningless, empty sound as I fell to my bed, face up. It was as if my brain had ceased functioning. I found that, at this moment, all I wished to do was stare at the ceiling. I was very...very surprised. *This is...quite the shock.*

I remained silent. I was truly, truly taken aback. But more than that, I was disappointed. It seemed that I still believed I had a shot with Mizuto-kun. How could I, when I'd been actively encouraging him to court her?! Women truly were frightening. They lay low until the opportune chance to strike!

But thinking back, I could've sworn that Yume-san had done something similar to me. At any rate, it didn't change the fact that women were frightening.

I paused my thoughts in silence before resuming. *No. No, the feeling I'm experiencing isn't disappointment as a result of my desire for him. This is the same kind of disappointment one feels when the idol they're a fan of gets a boyfriend.* Though you wish for their happiness from the bottom of your heart, you're unable to remove the sharp pains in your chest. Or at least that's what I thought. I couldn't really come up with an explanation for the whirlpool of complex feelings circling around my heart. No matter how many words I had, it was clear that something was threatening to spill out.

And then before I knew it, I was heading towards my desk. I held my pen and opened my illustration app. It felt as automatic and thoughtless as moving to stop my alarm clock. Though the canvas was blank, I could strangely see a picture there before me. All that was left to do was trace it. My soul was telling me I needed to.

## **More Eloquent than Words Could Say**

**Mizuto Irido**

The next day, I saw an unfamiliar picture had been posted to Isana's Twitter, which I was supposed to be running. The moment I laid eyes on it would stay with me for the rest of my life. The first thing I saw was a bright blue sky that made me think it was summer. But then, there was a plane trail that cut across it. Then, there was a lone girl in a sailor uniform staring up at it from a levee. Her bare feet, free from her loafers, were hanging over the edge. There was a smile on her face, but she was gripping her red scarf with frustration. The caption for it was simple but explained everything: "I wish you happiness."

"Oh..." After a long pause, that was the only thing I could say while staring at my phone.



I hadn't been wrong. Neither had she. Even though we couldn't date each other, I was sure we could change the world.

The picture Isana had posted was the first one to get over four digits in views.

*Thanks. Also, I'm looking forward to working with you. The new days are just beginning.*

# Afterword

## Romcom/Event/Horizon

This isn't the final volume. I started this volume of *StepExes* with no plan, as usual. Most of the time, I can see at least a scene into the future while writing, but this time, I could only see maybe two or three lines into the future. I was at a complete loss. But when I (careful of spoilers if you're starting here) reached the part where Mizuto talked about respecting Yume, it felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, because I finally knew what I was doing.

Ever since the novelization for this series began, I knew that I needed some way for Mizuto and Yume to promise their futures to one another. They started by breaking up, so I couldn't exactly wrap things up while ignoring the fact that many couples do eventually break up. This is one of the first reasons I knew from the get-go that I couldn't simply have a happy ending where Mizuto and Yume get back together.

I've been reading through four to five volumes of sole-love-interest rom-coms and from what I've seen, the protagonist and heroine usually get together, and the story shows them dating for maybe one volume at most. Well, I'm sure they have sales to think about, but I think that if you don't try exploring a way to pledge eternity to one another, then you'll lose what you need to depict. This depiction is a must for rom-coms—an event horizon.

This time, Mizuto and Yume were at least able to find a way that worked for them to pledge eternity to each other. But just as Mizuto said, the unimaginable eternity that the two of them are going to walk is a huge, irreversible change, and they won't have any way of knowing whether or not the strength of the respect they have for each other will be enough to survive that. So that's why they're giving it a shot. Who knows if they'll make it past the event horizon—the next volume.

*That* time will visit them sooner or later. Until then, I think I'd like them to

stay a brand-new lovey-dovey couple.

Anyway, this has been volume 9 of Kyosuke Kamishiro's *My Stepmom's Daughter is My Ex: A Proposal Isn't Enough*. By the way, I really was drawing for about a month after the new year started.

# My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"A Proposal Isn't Enough"







Aisa Aso

Akatsuki  
Minami

Christmas Party!!







Author  
Kyosuke  
Kamishiro



Illustrator  
TakayaKi



9

**My Stepmom's  
Daughter Is My Ex**  
"A Proposal Isn't Enough"

# My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

## "A Proposal Isn't Enough"









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My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex: Volume 9

by Kyosuke Kamishiro

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