14

Planet MUKURO

Spirit No. 6
Astral Dress—Zodiac Type
Weapon—Key Type [Michael]

Koushi Tachibana

Illustrated by
Tsunako



Date A Live

Planet Mukuro


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Planet Mukuro




“ ”
Shido Itsuka
A high school student
Tohka Yatogami
A Spirit
Origami Tobiichi
A Spirit
Kaguya Yamai
A Spirit
Yuzuru Yamai
A Spirit


“Ellen. That was for us. Let’s go.”
Artemisia B. Ashcroft
A Wizard
“I understand.”
Ellen M. Mathers
The strongest Wizard




“I shall stop the turning of this planet with Michael.”
Mukuro Hoshimiya
The tenth Spirit




"Look at these glass shoes. Aren't they pretty?"
Natsumi
A Spirit
"Um. Grandmother. I should really get going."
Yoshino
A Spirit
"This is basically 'The Little Match Girl.'"
Kotori Itsuka
Ratatoskr Commander
"Eek! Wh-what is this place?!"
Miku
A Spirit



“Eh-heh-heh! Just in the nick of time, eh, boy?”

Nia
A Spirit

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YEN ON

New York

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Planet Mukuro

Koushi Tachibana

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Yen Newsletter



Spirit

A uniquely catastrophic creature existing in a parallel world. Cause of occurrence and reason for existence unknown. Creates a spacequake and inflicts serious damage on her surroundings whenever she appears in this world. A very powerful fighter.

Strategy No. 1

Annihilate with force. This approach is very difficult, since the Spirit is extremely powerful, as noted above.

Strategy No. 2

...Date her and make her all weak in the knees.

Planet Mukuro

Spirit No. 6
Astral Dress—Zodiac Type
Weapon—Key Type [Michael]



Prologue

Awakening of a Star

A place that was and was not the sky, that was and was not the world.

A lone girl drifted in an impossibly dark space. Like a rock, like a speck of dust, like a bit of rubbish, she was simply there.

She was already becoming a part of nature, one part of the world. She floated through the tranquility of nothing, without resistance, without struggle. She did not interfere with anything, nor did anything interfere with her.

There was no one to see her, no one to hear her voice. In fact, there were perhaps none in this world who even knew of her existence.

But she felt no displeasure at this. Nor a hint of loneliness, not a drop of indecision, no mote of frustration. These were not the only things she did not feel. Her locked heart held no joy. No pleasure. No longing.

It was better like this. She wanted nothing other than peace and quiet.

However, on this day, an uninvited guest came to her. More than one, in fact. At first glance, they appeared to be massive lumps of steel, distorted human figures with long limbs. These foreign bodies invaded her territory.

She interfered with nothing. But a part of her heart remained unlocked—when something interfered with her, it would react and eliminate that interference.

She opened her eyes. How long had it been since she had faced any such interference?

"……Hm-hmm?" she murmured to no one in particular and stretched out her curled-up body. Bones and muscles

long accustomed to stillness cried out in quiet protest.

"…Ho-ho? So 'tis a flock of foreign bodies that would awaken Muku?" She held up a hand, murmured a name, and plucked an enormous key out of the air. And then she turned the end of it toward a massive shadow. "You are a blight. You would do well to leave."

That day, a catastrophe awakened, the worst the earth had faced.

Chapter 1

Shrine Visit

From what people said, more was not always better when it came to how much money to put into the offerings box during the first shrine visit of the year. Most everyone knew that you were supposed to toss in a five-yen coin for auspicious connection, since *five yen* and *connection* are homophones in Japanese. By the same logic, sixty-five yen would lead to a worthless connection. And given that there is no coin with greater value than five hundred yen, a five-hundred-yen coin gives no greater auspicious effect. It's quite awful a person could splurge and throw a hundred times that original auspicious five yen into the donation box and get no meaningful spiritual result.

This could also be taken to mean that the gods would not bestow their favor based on the size of the monetary donation. But once that donation reaches the ten-thousand yen bill level, it becomes *harmonious*, which is again auspicious. The whole thing is really suspect from start to finish.

That said, however, there was no way that high school student Shido would have the guts to throw in a ten-thousand yen note anyway. He tossed a five-yen coin toward the box as he offered his gratitude for the mercy of the gods and then pulled the rope to ring the bell, bowed twice, clapped twice, and then bowed again.

"…"

A wish popped up in his mind as he closed his eyes. He didn't actually believe there was a god sitting way back in the main room of the shrine granting the wishes of worshippers. To start with, there were eight million gods in Japan, an assembly of specialized experts. It was absurd to insist that any one of them would respond to all the many and varied prayers of the pilgrims visiting the shrine.

But he also didn't believe that the act of prayer had absolutely no

value whatsoever. Everyone wished, prayed, had their sights set on goals and objectives. But surprisingly, no one really focused too much on these in their everyday lives. Of course, students sitting for entrance exams and purehearted girls in love might always be envisioning their desired futures, but he thought that even they didn't often turn their eyes to the small joys they received on a daily basis or the environments in which they'd been placed.

People without disabilities didn't wish for the ability to live without external support, and people who were well-fed didn't pray to get by on the merest sustenance. These were extreme cases, naturally, but everyone was blessed in ways they didn't even notice. And they should all have been praying they would continue to be blessed like this, but they didn't so much as spare a thought for their good fortune.

And so Shido prayed. He prayed to the gods and made himself aware of his blessings anew. He prayed that the happiness he had now would last forever.

"…Phew." He let out a short sigh, opened his eyes, and lifted his face. He turned his eyes to either side of him to find girls with their hands folded together just like his own had been until a moment ago.

To his right were Tohka and Origami. And on his left were Kaguya and Yuzuru. They were all students at Raizen High School like he was, and also the Spirits whose powers he had sealed away. They were dressed in their own showy finest, offering up fervent prayers.

Shido thought that *he'd* prayed for a relatively long time, but… What on earth could they have been wishing for?

"Hmph." Beside him, Tohka opened her crystalline eyes and turned her face up. Her beautifully coiffed night-colored hair tickled her cheeks, and it had a certain luster in the sunlight. "Oh, were you waiting, Shido?"

"Nah, it's fine." He shook his head. "What'd you pray for?"

"Mm. I prayed I'd get to eat tons of yummy foods again this year!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Yeah, that tracks." His face softened into a smile. This was a somehow very Tohka prayer. He'd have to keep putting his all

into his cooking. This thought got him wondering what he should make for supper.

"And one more thing," Tohka continued.

"Hm?" He looked at her curiously.

"I prayed I could stay with you all forever," she told him, beaming like the sun itself.

He closed his eyes for a moment before smiling gently and nodding his agreement. "Yeah. That's a good one."

As if this was a signal, the Yamai sisters finished their prayers and turned identical faces their way.

"Oh! What did you two wish for?" he asked, and the Yamais, in black-and-peach kimonos, each threw a hand up in front of their face and struck absurd poses.

"Wish? Keh-keh!" Kaguya chuckled grandly. "That you would utter such a word. I merely came to gaze upon the potentiality of the god that rules this land. It did indeed shudder at my great majesty."

"Incrimination," Yuzuru said flatly. "That is a lie. Kaguya said in a quiet voice, 'Please let me reach the level of adult this year for sure.'"

"Could you not just go on saying random stuff like you're making a big announcement? I only said that I wished me and Shido could —" Kaguya started to protest and then gasped.

Called out by name like this, Shido did in fact get embarrassed. He scratched his cheek and averted his eyes. "Oh. Well, uh… I'll be careful, then."

"…!"

Kaguya's face flushed beet red, while Yuzuru chuckled meaningfully.

"Smile. That's great."

"Geez! Come on!" Kaguya whapped her twin sister with tears in her eyes.

"Evacuate. Ow, that hurts, Kaguya."

"Hey, come on. Try not to get in people's way…" Shido intervened with a pained smile.

They were at a shrine near the Itsuka home. It was already January 4, and while the crowds had thinned since the first three

days of the New Year holiday period, there were still worshippers trickling in for a late first shrine visit of the year.

Kaguya also took note of these other pilgrims. She took a few deep breaths, and her red face tightened as she recomposed herself. "…Okay. I have calmed. Divine darkness keep me."

"Y-yeah? Okay then, we should get going—hm?" Just when he was about to lead the group away from the main shrine building, he realized that one of the girls still had her hands pressed together.

In a kimono of white with a folded paper crane design, the girl—Origami—was muttering under her breath, intently offering up her prayer.

"Origami?" he asked.

"She's taking a really long time. Wonder what she's praying for." Kaguya curiously stepped over to the girl and brought her face close.

"…?!"

After a few seconds, she leaped back, her face exploding into an even deeper, more intense shade of red.

"K-Kaguya?!" Tohka drew near her, perplexed.

"Halt! No!" Kaguya stopped her, shaking her head back and forth vigorously, almost in a panic. "You're too young for this, Tohka!"

"Mm…?" Tohka looked at her with a frown.

"Wh-what exactly is Origami praying for?" Shido automatically broke out into a sweat at Kaguya's exaggerated reaction.

At exactly that moment, Origami finished her prayer, lifted her face, and turned it toward him.

"A-are you done?" he asked.

"…" She nodded wordlessly, rubbed her stomach, and stuck a thumb up. "Preparations complete."

"What preparations?!" Shido half shrieked, and then pressed a hand to his forehead as he sighed. "A-anyway, let's go. There are people in line behind us."

The Spirits nodded firmly, and as he moved away from the offerings box, he bowed at the people to their rear waiting for their chance to pray, as if to apologize for the commotion.

He stopped in a relatively deserted area and whirled his head around. "Umm, where'd Kotori and them get off to?" he asked,

trying to catch sight of his little sister. She and the rest of the Spirits had also come for this first shrine visit, but only a set number of people could pray at one time because of the size of the offerings box, so they'd split up into groups to pray.

"Oooiiii, big brooooo!"

He heard a familiar voice from behind and turned in that direction. His eyes grew round with surprise when he caught sight of Kotori. Just as he'd expected, she was standing there with the other Spirits, but something else had caught his attention.

Beside him, Tohka also cocked her head to one side, a curious look on her face. "Mm? Kotori, what are you doing?"

This perhaps was no surprise at all. Kotori was seated, pen in hand and writing intently, with the Spirits and other worshippers around a long table, the kind used in meetings.

"Mm." Clad in a red kimono, hair tied up with white ribbons swinging back and forth, Kotori showed him what she had in her hands.

It was a small piece of wood in the shape of what appeared to be a house, with a string attached to the top. An *ema*, another way to pray for a desired future outcome.

"Ooh, what's that?" Tohka peered at the small house intently.

"It's called an *ema*," Kotori told her. "You write your wish on it, and then your wish comes true."

"What? Really?!" Tohka's eyes glittered and shone. "Mmm. First, that Tanabata Festival, then praying at the box there, and now this? Wow! How come we get so many chances to make wishes?!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" Shido laughed dryly. "Well, it's not like your wish's guaranteed to come true. Don't get your hopes up too high, okay?"

"Mm!" Tohka nodded forcefully. "I know. It's gotta be tough for this god person!" She squirmed excitedly as she looked into Shido's eyes.

He glanced over at the Yamais and found that they had similar looks on their faces.

"We're here and all," he said. "You wanna do an *ema*, too?"

"Yeah!" The Spirits raised their voices in happy assent.

It felt pretty good to have such obvious joy directed his way. With

a smile in response, he went and bought *ema* for all of them.

"Okay," he said as he handed them out. "How about we find a spot to sit and write these?"

"Mm!" Tohka and the others eagerly picked up loose pens from where they lay on the table.

Shido followed suit and took a pen in his own hand before turning his eyes on the Spirits already writing their *ema*.

"Oh! That's pretty great, Yoshino!" he said as he peeked at her *ema*. On the right half of the piece of wood, she had drawn a cute rabbit with an eye patch.

"Th-thank you…" She lifted her face, her cheeks coloring with slight embarrassment. Dressed in her lovely grass-colored kimono, her hair tied up neatly, she looked a little more grown-up than she did normally.

"Heh-heh-heh. Right? You get it, little Shido." The puppet on Yoshino's left hand flapped its mouth open and closed. It was wearing a matching kimono, and its face was the spitting image of the one Yoshino had drawn on the *ema*.

"Yeah, it's really something," he agreed. "Such a cute *ema* might make it easier for the gods to find it, too."

Yoshino smiled, somewhat bashfully. "Oh… But then, Natsumi's and Nia's *ema*. Are also amazing."

"Huh?" He followed Yoshino's gaze and then gave a little start.

Two girls were sitting facing each other and writing on *ema* a little ways off from the others. But the mood hanging over them was totally different from that of the area in general. One girl was smaller, in a forest-green kimono, while the other was in glasses and a down jacket, but both were drawing illustrations of cute girls in long-sleeved furisode kimonos, making use of pens of several different colors.

From this alone, the scene wouldn't appear especially strange. But they seemed more like manga artists fighting to finish a script as a deadline approached than girls doodling on *ema* for a peaceful start to the year. And because both of their efforts were on the pro level (one was in fact a full-fledged professional), they were drawing attention whether they liked it or not.

“H-hey, girls?” Shido called out to them, and Natsumi and Nia looked up as if only now noticing him.

“…Ah!” Natsumi jumped, her generally unruly hair neatly tied back.

“Oh boy. Took ya long enough.” Nia wasn’t particularly dressed up in any way that could be called dressed up. She grinned amiably as she straightened her glasses.

“Ha-ha! That’s really great,” Shido said with a wry smile. “Guess that’s why you’re the professional artist.”

“Well, you know.” Nia threw her head back smugly, with a little self-satisfied chuckle, deftly twirling the pen in her hand. “Even if it is a little old *ema*, can’t actually slack, yeah?”

In contrast, Natsumi looked uncomfortable and hid her own illustration. “…Nia was so into it, I just sort of went along with her. It’s not like I’m drawing it because I want to draw it or anything…”

“Whaaat? We come all this way, and then you go disowning me like that?” Nia stared at the smaller girl. “A second ago, we were talking about walking the manga road together.”

“We were not!” Natsumi shouted, like this was an insult too far. “And what manga road?!”

Nia burst out laughing and brought her gaze back to Shido. “Aah, Nutsun, I really do have high hopes for you. To be honest, you’d be a great assistant. How about it? I can pay pretty decently. And if you want, I can introduce you to some editors.”





"…No, I'm good maybe." Natsumi frowned. "And what's with the 'Nutsun'?"

"Huh?" Nia furrowed her brow, perplexed. "It's a nickname? I mean, come on. When you're as close as we are, Nutsun, nicknames kinda happen organically."

"Uh? Wait. When did we get close?" Natsumi said, sweat trickling down her forehead.

Nia appeared not to be listening. She crossed her arms as though deeply moved and continued. "Anyway, so Nutsun is basically, you know. I mean, the first half of your name sounds like 'nuts.' And, like, you're kinda in your little shell there, yeah? Just peeking out a teeny bit like a pistachio through the opening in its shell."

"…Pfft!" Shido burst out laughing. The image of Natsumi tentatively checking things out from inside a hard shell was simply too easy to imagine.

"…" Natsumi stared hard at him.

He cleared his throat awkwardly to change the topic and turned toward Nia. "A-anyway, how come you didn't want to dress up, Nia? I heard Ratatoskr put together a fancy kimono outfit for you, too."

"Oh, yeah." She waved a dismissive hand. "I wore a kimono once ages ago. I thought I could use the experience as a reference for my work, but it was so hard to move in, y'know? And, like, I'm basically behind the scenes, outside the frame. I'm happy just watching you beautiful people."

"Yeah? I think you'd look good in a kimono, though," Shido said without thinking anything of it.

Nia's eyes grew round for a moment before her mouth twisted up into a grin. "Eh-heh-heh! What's this, boy? Trying to seduce ol' Nia right out of the gate? New year, new chance, that it? Pretty high spirits you're in, there. Playing up to the love interest?"

"Huh?" Shido furrowed his brow. "Oh. Uh. That's not what I—"

"Mm. Hee-hee-hee! So that's the game, huh? You got a fancy fetish, boy? You get all worked up seeing skin peeking out from a disheveled kimono? That kind of style?" Nia said somewhat scandalously. "Woh-kay, then. This is for you and your little interests, boy." She pulled an *ema* from her pocket and handed it to him.

"Hm? What's this? Did you buy two—? Wait." He dropped his gaze to the *ema* and drew in a sharp breath.

And of course he did. The illustration on the *ema* was so suggestive it was almost R-rated—a beautiful girl with her kimono half-undone, a boy on top of her. Next to this was written the very specific wish: *I want to someday encounter a lucky pervert like this. —Nia.*

"N-Nia, what even is this?!" he half shrieked.

"An *ema*. Duh," she replied, rolling her eyes slightly. "That's the first one I drew, but the lady there got mad at me. 'Blah, blah, violation of public morals, blah, blah.' And taking it home feels…I dunno, weird? So maybe you can take it for me?"

"L-listen, you…" Sweat beaded on Shido's forehead, but then he noticed that people passing by were glancing at what he held in his hands, so he awkwardly shoved the *ema* into his own pocket.

Nia laughed, seeming strangely happy. "Well, getting back to my point, I'm serious here, Nutsun. Oh! And I wanna hire you, too, boy."

"Me?" Shido frowned. "I mean, I get that you'd want Natsumi, but I can't do much of anything at all."

"No, no, an assistant's job isn't only to help draw the manga," she told him. "You making me supper, doing my laundry, cleaning my place—all that would be a huge help. Wait. That's more househusband than assistant. Okay, I just had a great idea. Marry me, boy."

"Whoa, hold up…" Shido gave her a pained smile.

"No, but I really do want a meal-ssistent," she told him, laughing out loud. "And on the manga side, it'd actually rock if you could help with sexy tableaux and hold Nutsun sometimes."

"Wha—?!" He gasped.

"…?!" Natsumi gaped at Nia, stunned.

Shido knew it was another one of Nia's little jokes, but the fact that Natsumi was right there and that they were both looking at each other made it that much easier to picture these "sexy tableaux."

Tak tak tak tak tak.

He had no sooner heard footsteps approaching than a girl in a

brilliant kimono was leaning far across the table toward him until she was basically lying on top of it.

"Daaaarling!" she said, with eyes that glittered so brightly he almost wondered if they were battery-powered. "What were you talking about just nooow? I feel like I heard something erooootic with you and Natsumi?!"

"M-Miku…?!" Shido's own eyes flew open in surprise at her sudden appearance.

Yes. The girl before him was a Spirit whose powers he had sealed away, and also an idol currently at the top of the charts in Japan—Miku Izayoi herself. But the expression on her face had left the narrow realm of idol and was reaching in an entirely different direction (to put it mildly).

"Oh! Is this about being Nia's assistaaaaant?" Miku, still draped over the table, threw her hands up excitedly. "If you and Natsumi are doing it, daaaarling, then I will, too! I'll do it, too! We'll bang out those tableaux, just the three of us!"

Natsumi frowned unhappily.

"Oh, for real?" Nia said, looking at the girl on the table. "That'd be great. Mm. But you're an idol, aren't you, Mikki? You must cost a bundle."

"I dooon't! You don't even have to pay me at all! In fact, I would even pay youuuu!" Miku said, popping up a finger. And then she was dragged away.

Shido looked over and found that Kotori and Tohka were pulling on her legs.

"Yeah, yeah. I know you're an idol, but let's not get too weird here," Kotori said, rolling her eyes. At some point, she had changed out the ribbons in her hair from white to black.





“Aaaaw!” Miku flailed her limbs in protest. “Kotori! Tohka! You’re no fuuuuun!”

“Hey—”

“Mm. Miku, quit kicking.”

“H-hey, that’s kinda danger—”

The balance of the table shifted, and all three girls fell back in a heap. Shido immediately reached out to try and pull them back—which was a mistake. He ended up dragged into the heap himself and tumbled to the ground with the girls.

“Owowow… You okay, gang—?” He jerked upright with a gasp.

And of course he did. He didn’t know how it had happened, but he now found himself atop Tohka, whose kimono was half-open.

“Wh-what are you doing, Shido?!” she shrieked.

“Gah!” He quickly turned his face away. “S-sorry!”

“Aaaw! No fair, daaaarling! Just with Tohka!” Miku moaned. “One of you taaaag me in! I’ll take either of you!”

In the middle of this chaos, Nia walked over from the neighboring table and picked up the *ema* that had fallen from Shido’s pocket in the tumble. And then she looked back and forth between the illustration on it and the figures of Shido and Tohka as she opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“For real?” she murmured, amazed. “This shrine’s blessings are wild…”

Which was when Shido realized that he and Tohka in that moment were in a configuration almost exactly like the one Nia had drawn on the *ema*.

“Don’t stand there staring!” he yelped. “Hup, hup… Hey, can you get up, Tohka?”

“Uh, mm…” Cheeks reddening, Tohka adjusted her kimono before taking Shido’s hand and allowing him to help her to her feet.

Shido bowed to the nearby worshippers in apology for the commotion before helping the Spirits to right the fallen table.

“Honestly,” Kotori said. “Be careful, okay?”

“I’m sorryyyy,” Miku cooed. “Next time, I’ll work harder to make sure I fall on top of youuuu.”

“…” Kotori grimaced.

“Ah-ha-ha!” Nia laughed like this was the funniest thing in the world. “I really never get sick of watching you guys.”

“This isn’t really anything to laugh about, though,” Shido protested weakly.

But instead of responding to this, Nia turned toward the *ema* she’d been working on and picked up a pen. “Now then! It looks like this shrine’s got the juice, so I better get praying to those gods. ‘Please make the boy my wife.’”

“Even if you’re just joking, couldn’t you at least make me your husband?!” Shido couldn’t stop himself from crying out.

“Ah-ha-ha!” Nia moved her pen quickly across the wooden surface to write out her prayer next to the lovely illustration. “I jest! I jest! Woh-kay. Where can I hang this bad boy, then?— Whoops.”

She’d returned the pen to its original position and stood up, the *ema* in one hand. And then she staggered and lurched like standing had brought on a bout of dizziness.

“…! Nia, you okay?” Shido hurriedly reached a hand out to support her.

“Goodness.” A relaxed smile rose up on her face as she placed a hand over her mouth coquettishly and giggled. “You’re my knight in shining armor, boy.”

“Is this really the time for that?” Shido stared sternly into her eyes. “Are you seriously okay? Maybe you should rest a little.”

“Not a chance!” she said with a shrug. “I mean, the first shrine visit is an essential event in the gal game. There ain’t no way you’re leaving just ol’ Nia out of the fun.”

“What are you even talking about?” Kotori came up from behind Shido and poked Nia in the head. “You were in a wheelchair yesterday. I’ve got a car waiting out back, at any rate, so you just tell me if you’re not feeling too hot. I have a very hard time believing you’re back at a hundred percent already.”

“Oh nooo.” Nia waved a hand in front of her face. “Honestly, li’l sis, you’re such a worrywart. I’m telling you, I’m fiiine. I stumbled on purpose there ’cause I was hoping to get a legal hug from the boy. You’re free to steal this trick, sis. I guarantee the results.”

“Wha—?!” Kotori furrowed her brow, and Nia burst out laughing

as she picked up her ema and walked over to the area for hanging the wooden prayer cards.

"Honestly…" Kotori crossed her arms with an air of exasperation as she watched her go. "She always dodges the question whenever things get serious."

It was true that Nia was always breezing along, always going with the flow, and it was hard to get any real hold on her. She was probably uncomfortable with any kind of serious mood. As soon as there was anything of consequence to discuss, she was quick to make a joke or run off.

However, Kotori's concern was only natural. Whatever else, mere days earlier, Nia had been quite truly on the verge of death.

"…"

Shido remembered the events of December 31 and gritted his teeth.

That day, Nia had been inverted through DEM scheming and her Sefirah had been forcibly taken from her. If Shido and the Spirits hadn't been there, or if they had been just a little later to act, Nia probably wouldn't have been here drawing on *ema* at all.

But they couldn't rest easy just because Nia had somehow made it out with her life. The enemy had gotten hold of the inverted Nia's Demon King Beelzebub, and DEM's attacks on the Spirits would no doubt only grow in intensity. This was yet another reason why Shido needed to pray to the gods for the continuation of this peaceful life.

And one more thing was bothering him.

"Kotori," he said in a voice too quiet for the others to overhear. "About that thing…"

"Mm-hmm." Kotori nodded slightly as if intuiting what he was asking about. "We're moving forward with the investigation on our end. But the fact is, we have no proof at present."

"You don't?" he replied, lowering his eyes. He recalled the words that had come from Nia's mouth the morning of New Year's Day.

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“Pure Spirit? But Spirits are all former humans as a rule, right?”

January 1, in the gray of morning with the year barely begun. Nia spoke these words sitting in a wheelchair among the Spirits, watching the first sunrise from the roof of the building.

Silence descended over them briefly.

Some Spirits were simply surprised; others tried to gauge what she meant by this; still others didn’t really understand. But everyone was shocked. There was a slight pause before each of their reactions, but they were all rendered speechless by Nia’s words.

But that was no wonder at all.

Spirits—uniquely catastrophic creatures existing in a parallel world. The cause of their occurrence and the reason for their existence were unknown. The one thing that was known was that they caused a phenomenon called a spacequake when they appeared in this world.

And from the examples of Kotori, Miku, and Origami, they had learned that a human being was transformed into a Spirit by having a Sefirah embedded in them.

As far as Shido and the others were aware, the Spirits were fundamentally different creatures from human beings, and the transformation of Kotori and the others was the irregularity.

But what Nia was telling them now directly contradicted this thinking.

Naturally, if they could easily accept this twist, they wouldn’t have been unable to speak. Unlike Kotori and the formerly human Spirits, Tohka and the other pure Spirits were ignorant of this world. Natsumi and the Yamai sisters seemed accustomed to it to a certain extent, but this knowledge had been gained by pushing up against the silent boundary between their worlds. Shido had never heard anything about them having originally been human.

But they also couldn’t simply dismiss Nia’s statement as untrue.

Although her Sefirah had been stolen and she’d lost a large part of her powers, her Angel Rasiel was omnipotent. With it, she could overcome any and all security measures to get whatever information she wanted. So it made sense that she would know things about the Spirits that Shido and the others didn’t.

Shido swallowed hard. If what she was saying was true, then the Spirits he'd thought were pure Spirits…

"Psyche!" she cried playfully, cutting through the silence. "Ha-ha! Did I get you?"

"…Huh?" Shido said idiotically, his pupils narrowing to surprised points. "Wh-what do you mean, Nia?"

"Hmm? I figured it'd shake things up manga-style," Nia said, and stuck out her tongue in a "li'l devil" kind of way. "Throw out some kind of big! shocking! reveal. But you sorta were way more stunned than I was thinking, so…"

Shido stood there stunned for a few more seconds before sighing heavily. "Listen, you…"

"Eh-heh-heh! Sorry, sorry," she apologized blithely, not the least bit ruffled. "But that'd be funny, yeah? If all the Spirits used to be humans. I just gotta push this theory every chance I get."

Shido sighed once more. Kotori and all the other Spirits also had a similar look on their faces.

"All right. We should be getting back. We're gonna catch our death of cold," Kotori said with a shrug, and the Spirits nodded before heading back into the building.

Shido started to push Nia's wheelchair in that direction to follow them.

She looked up over her shoulder at him and then said in a small voice, "Boy, come to my hospital room later."

"Huh?" He opened his eyes wide. Her tone was unusually serious.

But she was quickly back to her usual self. "What's up, boy? It's cold, okay? Let's go already. Or what? We looking at the kind of event where you generate enough heat to warm me up?" She hugged her own shoulders and squirmed about in the wheelchair.

"…"

Wondering if he'd misheard what she'd said, he pushed the wheelchair into the building.

And then, about an hour later, once the Spirits had returned to their

homes, Shido walked down the hallway of Ratatoskr's underground facility toward Nia's room. He checked the room number and then knocked on the door. A heartbeat later, he heard a muffled voice from inside.

"Yyyup. Come on in."

"It's me, Nia. What did—?" he started to say as he opened the door, and then stopped. Nia wasn't alone in the room. "Huh? Kotori? What are you doing here?"

His little sister was sitting in the round chair next to the bed, a Chupa Chups in her mouth.

"Mm." Nia nodded slightly. "I called li'l sis in, too. I mean, she *is* the commander of Ratatoskr. Thought we should have a proper talk at least once."

"A proper talk?" Shido asked. "About what exactly?"

"About what you said before, yeah?" Kotori said to Nia, flicking the stick of her lollipop up as she crossed her arms, a complicated expression on her face.

"Before?" Shido reflexively opened his eyes wider. "You mean the whole 'Spirits are former humans' thing? Wasn't that a joke?"

"Mmm. I realized after I said it that it's probably not the kind of convo I should be having with the pure Spirits standing right there. So I laughed it off as a joke in the mo, and it looks like you all bought it." Nia stuck her tongue out playfully. "Guess it's 'cause of how I act on the reg, huh?"

Shido rolled his eyes. "Makes me think 'boy who cried wolf,' personally."

"Ugh, a boy getting wolfy?" Nia snorted. "Nuh-uh, perv boy!"

"Oh. Uh-huh. Sure, that," he responded, his tone cold. But Nia did tend to sound like she was joking about pretty much everything on an everyday basis, so this was really the natural conclusion to draw.

But if she wasn't joking, then a simple fact raised its ugly head.

"So you mean, you were telling the truth before?" he said, calm again.

"I was." Nia stopped squirming and met his eyes. "But I maybe wasn't totally, either. Actually, that's kinda misleading, too. The one thing I need you to understand is that my all-knowing Rasiel isn't

absolutely omnipotent."

He frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Let's see. To go all the way back to the beginning—," Nia started, when the door knob turned, and the door opened with a creak.

Shido turned, curious. It was too late for any medical professionals to be making rounds. When he saw who had stepped into the room, he cried out in surprise.

"Origami! Mana!"

Yes. It was Origami, who had been on the roof with them earlier, and a girl wearing the same kind of hospital gown as Nia.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked. "Oh, did Nia maybe ask you to come, too, Origami?"

Origami quietly shook her head. "No. But her attitude on the roof was suspect. I wanted to hear the truth." She glanced over at Nia.

"Whoa, how can we be so in sync with each other?" Nia pressed her hands over her heart in a silly gesture. "Li'l Nia's heart is pounding like a schoolgirl in love."

"…"

When Origami remained silent rather than replying, Mana, on standby behind her, spoke up.

"I was about to go to the washroom, when I discovered your figure, Brother," she said. "And then I was like, 'oh, I was gonna ask you something,' but I lost my opportunity. I simply ran into Origami Tobiichi there by accident."

"Hold up a second." Nia arched an eyebrow. "What did you say just now?"

"Hm?" Mana frowned. "I lost my opportunity to ask—"

"No, no! Not that part! The bit before that!"

"I discovered my brother's figure?"

"Brother!" Nia folded her hands together like a devout priest receiving a divine revelation, an ecstatic look rising up on her face. "Ah! Mazing! Brother! One of the dream nicknames heard only in the two-dimensional world! This is the first time I've heard it in real life. Hey, hey hey, so can you say it one more time?"

"…Wh-why does this person harass me?" Scowling, Mana took a step back.

With a wry smile, Shido turned a hand toward her in order to introduce Nia. "This is Nia Honjou. She's a Spirit and a manga artist. I just sealed her power the other day. But some stuff happened, and now she's in the hospital."

"Hello! Hi!" Nia waved her hand back and forth energetically.

Mana bowed neatly and placed a hand on her chest. "I am Mana Takamiya. I am my brother's younger sister and a Wizard. Until recently, I was a combatant with Ratatoskr, but now I have become a prisoner by Kotori's hand."

"Hey!" Kotori raised a voice in protest. "Could you not make me out to be the villain here? It's your fault for going too hard!"

"Huh." Nia put a hand to her chin as though her attention had been caught by something else. "The boy's little sister?"

"Haven't I been calling him 'Brother' this whole time?" Mana asked defensively.

"Oh, sorry. I was so moved by the sound of 'Brother' that I didn't quite get to thinking about the meaning of it."

"…" Sweat trickled down Shido's cheek. In this, Nia was the same as she ever was.

"Hm? But wait up." Nia frowned. "The boy's last name is Itsuka. Is there some complicated family sitch here? Or… Oh! Is our little-sister lover *making* you call him 'Brother'?"

"Why is that where you mind goes?!" Shido couldn't keep himself from crying out.

Nia brought a hand to the back of her head and cackled with laughter. "Aah, sorry, sorry. I just figured that was about the only way she'd be giving you the moe name of 'Brother.'"

"What?" Mana furrowed her brow suspiciously. "Am I being mocked now?"

"Absolutely not," Nia said firmly. "I actually respect you. Stay this way forever."

Shido was certain that if Mana's nickname for him changed now, it would be squarely on Nia's shoulders.

"…Well, our story gets a little long, so I'll explain later," he said, pulling himself together. "Right now—"

"Ah! Yes, mm-hmm." Nia nodded like she had just remembered

something. “More of a crowd than I planned on, but I guess it’s fine. I mean, it’s Little Sister Number Two and Oririn. And you remember being human, so no harm, no foul there.”

“Hey! Ho!” Mana raised her voice. “Please wait. What is this ‘Little Sister Number Two’ meaning?”

“Huh? I mean, you know, he already has a little sister, so…,” Nia said as she pointed at Kotori, and Mana let out an unhappy sigh.

“Kotori is his adopted sister; I’m his real sister,” she said. “If one of us is number two, it’s Kotori!”

“Wh-who are you calling number two?!” Now it was Kotori’s turn to shout. Although it wasn’t as though she couldn’t understand what she was getting at.

“I mean, look,” Mana continued. “Even from the way we wear our hair: I have just the ponytail, and you’ve got the two pigtails, Kotori. And in terms of fighting style, I’m technique-focused and you’re all about force.”

“Could you maybe not go around calling other people tyrants?!” Kotori cried in response.

“C-calm down,” Shido said, stepping in between the two girls. “Nia, you’re sowing chaos here. Could you just think of another nickname?”

“Hmm.” Nia stroked her chin in apparent thought before speaking again. “Okay. Manatee.”

“I do feel like this is somehow resonant of a sea-dwelling creature, though.” Mana still seemed to harbor some lingering dissatisfaction, but she eased off protesting. She must have determined that it wouldn’t do her any good anyway.

“All right, I’ll explain.” Nia cleared her throat. “Spirits are originally human. This is true, but maybe also not true.”

“I don’t really understand,” Shido said with a frown. “I mean, *you* were originally a human. You have those memories from before and everything.”

“Mm.” Nia stroked her chin. “How can I put this? If we follow your line of thought, boy, I feel like we’d put me in the pure Spirit category.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” he said immediately. “You remember

being human, though."

"I said, calm your tits. I told you, didn't I? That's *if* we follow your line of thought." She held up a finger and continued. "I came out of that parallel world with a spacequake. I didn't know who I was or anything about this world, in fact."

"What?" Shido reflexively opened his eyes wide in surprise. This was exactly how it had happened for Tohka and the other pure Spirits. "H-hold on a minute. So then the memories you say you have of when you were a human being—"

"Now, listen," she interrupted. "When I first manifested here, I didn't know what was what. But there was one thing I understood crystal clear. And maybe this is something all Spirits have in common."

"So what was this thing you understood?"

"My Angel power."

"Oh…"

She was right. Tohka and Yoshino had known pretty much nothing about this world when they'd arrived, while Origami and Kotori had been suddenly given Spirit powers, but all of them instantly became masters of their Angels. No doubt, the Angels were equipped with the power to make their masters understand their own functions.

"Oh!" he cried out abruptly, as he remembered Nia's Angel and its power.

She nodded as if reading his mind. "I was flung into this world, not knowing what was what. My Angel's power was all I had, the only thing I understood. The power of the all-knowing Rasiel."

"You can't mean—" Kotori stared at Nia with serious eyes.

Nia nodded slightly before opening her mouth again. "Yeah. That's how I found out what kind of creature I was, how I got this power, why I was in that place."

"Wha—?!" Shido shuddered in surprise and furrowed his brow.

"I started out as a human being," Nia continued. "But something happened, and I was at the bottom of this pit, really done with life… And then, this Spirit showed up."

"…! Phantom?!" Kotori said. But that was only natural. The story

Nia was telling them now very strongly resembled the way Kotori, Miku, and Origami had become Spirits. The mysterious being that turned humans into Spirits was known by the code name Phantom because her presence was as ephemeral as fog.

"Phantom?" Nia parroted.

"…Yes," Kotori said. "A Spirit hidden behind something like static, the one who made us into Spirits. So you're saying she came to you, too, Nia?"

"Oh, I get it. So that's the name you gave her." Nia cocked her head to one side thoughtfully. "Hmm, I don't know if it was the same Spirit that came to you little sisters, though. The one certain thing is, I can't figure out who she really is either, if I'm being honest."

"You don't know her true identity?" Kotori asked. "You didn't check her out with Rasiel?"

Nia shook her head. "Normally, ol' Nia here hates spoilers. So I'd make a point of *not* looking up a character who's so obviously in the mastermind camp. But my curiosity got the better of me with her, and I checked her out. But Rasiel didn't know."

"What…?" Kotori frowned. But this was unnatural. Rasiel was the all-knowing Angel. There should have been nothing in this world it did not know.

"I dunno how to put it," Nia said slowly. "Maybe Rasiel did dig up the deets on her, but I couldn't read it. It was almost like… Right, if I had to say, it was like the text was garbled."

"Meaning? Did something happen to it?"

"No idea. But the impression I got was that she sort of dodged Rasiel's search. Or like she's jamming Angels with this kind of power, maybe. Or her power's too strong, and it made Rasiel's display all buggy? You know, when an enemy's too powerful, their power gauge kinda goes all *blam!* Bounces back?"

"Hmm." Kotori crossed her arms and scowled. While she understood what Nia was saying, something about the whole thing didn't sit right with her somehow.

"Well, anyway," Nia continued, "this Phantom shoved a Sefirah in me, and I turned into a Spirit. My memories of being human got all locked up, and I went to sleep in the parallel world. And then I

showed up in this world."

"…"

Shido was stunned into silence after hearing Nia's story. If what she was saying was true, then it was possible that Tohka and the other pure Spirits had simply lost their memories of when they were human.

As if guessing at what he was thinking, Nia said, "So I'm pretty sure everyone becomes a Spirit the same way. But it's not like everyone can peek at their own past like I can, and when I actually think about it, I really shouldn't have said anything in front of the girls there."

"…I get that," Shido said heavily. The conclusions she'd reached did make a kind of sense based on her own experiences.

"Plus, I only looked myself up," she added. "Sorry for talking all portentous up on the roof."

"…No." With a complicated look on her face and arms still crossed, Kotori flicked the stick of her Chupa Chups up and down. "This information is plenty useful. If your hypothesis is correct, then we need to completely revamp our thinking. I'll do some digging and see if any missing girls from the last thirty years fit our bill."

"Mm. Sorry, eh? If he hadn't taken Rasiel from me, I could've looked it up easy-peasy." Nia pantomimed flipping through a book.

"Don't worry about it," Kotori said with a shrug. "I'm just glad you made it out alive."

Origami opened her mouth with a follow-up note. "But Shido couldn't have sealed your power if you hadn't had at least a bit of Spirit left in you. It's still possible for you to manifest your Angel or a limited Astral Dress."

"What? Is that how it works?" Nia opened her eyes wide in surprise, and Origami nodded firmly.

"The power sealed by Shido can be made to flow back into you when your mental state is unstable or with the proper mental training."

"Huh… Unstable mental state, huh?" Nia murmured, then closed her eyes and began to grumble quietly.

"Hey? Nia?" Shido leaned toward her, alarmed. "You're still not at

a hundred percent. Maybe you shouldn't—"

"*…Ohhryah!*" she shouted, her eyes flying open. Her body shone faintly, and in the next instant, this light was coalescing in her hand to form a book. "Ooh! You're right!"

"Whoa!" Shido reflexively reeled at the sudden appearance of the Angel. "Y-you did it just like that?!"

"Eh-heh-heh!" Nia snapped a thumb up at him. "Don't underestimate the power of a manga artist's imagination. Just gotta picture myself running up against a deadline, and *bam*."

"…"

Did all the manga artists of this world face their deadlines in a mental state so unstable they could force an Angel to manifest? Shido felt like thanking them for their hard work and telling them to maybe take it a little easier sometimes.

"Hmm. Let's see here… There!" Nia licked her lips and flipped the pages of the book hanging in the air. But a few seconds later, she frowned, troubled.

"So?" Kotori asked expectantly.

"Mmm. It's no use," Nia replied with a sigh. "Looks like Rasiel's finding the deets, but it's like the function to tell me those deets is busted. I have zero idea what it says. It's basically the same as when I tried to find out about that one who turned me into a Spirit."

"Yeah?" Kotori let out her own sigh. "Well, that's that, then."

"Sorry, eh… Oh!" Nia exclaimed suddenly. "But looks like not everything's gobbledygook. Umm, the hiding place of the treasures in the boy's room is—"

"What are you even looking up?!" Shido shouted, outraged.

"At the back of his desk drawer." Kotori finished Nia's sentence without so much as twitching an eyebrow.

"A few issues in the encyclopedia case, too," Origami added.

"Hngah?!" A cry of bewilderment leaped unbidden from Shido's throat.

Sweat trickling down her cheek, Mana stared hard at the girls. "How are the two of you in possession of deets like that…?"

Kotori and Origami said nothing and simply averted their eyes. A look of guilt flashed across Kotori's face, but Origami's expression

remained unchanged.

Nia flipped through the pages of Rasiel as though checking how much power the Angel had left, and now she uttered an "Oh!" like she had just thought of something. "Right. What if…?"

She raised her hand and once again concentrated intently. Soon enough, the pen that went with her Astral Dress appeared in her hand.

"Oh! I did it." She twirled the pen between her fingers a couple of times and then slid the tip across the pages of Rasiel. Countless black lines appeared as the pen moved, filling the blanks with characters from a language Shido didn't know. Almost like—yes, she was doodling in the book.

"Nia?" he asked with a frown. "What are you doing?"

"Mmm. Applying the future record," Nia responded, the corners of her mouth turning up sharply.

"Future record, that's—" His eyes flew open wide. *Future record.* This was the ability Nia had once used on him that seemed like it should have been against the rules. It made whatever future Nia wrote down in Rasiel into the actual future.

"You can still use that?!" he cried.

"Mmyeah, no." She shook her head slightly, face still turned to the Angel. "That's like Rasiel's ultimate ability, mmkay? Totally unusable in this halfway state. I think even that DEM bigshot who got my Sefirah can't use it."

"Y-yeah?" He felt a hint of relief.

Once DEM's Westcott had gotten a hold of Nia's inverted Sefirah—the Qurifah—he had mastered the Demon King Beelzebub far too easily. The situation would be very dark indeed for Shido and the Spirits if he could also use the future record.

"So what, then?" he asked.

"Bit of an idea. Rasiel has pages that look for information and other pages that are blank. Normally, I use the blank ones for drawing the future, but…" She turned the pages of the Angel toward Shido and the others. It looked like an encyclopedia that a child had scribbled in.

He frowned. "What's this?"

"Eh-heh-heh!" Nia laughed smugly. "Rasiel and Beelzebub are a bit like two sides of the same coin. They can't both exist at the same time. So if the search pages are all messed up, then it'll prob'ly be pretty rough going for whoever's using Beelzebub."

"Oh…!" Shido finally realized what Nia's intention was. Kotori and Origami, who had also witnessed Westcott using Beelzebub, both nodded their understanding.

"It does hurt us a lot to have a Demon King that can know everything in creation fall into the hands of the enemy," Kotori remarked. "But if we can interfere with it like this…!"

"Well, it's an obstacle at most," Nia told her. "Think of it like the snappy search engine of yore getting suuuuuuuuuuuper slow."

"That's still plenty helpful," Kotori insisted. "Clever, Nia. Although I wouldn't expect anything less from you."

"Eh-heh-heh! Complimented by li'l sis!" Nia threw her head back smugly. "But it's not like our enemy's powerless now with me blocking the search function. You be extra careful. We don't need them drawing blood from anyone else."

"…!"

Shido was speechless for a moment. But he was aware that this was not the reaction he should be having right now, and he dropped his head. "Yeah. I won't let anyone else get hurt. And that obviously goes for you, too, Nia," he said, raising his head and looking her squarely in the eye.

She seemed bewildered for a second and then laughed, her cheeks coloring. "Eh-heh-heh! What's this, boy? You maybe like the older ladies? I had you totally pegged as lolicon, though."

"L-listen, you…"

"But thanks," she continued, somewhat shyly. "That makes me happy."

He gave a vague "S-sure" in reply, feeling itchy somehow.

Watching this exchange, Kotori sighed as she flicked the stick of her Chupa Chups. "Nia's exactly right. Ellen Mathers plus the Demon King Beelzebub. Supercharged for battle. That combo alone's trouble enough, but then we have this new Wizard on the scene."

"…" Origami twitched an eyebrow for some reason.

Her reaction jogged Shido's memory. She'd said something like a name when she saw the Wizard who had cut into the inverted Nia's chest the day before.

"Hey, Origami?" he asked. "When you…"

"…" Origami nodded as if guessing his question. "Yes. I know that Wizard."

"What?" Kotori frowned.

But Origami continued, the expression on her face unchanged. "Her name is Artemisia Ashcroft. A Wizard from the British SSS."

"…! Artemisia?!" It was not Kotori but Mana who reacted to this name. Her eyes flew open in disbelief, and she stared at Origami.

"Do you know her, Mana?" Shido asked.

"Yes. She's famous among Wizards," she replied. "I've also met her in person at a previous time. She's the most powerful SSS Wizard. The Hawk of Hereford. Next in line to M. If she's with DEM, then her call sign would come to be one lower than my own, perhaps."

"Sh-she's that strong?" he said, sweat beading on his forehead. Mana herself was one of the top five Wizards in the world in terms of skill, and the fact that she was saying this forced him to really understand Artemisia's great power.

"Yes… But." Mana faltered and looked toward Origami.

Origami nodded firmly. "The Artemisia that we know wouldn't join DEM. There might be something else going on."

"…Okay, right. I wouldn't put anything past DEM, either," Kotori muttered, a disgusted look on her face, and bit down on her Chupa Chups with a *crack*. "That said, though, whatever's going on, the fact is, this Artemisia Ashcroft is a hostile at present. I'll dig into her while I check out the Spirit's history. In the meantime, keep your guard up."

"…"

Shido and the others nodded as if bracing themselves for whatever the future held.

"Woh-kay," Kotori continued. "Then let's call it a day here. It's not good to keep our patient up too late."

"Huh? Are you maybe worried about me there, li'l sis?" Nia said

flippantly. “Don’t worry! Before a deadline, I’m all-nighters all the time.”

Kotori rolled her eyes. “…And that’s exactly why I’m telling you you gotta actually get some sleep now.”

But Nia apparently had no intention of going against the commander’s order. She gave Kotori a very deliberate bow before snapping her fingers to make Rasiel, hanging in midair, disappear.

“Shall we go, then?” Kotori started walking toward the door.

“Yeah. Oh! Wait.” Shido was about to trail after her when he remembered something and stopped. “That reminds me, Mana. What was it that you didn’t get to ask before?”

Nia’s story had taken precedence and distracted them all, but he was pretty sure Mana had said something about a question when she’d first arrived.

“Oh, that’s right.” Mana clapped her hands. “You know, last month, there was that time when Spirit power sent you on a rampage, yes, Brother?”

“Uh-huh… You, uh, really helped me out then,” he said, recalling the events of that time… Well, to be honest, he couldn’t remember most of what had happened.

When the paths between himself and the Spirits he’d sealed had constricted, their powers had filled him to the point that he lost control. It had been none other than the Spirits themselves—and Mana—who’d saved him.

“No.” She shook her head. “It is only natural that I would help if you’re in trouble.”

“Oh, but,” he protested weakly.

“You would also help me if I were in trouble, yes, Brother?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, of course.”

“That’s how it is, then,” Mana said nonchalantly, with no sign of getting overwrought or making him feel indebted. She might have been his little sister, but in this way she was actually quite smart, very mature. “But there is one thing disturbing me.”

“Disturbing you?” he asked.

“Yes. When I was fighting Ellen and I dropped down beside you, you did say this to me, Brother: ‘Aah, Mana. Thank goodness you’re

okay. Where's Mio? Didn't she rescue you?'"

"Mio…?" Shido furrowed his brow at the unfamiliar name. Kotori, Origami, and of course Nia all had curious looks on their faces.

"Yes." Mana nodded. "The instant I heard this, I felt a strange dizziness. Or more like a hazy image sprang up in my mind. And thus I thought mayhap this was a name connected with the memories of the past that we are without now, Brother."

"Yeah? But…" He grimaced. He'd never heard the name Mio before. And more importantly, he didn't remember having actually uttered it. "Sorry. I can't remem—"

Abruptly, he was overcome with a powerful dizziness.

"Huh…?"

Heaven and earth twisted, and he could no longer stay on his feet. He staggered reflexively and was about to drop to the floor.

"Brother?!" Mana reached out to support him, but his dizziness didn't subside.





His field of view was hazy, like a fog had descended on everything. A very small, quiet voice came to him from somewhere.

"Mio. That's…my name…?"
"Uh-uh… I'm so happy. That makes me…happy."
"I love you. Let's always be together, okay…?"

"Wh-what—?"

In his muddied consciousness, Shido felt like he saw the hazy figure of a girl with long hair.

A second later, he passed out.

◇

"That was a surprise. I mean, dropping out of the blue," Kotori said, crossing her arms on the shrine grounds and dressed in her finest kimono.

"Sorry…" Shido scratched his cheek repeatedly. "Didn't mean to make you worry."

"No big. I'm used to it," she replied bluntly.

But he had heard from Mana that Kotori had been the most confused and worried of all of them when this had happened.

"…What?" she demanded, narrowing her eyes at him.

"No, it's nothing." He pressed a hand gently to his cheek and continued, changing the subject. "I wish Mana could've come, too. I mean, how often do we get to do the first shrine visit of the year?"

"Well…yeah. She said she doesn't really like crowds, but her condition is stable. Maybe we should've just dragged her out," Kotori said, as she made a gesture like she was tossing a lasso around someone.

He smiled at the rough and somehow comical gesture, and her cheeks reddened as though she was a little embarrassed by his reaction, before she let out a short sigh and continued.

"…So? You remember anything? About this…Mio person."

"No… Not a thing," he said with a sigh. It was true that while he

had gotten dizzy after hearing the name Mio, he'd had absolutely no audio or visual hallucinations since then.

"…Yeah?" Kotori pulled a Chupa Chups out from the sleeve of her kimono and unwrapped it before popping it into her mouth. She flicked the stick up and down before slowly lifting her face and turning it up to the sky. "So, like, what if?"

"Huh?" He looked at her with a slight frown.

"What if you could remember the past and…everything about this Mio person… What would you do, Shido?"

"Kotori," he murmured, glancing at her face in profile, and then his cheeks relaxed into a smile. "Don't worry. I'm your big bro, Kotori. I'm not going anywhere."

He tousled her hair, and she immediately flushed a deep red.

"Wha—?! N-no one said anything about that, though?!"

"Ha-ha! Yeah? Sorry then. Anyway, c'mon. We'll do some *ema*." He held out a pen, and she took it with an indignant sniff.

◇

"If there truly is evil to be despised in this world, then it is not war, nor drugs, but out-of-order elevators."

—Ellen M. Mathers

With this aphoristic refrain playing on repeat in her head, Ellen climbed the stairs of DEM Industries' Japan branch office.

"Haah… Haah…" She panted as if invisible hands were squeezing her lungs, and her knees trembled. Sweat ran from every pore on her body, and her pale blond hair was plastered to her cheeks. "Why… Now of all times… Out of order…?"

"…Are you all right, Ellen?" the girl walking ahead of her said, looking back. Hair a slightly darker blond than Ellen's, blue eyes. She was wearing a suit that matched Ellen's, but in total contrast with Ellen, there was not so much as a drop of sweat on her own face. Artemisia B. Ashcroft, Ellen's subordinate and new DEM Industries

associate.

"…I'm all right," Ellen wheezed.

"But you're sweating buckets. Want me to give you a hand?"

"I do not need a hand."

"But there's still four more floors."

"I went for a swim in the pool before, is all!" Ellen shouted, unable to contain herself.

Yes. Immediately before the summons came, she had been exercising in the in-house fitness facility installed when the building was renovated.

She exhaled at length as she reflected on this. Her dashing form walking to the large pool, beautiful body wrapped in a competition swimsuit. And her beloved Prydwen gripped in one hand, crowned with the name of the holy mother shield. Seeing her, the other Wizards had gasped and stepped aside.

"Ah, that's… Executive Leader Mathers?!"

"Is she holding…a kickboard? Wait. Can the executive leader not swim—?"

"Idiot! Don't say stuff like that. She'll kill you!"

The exercising Wizards began to whisper and chatter. They were some distance from her, so she couldn't make out every word, but they were no doubt shivering with fear at her magnificent aura. With a smile, she tossed her hair back. She had no idea the level of esteem the plebs held her in, but it was no wonder that they did.

All right. How about a swim? After a few light stretches, Ellen took a deep breath and headed toward the pool. Naturally, it would have been impolite to simply jump in. She slipped her feet in first and slowly entered the water. And then, holding tightly to Prydwen, she began to kick her legs.

She didn't know how far she'd gone when she glanced aside several lanes and saw her colleague Artemisia swimming there.

…Mm-hmm.

While a Wizard's performance was determined by their handling of a Realizer, it was nevertheless good to have foundational physical strength. Thus, it wasn't strange at all that Artemisia would be there.

Ellen turned her gaze forward again and continued kicking her

legs, making sure to keep the water from touching her face.

Haah… Haah…

And then when she was reaching the limits of her stamina in the middle of a lap, she abruptly turned her eyes on Artemisia a few lanes over and found that the other girl was swimming farther back. Her cheeks softened into a smile. Artemisia might have been something herself, but it seemed that she was indeed no match for Ellen.

"Whoa, she's fast… How many laps is that in the lane over there?"

"I think she's on, like, eight or something?"

"What about the executive leader?"

"If you value your life, you won't ask that question."

Poolside, the Wizards were whispering to one another as they watched Ellen and Artemisia. Ellen couldn't hear the details of what they were saying, but they were no doubt discussing how powerful their executive leader was outside of battle as well. It was all fine and good for the plebes to extol her virtues at whatever lengths they wished. It wasn't that she couldn't understand that they would want to talk about her. She had no intention of taking any boorish action like trying to stop them.

As Ellen reached the end of the pool after kicking along for a while, an announcement came over the loudspeaker.

"Second enforcement division executive leader and vice leader, please come immediately to the office on the thirtieth floor."

…? Did…something…happen…? She lifted her face and was trying to get her breathing under control again when she heard a splash from a few lanes over.

It seemed that Artemisia had finally finished a minute or so after Ellen herself. Artemisia got out of the water, showing no signs of being out of breath, came to stand in front of Ellen, and held out a hand.

"Ellen. That was for us. Let's go."

"I understand."

Ellen ignored Artemisia's hand and tried to pull herself out of the pool. But her arms and legs wouldn't obey her because of the

intense exercise she'd been doing—or rather, because she determined that it was not good to ignore the kindness of a subordinate. She took the offered hand.

…And here she was now.

She snorted indignantly. "In normal times, this many stairs would truly be nothing to me. Today, I just happened to do some training that pushed me to my own limits."

"I was swimming in the pool, too, though," Artemisia noted hesitantly.

"You're on a different level, with how slow you were swimming!" Ellen turned her face away, insulted.

"Oh, yeah?" Artemisia cocked her head slightly to one side. She then seemed to realize something and continued quietly. "Either way, at this rate, we're going to end up keeping MD Westcott waiting."

"Ngh… That is…true," Ellen reflexively stammered. Yes. The office on the thirtieth floor of the building was that of the head of DEM, Westcott. "Fine," she groaned.

Artemisia nodded as though making up her mind. She walked around behind Ellen and hoisted her up to hold her by the shoulders and legs—the fabled princess carry.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" Ellen protested. "Let go of me!"

"When we get to the thirtieth floor," Artemisia said, and nimbly raced up the stairs at a speed that seemed impossible given that she was carrying another person.

"Eeyaah?!" Ellen cried. "P-put me down!"

"It's just a bit farther. Hang on."

"Ngh! Then at least change how you're holding me! Th-this is… It threatens to bring up ugly memories!" Ellen kicked and flailed her arms and legs as if to try and banish the shadows that flitted through her mind.

Artemisia sighed like she was dealing with a toddler having a tantrum. "Don't fuss like that. We're almost there… Hup!"

Tmp, tmp. With rhythmic steps, Artemisia came to a stop.

It seemed that they had arrived at the office that was their destination. Artemisia set Ellen down and patted her hips as if to straighten the hem of her jacket.

“Stop that,” Ellen snapped. “Are you my mother?!”

“Just let me,” Artemisia told her. “Okay. Are you not going to knock?”

“I don’t need you to tell me to do so!” Ellen said indignantly, and then knocked roughly on the door.

“Come in,” came a voice from inside.

“Excuse us.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

She opened the door and stepped into the office. She quickly looked around the space and found a man sitting on a chair toward the back. Dark ash-blond hair, sharp eyes. And a jet-black book floating above his hand. This was the person who ruled DEM Industries. Isaac R. P. Westcott in the flesh.

“Aah, I’ve been expecting you, Ellen, Artemisia,” he said, and then frowned. “You’re sweating quite profusely. Is something the matter?”

“…No. Anyway, what was it you needed?” Ellen replied somewhat evasively.

Westcott nodded to himself as he indicated to the book floating next to him. The Demon King, Beelzebub. The “despair given form” that he had obtained December 31.

“I did tell you that Beelzebub’s information search has been obstructed for a few days now, yes?” he said.

“Yes.” She nodded. “Something about some kind of interference from the sister side.”

“Mm. The omnipotence faculty has been largely shackled due to this interference,” he said sadly. “A terrible miscalculation. It’s taken this much time to simply decipher the information I’d been looking up at the time.”

Ellen’s eyes flew open. “Y-you mean?”

“Yes.” Westcott nodded theatrically, his lips turning up into a grin. “I’ve finally confirmed the location of a new Spirit.”

“…!” Ellen took a sharp breath and clenched her hands into fists. “She can’t actually already be in this world, can she? Where exactly?”

“Heh-heh.” Westcott chuckled and raised a finger. And held it up

to the heavens.

Chapter 2

Space Spirit

Monday, January 9. The municipal Raizen High School, deserted until yesterday, now saw a flood of students making their way through its doors. They slipped through the gates, their breath puffing into white clouds, and headed to their classrooms, saying hello to classmates along the way. The details of their conversations varied, but the majority of them included the words "Happy New Year" and "Good to see you again." It was the day of the opening ceremony, the end of the holiday that straddled the end of the year and the start of the third term at Raizen High School.

"Mm…" Shido walked toward the school with Tohka, rolling his shoulders lightly as though to get comfortable in his school uniform. It had been a mere two weeks since he'd last worn it, and yet it felt like it had been a hundred years since he had slipped his arms through the sleeves of this blazer.

That, however, was only natural. Far too many things had happened over this winter break in addition to the usual chaos around the shift from one school year to the next. Shido thought about all this as he stretched, until he heard the voice of a boy from his right.

"Hey, how ya been?"

He looked over to find a boy standing there with his hair pushed back with wax. It was his classmate Hiroto Tonomachi.

Shido couldn't help feeling it had been a really long time since he'd seen this friend. Strangely moved, he raised a hand in greeting. "Oh, hey, Tonomachi. Happy New Year."

"Oh yeah. Happy, happy," his friend replied unceremoniously. "So, like, what exactly did you *do*, man?"

"Huh?" Shido frowned at the sudden question.

Tonomachi held up his thumb and jerked it backward. Shido peered out from behind him in the direction of this thumb and caught sight of three girls shooting glances at him and whispering to one another.

One taller in a worn-out uniform, one medium-statured who practically screamed that no personality was her personality, and a smaller one in glasses. From the right, they were Ai, Mai, and Mii. The chatty threesome was the pride of Year 11, Class 4. And they were putting on a very obvious show of talking about him. This would indeed catch Tonomachi's attention.

"Oh…" Shido wasn't sure how to respond, and sweat beaded on his forehead.

He maybe… It wasn't as though he didn't have some clue as to why. From what he'd heard, he'd fallen into a state of almost intoxication when the Spirit power had built up inside of him the previous month and he'd rather passionately tried to seduce all three of them. Naturally, he had absolutely no memory of this, but…that wouldn't matter to them at all.

"…No idea," he said, more or less evasively. There was no need for him to spread rumors about himself.

"Huh. Well, sure. Anyway, I saw Tama outside the teachers' room and—" Tonomachi started to say, but as if to cut him off, the bell rang. "Whoops. Already that time, huh?" He moved toward his own desk.

"Hey, whoa," Shido called to stop him. "What about Tama?"

"Mm." Tonomachi waved a dismissive hand. "She'll be here soon. See for yourself."

"…"

Shido furrowed his brow. He was overcome with a very bad feeling. In another incident he himself did not remember during the Spirit power fiasco, he had apparently passionately begged Tama to marry him.

But Ratatoskr analyst and his assistant homeroom teacher Reine Murasame was supposed to have taken care of all that somehow.

Shido was racked with anxiety as the door to the classroom opened, and his homeroom teacher, Tamae Okamine—aka Tama—

appeared, her small figure cloaked in an almost visible cloud of gloom.

"Whoa…!" He gasped reflexively.

His classmates also seemed to have a similar opinion. They all began to whisper at this unusual look for their teacher.

"Mm. Shido, what's wrong with Ms. Tama?" Tohka asked, quietly worried at the desk to one side of him. "She looks pretty depressed."

"R-right. What *is* wrong, I wonder," he replied, sweat trickling down his cheek.

Tama seemed not to hear any of the whispers as she trudged forward and tossed the attendance ledger onto the podium. And then she greeted them in the most robotic way.

"…Happy New Year, class. How was your winter break? Christmas, New Year's Eve, New Year's Day… I'm sure you had a lot of fun…"

She wasn't saying anything particularly strange, but all his classmates gulped as one.

Tama continued with a vacant expression, twisting up the corners of her lips. "…How old will you all be this year? You're moving from Year 11 to Year 12, so I guess that'd be eighteen. Those of you born earlier will maybe be turning seventeen. My birthday's in March, though. How old do you think I'll be?"

The famed Teacher Tama of Raizen was on the edge of a cliff, a twenty-nine-year-old maiden. The whole class knew this. But no one would say it out loud.

She whirled around to look at the class before forcing an exhausted smile onto her face. "I… I will finally graduate from almost thirty this year to actually thirty. Hee-hee… Hee-hee-hee… Amazing, hm?"

"T-Tama…," Ai said, her voice quiet, as if the words of the woman before her were in fact too painful to simply let lie.

Tama turned in her direction, the fluorescent light reflecting back and making the glasses she wore flash with light. "Shut up. When you talk to me from now on, please say 'sir' before and after you speak."

"S-sir. Yes, sir." Ai obeyed with a bow as if overwhelmed. "Sir.

Tama, what happened…? Sir.”

Tama stretched her lips out into a smile of pure ice. “Nothing happened. I’m fine. I simply had some happy news. Eri, my best friend since elementary, is getting married next month. Hee-hee-hee, I’m so happy. She’s such a great girl. I’m sure she’ll be an excellent wife. We always spent our birthdays and Christmases together every year, and we gave each other chocolates on Valentine’s Day. She gets all weepy after a couple of drinks, and this one time, she went and hugged me and was like, ‘Waaah, if we turn thirty and we’re still not married, please take me as your wife, Tamaaaa!’ Her fiancé is a doctor, two years younger than she is. We went out for drinks at the end of the year before last, just us girls—no guys to hit on us—and Eri drank too much and fell and hurt her foot. But, like, the doctor who saw her fell in love at first sight and really went on the offensive, I guess. I was also there. But I’d been drinking, too, so I was drowsing just a bit in the waiting room. I never dreamed my friend was falling in love in the next room, not the girl who’d been with me for so many years. Who would? You really do never know what’s going to happen in this life. No, but it’s honestly great. I’ve always thought that the men of this world were fools to leave a girl like Eri sitting on the sidelines. She really is a great girl. Beautiful face, tall and slim—she’s like a model. And I figured, well, if a girl like Eri can’t get married, then I’m still okay. But she went behind my back and got herself someone. Now that I’m thinking about it, it’s like, oh, wait, we didn’t have as many girls’ nights last year, either. But this isn’t all on me. I mean, she didn’t even tell me. Just sent me that wedding announcement out of the blue. Like she was embarrassed to say anything. Although, well, that’s the kind of thing that tickles the masculine spirit. I really have to learn from her there.”

Tama rattled on lifelessly, and then collapsed forward onto the podium.



"Heh… Heh-heh-heh. Another… Another one of my classmates married… Dammit! Damn it all to hell! All the good ones get married."

And then, almost as though she had been possessed, she began to mutter and grumble.

"All of them, they all leave me behind… Tell me… How many more times exactly will I have to sit through another one of your weddings?!"

"S-sir." Ai tried again. "Um. Sir…"

"Just you wait, all of you. I'll be there soon… Ha. Ha-ha. Left on the shelf again. The god of marriage hates me," Tama said, and laughed like something had snapped inside of her.

The class looked at one another, bewildered.

After a period of unsettling laughter, Tama abruptly fell silent and opened the attendance ledger. "…Okay, I'll take attendance now," she stated, as though nothing had happened.

""""No, no, no, no!"""" Ai-Mai-Mii cried as one, shaking their heads emphatically from side to side.

"Sir. This is totally not okay. Sir!"

"Sir. You should rest a little. Sir!"

"What are you talking about? I'm fiiiine," Tama replied with a bright smile. "Although, if the devil came to me and offered to grant me one wish in exchange for my soul, I might ask him to please drop a giant meteorite on Japan next month."

"Sir. This is exactly what we're talking about! Sir!"

"Sir. You sound like a little kid before the end of a vacation, sir!"

"Hee-hee-hee. I'm just kidding. *Honestly.* Fiddle-dee-dall, meteorite fall!" She picked up a piece of chalk and waved it around like the wand of a magical girl before turning it sharply toward the window.

In the next instant, the tremendous sound of an explosion boomed into their ears from the courtyard, and an intense shock wave rocked the classroom. The school itself shuddered and shook, the windows shattered, the curtains were almost ripped free of their rods. The students screamed and leaped away from their desks or dove underneath them.

"Whoa!"

"Aaaah!"

"Wh-what the…?!"

Shido clamped his hands over his ringing ears and lifted his face. Bits of glass fell from his uniform as he stood up.

"Shido. There." Origami pointed outside, apparently the first to grasp the situation.

As broken glass crunched underfoot, he approached the windows and timidly peered outside.

The track area, a massive field in the courtyard, was now a bowl; the earth had been gouged away completely. And it wasn't only the courtyard. The road that passed alongside it and even the vacant lot across from that looked like excavation sites. Almost like a spacequake had wreaked its havoc on the area.

But the spacequake alarm hadn't gone off. Shido frowned as he looked out on the damage.

"…Hm?" he said as he spotted a black lump in the center of the gutted landscape.

From here, he couldn't make out the details. It looked like part of a broken machine or a large rock. But it was obvious that whatever it was, the impact when it had hit the ground had caused the earlier shock wave and this crater. And the fact that it had made this impact meant that the lump had come from somewhere.

Taking a cue from Shido and Origami, the other students also swarmed to the windows to peer out into the courtyard and seemed to reach the same conclusion as Shido.

Tonomachi, stunned, turned his face up to the sky. "…A-a meteorite…?"

"…Haunh!" The moment she heard those words, Tama grew pale and dropped to her knees.

"G-gaaaaaah!" someone cried. "Tama called down a meteoriiiiiiiite?!"

"She signed a deal with the devil without even knowing it?!"

"Tamaaaaaa! Get the hell ouuuuuuut!"

While the students screeched and screamed, Shido started to race over to the panic-stricken Tama. But as if timed to interrupt his

act, the cell phone in his pocket began to vibrate. The name on the screen was Kotori Itsuka. He very much was not supposed to pull out his phone in the middle of homeroom, but this was an emergency. He moved to one end of the classroom as he pushed the ANSWER button.

"Shido! You okay?!" Kotori's panicked voice hit his eardrum as soon as he picked up.

"Y-yeah," he said quickly. "Listen, Kotori. Tama made a deal with the devil, and a meteorite—"

"*Uh? What are you talking about?*" she snapped. "*Forget that. You need to come to the temporary command room with Tohka and the other Spirits* right now!"

"Huh…? You mean—?" He gasped, and his eyes flew open.

"Yes. We've got a Spirit."

◇

After ten minutes in the car that Kotori had sent for them, Shido, Tohka, Origami, assistant homeroom teacher Reine, and the Yamai sisters from the class next door arrived at Ratatoskr's basement bunker. Normally, the secret organization used the airship *Fraxinus* as its command center, but said airship was currently undergoing repairs to damage sustained in a previous battle. So their base for the time being was in an underground facility not too far from Shido's house.

Once they were through the strict security, Shido left Tohka and the other Spirits and headed toward the command room. The Spirits seemed a little put out when they were told to remain on standby in another room, but if there really was a new Spirit in play, then Shido would have no choice but to go on the offensive with her. It was better for everyone involved if they weren't compelled to watch that.

Upon entering the command room, he immediately felt the tension in the air. The crew of *Fraxinus* was already there in full force, each of them hard at work at their own consoles, staring intently at the many monitors in the room.

"So you're here," Kotori said, looking Shido's way from where she was seated in the captain's chair (although, strictly speaking, this was misleading since this was not a ship) in the center of the command room. The ribbons that tied her hair back were black, naturally. She was currently wearing a military uniform, with a crimson jacket draped over her shoulders.

"…Sorry we took so long." Reine, who had ridden from school with Shido and the Spirits, slipped off the white lab coat she was wearing and sat down in an empty chair.

"Just glad you're here," Kotori replied briefly, and returned her gaze to Shido. "So the situation."

"Right…" He paused to gather his thoughts. "What is even happening? You said that meteorite was the work of a Spirit? The spacequake alarm didn't go off, though. Does this mean a quiet manifestation? And targeting the school out of nowhere, it's… You don't think she was actually gunning for me and the Spirits, do you?"

"Hmm." Kotori stroked her chin, a troubled look on her face. "Very good question. To be honest, I can't really say."

It was his turn to frown. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"Mm. Can we get the video?" Kotori said, and the crew began to tap at their consoles.

Soon enough, a world map was displayed on the large monitor in front of them. Various spots on continents, islands, and oceans were marked conspicuously in red.

"What's this?" Shido asked, staring at the monitor.

"Mysterious object appeared in the high school courtyard, yeah?" Kotori said in response. "These marks indicate places where the same phenomenon happened at basically the same time."

"Wha…?!" He automatically furrowed his brow and stared at the world map. "*All* of these at the same time?"

"Yes." She nodded firmly. "It's hard to get your head around immediately. 'Bullets' were fired at forty-two locations around the world, which include DEM facilities and several anti-Spirit team bases in different countries. We can't discount the possibility that these were purposely targeted, judging from the faint Spirit waves and the magic signal."

“W-wait a second,” Shido stammered. “Meteorites fell on South America, too! That’s the opposite side of the world! If these all happened all at once… You’re not telling me there’s more than one Spirit? Like the Yamais?!”

“…No, that’s not it,” Kotori responded, slowly shaking her head. “It’s definitely the one Spirit. And to be precise, they’re not meteorites.”

Shido seemed slightly perplexed, and she saw that her explanation was insufficient. She flicked up the stick of the Chupa Chups in her mouth and let fly orders to her crew.

“Picture’s worth a thousand words. Get that shot up for me.”

“Yes, sir!” Mr. President Mikimoto said, and tapped at his console, where a new image replaced the world map on the monitor.

“…”

Shido inhaled sharply at the fantastical sight.

An inky darkness spread out over the screen, countless stars shining. For a second, he thought it was the night sky. But he quickly realized he was mistaken when he saw a gentle circle carved out at the bottom of the screen. This swirl of dazzling white and blue was without a doubt the mother planet where he lived, the earth itself.

“Space…,” he half whispered.

Yes. This was literally the neat separation of heaven and earth.

And in the middle of this emptiness floated a girl, without care.

The first thing that caught his eye was her beautiful hair. It gleamed as though it emitted its own light in the darkness of space, vibrant and golden and so long that he was reminded of the fairy tale “Rapunzel.” It spread out around her like a gilded halo, drifting through the gravity-free expanse. The Astral Dress wrapped around her body sparkled with patterns like constellations, and her hands gripped something like an enormous staff.

“Is that…her?” Shido asked tentatively.

“Yes.” Kotori’s nod was decisive. “This is the first time we’ve seen this Spirit. She hasn’t been given a formal code name, but for expediency’s sake, we’re calling her Zodiac.”

“Never before?” He turned to look at his little sister in disbelief.

“Nope. Of course, we can’t ignore the possibility that we just

haven’t measured her before. But at the very least, there’s no Spirit like her in the Ratatoskr database. Which means there’s a lot we don’t know—Angel, Astral Dress, abilities, personality.”

“I guess so,” Shido agreed. “Then you don’t know yet how she attacked the earth, either?”

Kotori shrugged and sighed. “Truth is, there’s a reason why we were able to pinpoint her position.”

“A reason?” he parroted.

“Yes. Rewind the video three hours,” she commanded.

“Yes, sir!”

At the same time as the crew responded, the image shown on the monitor changed. The background of space was the same, but Zodiac was curled up as though in sleep, simply floating.

“What is…?” Shido started to say, and then stopped.

Because a new shadow appeared on the screen.

“Wha…?! An airship…?!” His eyes opened wide, his shock obvious on his face.

Three massive ships flew up from earth. And they weren’t alone. He could see a number of almost insect-like shapes clinging to the ships. But when he really looked hard, he found that each and every one of them was a mechanical doll with a twisted human shape. There was no mistake—these were Bandersnatches, DEM Industries’ uncrewed weapons.

“No way. DEM?!” he shrieked.

“Yes.” Kotori nodded, disgusted. “It was DEM who discovered Zodiac’s location. We noticed a DEM airship moving suspiciously, so we poked around the area with some drones.”

“H-how did DEM know the Spirit’s location—?” he started, and then cut himself off with an “Ah!”

Kotori had likely reached the same conclusion as he had. “Most likely Beelzebub. While Nia did obstruct its search, it’s not like she completely nullified that power.” She snorted to indicate her displeasure, and the scene on the screen changed.

The DEM ships set their sights on Zodiac drifting in space and prepared to attack. They deployed Territories as the barrels of countless arms poked out of the hulls and began to charge up a

tremendous amount of magic. The Bandersnatches, spread out around the Spirit, readied their CR units.

"H-hey," he said. "Isn't this kinda bad?"

"It's fine. Just watch," Kotori told him, as Zodiac slowly lifted her face in the center of the screen, perhaps finally noticing what was going on around her.

Showing no particular signs of surprise, she stretched casually and held up her right hand.

"*Michael*," the girl in the video murmured, and in the next instant, a shining staff appeared out of thin air.

There was no mistake. This was what Zodiac had been holding in the image they'd seen earlier. The top was magnificently decorated, and twisted teeth poked out from the staff below it. The whole thing was reminiscent of an enormous key.

"Her Angel…?" Shido asked.

"Looks like," Kotori agreed, just as the Bandersnatches began to move as one.

The many machines deployed around Zodiac held up their laser blades and flew at her. But she didn't appear to be surprised. She pushed the tip of her key Angel toward the Bandersnatches closing in on her.

"*Segva*," she said, and turned the key to the right. Almost like turning a key pushed into a keyhole.

In the next instant, the power drained from the limbs of the Bandersnatches, and the Territory that had been deployed around them dissipated. The machines were not even scratched. But while only a second earlier they had been attacking Zodiac with clear hostility, they now slumped over motionless, as though their batteries had been exhausted.

"This…," Shido said, confused.

"…Michael," Reine replied in a quiet tone. "Guessing from the video and analysis numbers, it seems that the Angel has the power to seal the functions that a target possesses by pushing the key toward the target and 'locking' it."

Even as Reine spoke, Zodiac kept immobilizing one attacking Bandersnatch after another.

But it seemed that DEM hadn't intended for their humanoid drones to take down Zodiac. While she was dealing with the Bandersnatches, the three DEM airships completed their magic charging and began to attack as one. Concentrated magical light shot out at her from three directions, and for a moment, the darkness of space shone with a dazzling light.

"Whoa!" Shido cried.

But even in this unfavorable position, Zodiac did not so much as flinch. Instead, she calmly held up her staff and thrust the bottom end forward. Suddenly, the end of the staff was invisible, as if it had been swallowed up by space.

Zodiac turned the handle to the left with both hands. *"Lataib."*

In the next instant, a black hole sprang up around her and sucked in the rain of fire directed at her.

"Wha—?!" Shido's eyes flew open in surprise.

But that wasn't the end of it. After this defense had rendered all of the DEM attacks null, holes opened up behind the DEM ships and the Bandersnatches surrounding Zodiac, and a barrage of bullets and magical energy shot out. The inky black world once more bloomed with flowers of light. Hit by the powerful magical blasts they themselves had fired, the three ships and the myriad of dolls popped and scattered.

"The DEM attack…?!" Shido cried.

"…Mm-hmm. Another of Michael's powers," Reine replied quietly. "…By thrusting the key into empty space and 'opening' it, it creates a 'door'…or something like it. And then this door opens to whatever location she wishes."



"A key Angel that opens doors… You don't mean?!" He lifted his face with a gasp and looked at Kotori. She snapped her fingers as if to say, "Excellent response."

"You've got good instincts," she told him. "Zodiac turned her attack toward the earth after this. She created a door in the air like before, grabbed hold of the remnants of the DEM ships, and tossed them in."

"So she made a bunch of exits to her door above the earth?" he asked.

"Pretty much," Kotori said. "I guess she was more than a *little* angry that DEM came along and woke her up when she was having such a nice sleep. If they'd dropped out of orbit naturally, those remains would have burned up in the atmosphere. But transported directly into the sky, they dropped as is onto the ground, and *boom!* Although I guess, thanks to this, the actual force of the impact was largely contained, so…"

"I-it was? I feel like there was a pretty big shock wave, though." Shido frowned, remembering the broken windows of his classroom.

Kotori shrugged in exasperation. "If meteorites that big had actually crashed into the planet, it would have been on a whole other level. We're talking dozens of kilometers wiped out. And in fact, given that she can open her doors wherever she wants, that's plenty possible for her. To be real, even with just the force of that attack there, she could have done some serious damage depending on where she hit."

"…"

Sweat trickled down Shido's cheek. He could see that this was a fearsome ability. Depending on how it was used, the world itself could very well be destroyed. But he couldn't sit and stew in his fear. He took a few deep breaths to slow his pounding heart before looking fixedly at Kotori again. "So what exactly am I supposed to do here?"

A Spirit had appeared, so he had to make her weak in the knees and seal her powers. Shido himself was well aware of this. But the Spirit in question was in outer space. He couldn't exactly go to her like he had with the other Spirits. It would be difficult to even make

contact with her at all.

"Right," Kotori said. "We've got a number of options, but I'd rather not take too long about it and let the earth be attacked again. We'll try talking with her the fastest way possible."

"Talking?" Shido cocked his head to one side. "How exactly? It's not like I can phone or mail her or something."

Kotori sighed, as if she'd had enough of him. "What are you even talking about? Did you forget how we're getting this video?"

"Video… Oh! Right!" He slapped a fist into the palm of his hand. He hadn't really considered the issue, since the Spirit was being monitored as if it were the most natural thing in the world, but this video would have been taken by Ratatoskr's drones.

"Of course, they're a little different from the ones we use on the ground here," she told him. "In terms of function, they're maybe similar to *Fraxinus*'s Yggdrafolium. They're equipped with small Realizers, so they can deploy Territories around them."

"I get it." He nodded slowly. "So within the range of the Territory…"

"Yes. Normally, conversation's impossible in space, but we should be able to bring your voice directly to her. And…bring that thing for me," Kotori said, snapping her fingers.

"Sir!" Vice Commander Kyouhei Kannazuki replied, on standby beside her, and brought over some kind of strange-looking device. He reached a hand out to the thing on top of it and offered it to Shido.

"Now then, Shido," he said. "Please put this on and stand right there."

"Huh? What is this?" He dropped his gaze to what the vice commander had handed him. It seemed to be a headset with goggles. Perplexed, he nonetheless put it on as told.

Kannazuki turned what looked to be a camera lens toward Shido and began to operate some kind of console.

"Commander," he said finally. "All preparations are a go."

"Excellent," Kotori replied. "Then let's begin the experiment. If you would."

"Sir!" Deep Love Minowa cried. As she tapped at her console, the

device in front of Shido began to hum with the quiet whine of operation.

"What…?" Shido eyed it suspiciously. In the next instant, Shido appeared before Shido. "Ah?!"

Taken aback at the sudden manifestation of his own self, Shido fell onto his backside. The Shido in front of him similarly fell over.

"Ow-ow-ow. So is this maybe…?" he said slowly, staring at the other him moving in exactly the same manner.

"Yes." Kotori nodded. "This device tracks you and then projects that data as a three-dimensional image. Naturally, it can also output video from a Realizer-equipped drone."

"Huh. This is incredible. It looks like the real deal." He reached out a hand to the other him, who was looking at him dubiously. But of course, the other him was a 3D video. Shido's fingers poked through the other Shido's fingers and slipped past his arm.

"It's turned off right now," Kotori continued. "But the drone's video feed will be projected into your goggles once it's showtime."

"I—I get it." He nodded slowly. "So it'll be like I'm right there with the Spirit, talking with her?"

"Exactly," she said. "Okay, let's get to it, then. I'd rather not dawdle here, given we have no idea when she'll start attacking again now that she's awake."

"R-right. Got it." Shido put a hand on his chest to slow his racing heart. To be honest, he would have liked to have a little more time to get familiar with the device and to prepare himself mentally. But just as Kotori had said, they had to move fast here. Not to mention, being mentally prepared was no guarantee an attack on a Spirit would go well.

He clenched his hands into fists as a show of will and exhaled at length, and then put them onto his cheeks, stiff with nervous tension, which he pushed up into a smile. Yes. When facing a Spirit, he needed to wield not weapons but words of love. And in his heart, he needed to have not fear but a firm conviction that he would save the Spirit.

"I'm ready anytime, Kotori," he said finally.

"Great smile," Kotori remarked, smiling back. She settled back

into her captain's chair, grasped the stick of the Chupa Chups in her mouth, and snapped the lollipop toward the monitor. "Commence Operation Long-Distance Love!"

"Roger!" the crew responded as one and got to work.

"Having camera number one approach the target."

"Territory deployed. Preparing to project video."

"Commencing parallel monitoring of target mental state."

"Projection preparation complete. Shido, here we go!"

"Okay!" he cried, and in the blink of an eye, his field of view changed from the confines of the control room to the vastness of space.

"…!"

He'd been told that the feed from the drone would be projected into the goggles, but he nonetheless gasped reflexively.

An endless expanse of inky black, stars so dazzlingly bright they seemed like a whole different set from the ones he could see from earth. And an enormous blue planet filling the space below him. For a moment, he could only gaze in wonder at this magnificent sight.

But now was not the time to be enthralled by this new view of his home planet. Shido pulled himself together and slowly lifted his face.

He saw the figure of a girl from behind, with incredibly long blond hair drifting around her. She had all the mystique and majesty he had come to expect of a Spirit.

"All right, shall we get started on our long-distance love affair between earth and outer space?" Kotori delivered these joking words in the most serious of tones.

Shido nodded firmly in response and spoke to the girl's back. "Hey. Hi there."

"…"

She heard his voice and looked back, and the next moment, she raised her staff and released a beam of light straight at his head.

"Gah?!" He immediately threw his head back, but it was too late. The shining golden beam laden with Spirit power easily pierced his head and slipped past him into the darkness of space.

"Ow?!" Reflexively, he collapsed, writhing on the floor. He clutched his head with both hands and flailed his legs. "K-Kotori! It's

bad! My head! My head!”

“Relax,” she said dryly. “It’s still on your shoulders.”

“…! Oh…” He quickly regained his composure. The video was so vivid that it had really seemed to him that his head had been blown off, but it was only the three-dimensional projection that had been attacked. And while he was indeed in actual pain, it was not the pain of getting shot through the head, but of hitting it when he fell.

Rubbing the injury, Shido stood up once more. “A shot out of nowhere like that, though,” he murmured. “She’s a pretty rough Spirit. I’d be dead if that hadn’t been a projection.”

“She’s prob’ly all worked up after being attacked by DEM,” Kotori told him. “And then you show up—it’s no wonder she deemed you an enemy. Let’s show her we’re not here to hurt her.”

“R-right.” Shido took a few deep breaths to calm his nerves again while the head of his 3D projection was regenerated, and the girl was once again projected into his goggles. “Relax. I’m not your enemy. I’m not going to attack you.”

“…Hm-hmm?” The girl cocked her head to one side at Shido’s reappearance, the expression on her face unchanging. In the next instant, she waggled a finger in a beckoning motion. The machine fragments drifting through the area abruptly shot toward him and dug into his chest.

“Ngaah?!” He reflexively shuddered at the sudden attack, but he managed to stay on his feet this time. He pressed a hand to his chest to push past this shock and continued speaking. “Please wait. I—”

Now the girl whapped his head with the top of her staff as hard as she could.

“Gehah?! N-no, seriously, I—”

“…”

More machine debris came flying at him, shooting through his limbs this time.

“I—I just want to tal—”

“…”

She fired countless beams of light and turned his body into a beehive.

"Nngaaaah!" he screamed, body battered and bruised. "She is *wildly* belligerent?! I've died five times in as many minutes, okay?!"

"…Mm-hmm." Reine put a contemplative hand to her chin. "I never imagined she'd be this aggressive. It seems it was the right choice to make contact via three-dimensional video."

"Wait a moment," Nailknocker Shiizaki cried. "The Spirit is—!"

Shido jerked his head up and found that the girl was staring at him after he'd regenerated for the nth time. The somehow vacant expression on her face hadn't changed at all. But she was actually moving in a way she hadn't before. And then for the first time, she parted her small lips.

"Curious. Why is it that you do not die?"

Her voice was quiet, almost inflectionless. That said, however, this was still the first response they'd gotten from her that was not an attack.

"R-right!" Shido nodded theatrically. "You're talking to me! Great! That's why I'm using this projection of myself; I wanted to talk with you. So— Oh, ow. Ow-ow-ow. Stop that. Stop digging into my stomach with your staff while I'm talking to you."

He pressed a hand to his side, an expression of anguish on his face. The girl was jabbing the tip of her staff into his stomach and moving it around like she was stirring soup. It didn't actually hurt, but it still didn't feel good.

"*A projection*," she said finally. "*Hm-hmm… How strange.*"

"Y-yeah…" He smiled awkwardly, a cold sweat beading on his forehead. "A-anyway, if you don't mind, could you tell me your name?"

"Muku's name?" The girl stopped digging around his midsection and lifted her face. *"Acceptable. Mukuro. Mukuro Hoshimiya."*

"Mukuro Hoshimiya," he repeated carefully. "That's your name?"

"*Indeed*," the girl—Mukuro—said, nodding. "*And you, what be your title? Is it not ill-mannered to demand the name of another when you have not named thyself?*"

"Oh, sorry. I'm—" Shido was about to respond when a window suddenly popped up in front of him. "Ah! Wh-what?!"

"Hm? What troubles you?"

“O-oh,” he stammered. “It’s, uh…”

“Calm down. Just some options.” Kotori’s voice came to him. In line with her words, the window now displayed some text.

Apparently, the monitor display in the control room was connected to Shido’s goggles. From his point of view, the window was floating all alone in the middle of space, which made him feel rather strange.

1. I’m Shido Itsuka. Let’s be friends.

2. I’m Shido Itsuka. Be my girlfriend.

3. I’m Shido Itsuka. I’m the man who will be your master. Be my flesh slave. I’ll make it so that you can’t live without me physically.

“All hands! Choices!” Kotori barked, and Shido heard buttons being pressed in succession all around him.

A few seconds later, the results were formulated into a pie chart on the screen. The most votes were for option (3).

“I see.” Kotori nodded. “Three, then.”

“Yes. Both one and two are obvious compromises,” a crew member replied. “We should take the opportunity to attack.”

“Exactly,” someone else piped up. “We haven’t seen any upset in her mental state so far, either good or bad. I want a reaction pattern from her.”

“That’s a good point,” Kotori agreed. “The projection can’t be killed, whatever she does. Let’s take full advantage of that. Shido, three.”

“Hang on a second!” Shido couldn’t help crying out at the familiar conversation and the conclusion it led to.

“What, Shido?” He could hear the frown in his sister’s voice. “Why the yelling all of a sudden?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me!” he yelped. “Why would you pick three out of these options?! One is the best! One!”

"Stop frothing at the mouth," she said. "I told you. She can attack all day, but you won't die. So I want to go with the more daring choice and see how she reacts. Hurry it up. She's waiting."

"Hngh…" He hated it, but Kotori was right. He couldn't leave Mukuro hanging any longer. He still felt that this was not quite right, but he nonetheless opened his mouth, albeit reluctantly.

"I'm Shido Itsuka… I'm the man who will be your master! Be my flesh slave. I'll make it so that you can't live without me physically…"

"Hm-hmm. Shido Itsuka?" Mukuro put a hand to her chin. This was the extent of her reaction.

"Nothing?!" Shido, Kotori, and the crew cried in unison.

Shido hadn't expected her to take a shine to him in any way with this choice, but he had expected at least *some* kind of reaction. The flustered chatter of the crew indicated that they had expected the same.

"Any shifts in mental state or likability?!"

"N-no change whatsoever!"

"The levels are so flat, they're actually making me nervous!"

"…What does this mean?" Kotori said dubiously. "Did she not hear him? But she picked up his name, so…"

"*I reply with a question*," Mukuro continued. "*What purpose do you serve? For what reason do you come here?*"

"Huh? Oh. Uh…" Before Shido could say much of anything in response, she turned the staff she held toward the earth.

"*A projection*," she murmured. "*Which would indicate your true form lies on that planet. Muku does not enjoy deceit. For every falsehood you speak, Muku shall drop a stone on the planet.*"

"Wha…?!" He gasped. A stone… She probably meant a meteorite, like the one that had fallen onto the school courtyard.

"*Acceptable?*" she asked.

Kotori sighed. "…She's serious. Okay, Shido. Policy here is brutal honesty. We try to throw up a smoke screen in a situation like this and we'll be in for a world of hurt."

"Right… Got it," Shido said, in reply to both Mukuro and Kotori. "I work to help Spirits like you." And then he began to talk. About his own objective. About the organization Ratatoskr and the hostile

DEM. And about the ability he had.

"…Hm-hmm." Having heard everything, Mukuro nodded slightly before turning her face toward him, her expression unchanged.

He reflexively held his breath, feeling the pressure of her golden eyes staring at him from the gaps in the long hair covering her face.

"*This does not appear to be falsehood*," she proclaimed finally. "*Oh-ho. So this is the state into which the planet settled while my eyes were turned elsewhere.*"

"Uh-huh. So, Mukuro. Will you come down to the surface and let me seal your Spirit powers?" he asked, his heart beating the slightest bit faster.

But.

"*I refuse*," she replied without the slightest hesitation.

"Ngh," he groaned. It wasn't like he hadn't anticipated this, though. He'd been rejected before. Furrowing his brow slightly, he continued. "I—I guess it *is* a lot to ask. I mean, I show up out of nowhere and tell you this whole story. I can understand why you wouldn't trust me right away. But it's true. I want to—"

"*I do not doubt you*," she interrupted.

"Huh?" He reflexively opened his eyes wider.

"Your words are most certainly truth. I surmise a pure good faith in them."

"S-so then why?" he asked.

"*Your reasoning has a sense to it*," Mukuro replied, in the same inflectionless tone. "*But I tell you, Muku has no need of such alms. I am content to drift in this place.*"

"B-but DEM might come back and attack you again?!" he protested.

"Dee. Ee. Em." She clumsily repeated the name and nodded in understanding. *"Aah. The scrap iron slaughtered earlier. Such opponents may come in any number but could never best Muku."*

"You're wrong, though," he told her desperately. "DEM has Wizards with power that's off the charts! Those guys you saw before don't even begin to compare. You're in danger here, Mukuro!"

"They are no different." Mukuro's expression was unchanged. *"None exist that can defeat Muku's Angel. And if such a force were*

to be visited upon me, I would simply open a hole with Michael and flee, leaving naught in this space. Muku has no unfinished business on that distant planet. It is enough to swim through the galaxy as Michael wills. Or do you mean to imply that this Dee-ee-em possesses a monster that could chase Muku across light-years?"

"I mean…" When she put it like that, he was at a loss for words. If she really could cross the galaxy, he did maybe think even DEM would have some trouble catching her.

But that didn't mean he could simply give up. DEM had Ellen, Artemisia, and Westcott, who had Beelzebub now. Shido had no idea what kind of attack they could mount against Mukuro. And that wasn't the only reason he wanted to bring Mukuro to the earth's surface.

He shook his head slightly and continued. "But you could have lots of fun on earth, too. I mean, for one thing, you could hang out with other Spirits. Aren't you lonely out here all by yourself?"

"Lonely… Hmm." Mukuro cocked her head slightly to one side. *"I am obliged to you for the concern, but that is not an issue. Muku does not feel what you call loneliness."*

"Come on, you don't have to put on a brave face. Being with friends—"

"No. It is not in that sense that I use the word. If I were to speak more precisely, it is not only isolation, but also mental pain, sorrow, fury, excitement, joy, enjoyment, love, that I do not feel. My heart is locked."

"Huh?" Shido frowned. "L-locked?"

"Indeed. With Muku's Michael." As she spoke, she indicated the key-like staff in her hand.

Michael. One of its powers was to lock a thing and seal that thing's powers. Shido had indeed seen this ability in action already. The Bandersnatches "locked" by Mukuro had their functionality removed and became nothing more than motionless heaps of metal. What if the power of the Angel affected even those things not visible to the eye? Then it might have been possible to "lock" the functionality of the heart that generated emotions, just as Mukuro had said.

"Wh-why would you…?" Shido asked at last. "I mean, not just loneliness or sadness, but even pleasure!"

"*Truly. Why indeed*," Mukuro replied. "*They were not necessary—No, that is incorrect. Perhaps the previous Muku thought that such things themselves were the origin of distress. The current Muku no longer knows.*"

"But you're here like this, talking with me," he noted.

"*Muku did leave the function to converse at least*," she said, her expression dull like someone who had turned her back on the world—like a mountain hermit. "*I did not wish to become an unspeaking corpse. At most, Muku simply wished that nothing would occur to her or within her. Thus, I sit in space where no hand can reach, and any emotions such as anger or yearning that have the potential to disturb my current condition are locked away. Now I merely warn those who invade this proximity.*"

"That's…" Shido clenched his hands. "That's just way too sad, isn't it? Please, come down to earth. I want you to be happy."

"*…*"

Mukuro was silent for a while before looking directly into his eyes. And then she slowly parted her lips. "*Tell me, Shido. Have you not misinterpreted this?*"

"Mis…interpreted?"

"*Indeed. Muku's happiness is not to be decided by you.*"

"…!" He gasped.

But Mukuro continued, simply and intently, quietly. Her voice remained even, with no powerful emotions. "*It is no doubt a truth that some Spirits have indeed been in want of the aid you offered. Muku would not think to deny this. But Muku is Muku. Why do you extend a hand to Muku, unasked for, when I am satisfied with the status quo?*"

"Huh…?" He widened his eyes at these unexpected words.

"*You say you will save Muku. I must merely do as you say, and as a consequence, I shall be happy. You cross a line with your officiousness. Are you not in fact insisting upon your own ego? You shall not use Muku to achieve a personal sense of accomplishment.*"

"I-I'm not—that's…" He tried to protest, his voice shaking. But he

had no real argument to what she was saying.

"Ah…" She peered into his face as if in realization. *"Does this desire to liberate truly originate in your own heart? Why do you go to such lengths to manage and control the powers of the Spirits? I see that I have not fully understood… But it is suspect. What do you —? No, what does the one who stands behind you truly believe?"*

"That's… What are you even—?" Shido furrowed his brow. Did she mean Ratatoskr and the support they gave him? Or…

"*In addition, this Dee-ee-em is also on the planet*," Mukuro noted. "*Assume Muku did allow you to seal my power. Would I truly be any safer on the planet than I am here? Have the Spirits you saved thus far never been assaulted by this enemy?*"

"…! I—I mean…" Shido grew hoarse. The battles with DEM flashed through the back of his mind.

…Aah. He had indeed sealed the Spirits' abilities. He'd believed it was for their benefit, and in fact, the Spirits themselves had been happy about it. But the loss of their powers also put them at a different kind of risk, however slight it might have been.

"*I shall speak plainly, Shido*," Mukuro said, as if sensing Shido's sudden internal conflict. "*It is a bother to be the target of your goodwill. Do not come before Muku again.*"

"…!"

He felt a shock like his head had been dealt a crushing blow from an iron hammer. Actually, it would have been better if the hit had been physical. Her words were quick like an earthquake, and poisonous in the way they sank into his very bones.

"…Shido. Hold your head high. You weren't wrong to do what you've done." He heard Kotori's voice—the first Spirit whose powers he had sealed.





But he was unable to respond. He understood in his head what she was saying. But…

"*This conversation is over*," Mukuro said, interrupting Shido's thoughts. "*What Muku desires is peace, that this status quo continue. If at any time an incorrigible one should appear before Muku, well then…*" She turned her staff toward the earth and continued in a flat voice. "*I shall stop the turning of this planet with Michael.*"

The fatal blow.

"Wha…?!"

"She can't be…!"

Kotori and the crew cried out in confusion.

"You may also convey that message to Dee-ee-em or what have you. Now, farewell, Shido. I expect we shall not meet again." Mukuro brandished her staff and stabbed the tip of it into the drone projecting Shido's image. *"Lock."*

The instant she turned the key, Shido heard the white noise of static, and his world was completely locked up.

Chapter 3

New Wings

"What happened to the video?!" Kotori's outrage echoed across the bridge. But the main monitor and Shido's goggles, which had shown the figure of Mukuro until only a moment earlier, were now both a sea of static.

"It's gone," a member of the crew reported. "There's no response from the camera!"

"Ngh. Meaning she 'locked' it with Michael?" Kotori clicked her tongue softly as she remembered Mukuro's words right before video and sound were cut off.

"…" Shido removed his headset as he listened to the crew's chatter. He clenched his fists and squeezed a voice out of his throat. "I…"

I couldn't say anything back to her.

Naturally, in the beginning, it had been Ratatoskr who had proposed that he save the Spirits. But when he had actual contact with those Spirits, he found himself sincerely wanting to help them. But what if…

Hadn't they also lost a future due to his interference?

Just as this thought flashed through his mind, a karate chop landed on his head.

"Ah-cha?!" he cried out in reflexive bewilderment, and pressed a hand to his head as he turned around.

Kotori was standing there with an exasperated look on her face.

"Wh-what the hell, Kotori?" he demanded.

"You lose a single argument, and now you're lost at sea?" She snorted and sat back down in her chair. Apparently, she'd walked over simply to bop him on the noggin. "Of course, it's not that I don't get what she was saying. But that doesn't mean we have to

say ‘You betcha’ and go along with it. We have to save the Spirits; that’s a fact. But we also can’t forget that each one is a massive catastrophe all on her own. We can’t exactly leave someone with that kind of power hanging out over the planet.”

She was right. But Shido still frowned. “She said she wouldn’t do anything if we didn’t bother her,” he said. “So the flip side is that if we poke her, she’ll attack. Right?”

Kotori flicked up the stick of the Chupa Chups in her mouth. “Assuming that’s true, though; Mukuro said it herself. We should tell DEM. People are all the same to her. Even if *we* stay away from her, you think DEM’s gonna play ball?”

“Hngh.” Shido scowled. DEM was very much not the type of organization that would take heed if Shido and Ratatoskr told them to leave the Spirit alone because it was too dangerous. In fact, they would likely redouble their attack, happy to be free of Ratatoskr’s interference.

“As long as DEM knows about Mukuro’s existence, they will absolutely send assassins.” Kotori turned the stick of her Chupa Chups toward him. “And if they succeed, that’ll be the end of Mukuro. Her Sefirah will fall into Westcott’s hands. If they fail, Mukuro will retaliate and the world will be ‘locked.’ We don’t know for sure what that means, but I think we can safely say it’ll be a disaster on an unprecedented scale for humanity.”

“…! That’s…” He gasped.

“In the end, we’ve only got one option”—Kotori glared at him as she spoke—“seal Mukuro before DEM attacks again. That’s it.”

“…” Shido scratched his head. And then he let out a long sigh. “Yeah, I guess. You’re right. Sorry. I just got a little off track there.”

“It’s fine. It’s not like I don’t get where you’re coming from,” Kotori said, as she shifted her gaze away from him abruptly.

She hadn’t exactly put it into words, but he could more or less guess that she felt a similar conflict as he did.

Her reasoning was entirely correct. As long as DEM was around, they really couldn’t simply leave Mukuro be. But this wasn’t a good argument against what Mukuro had said.

What if this company DEM Industries *wasn’t* around? What if

there were little-to-no chance of anyone bothering Mukuro? What kind of conclusion exactly would Kotori have come to then?

As if reading his mind, Kotori continued, her eyes still averted. "Remember this. The Spirits saved by your hand are at the very least still here."

"…Yeah. Thanks, Kotori," Shido replied, swallowing his own conflicted feelings. This wasn't the time to be paralyzed with indecision. If he and the rest of the team didn't get to work, the world itself could face serious consequences. "You're right. All we can do is…do it."

"Yes." Kotori nodded firmly. "Exactly."

"…That resolve is excellent," Reine chimed in, sounding troubled. "But it seems she won't make it so easy for us."

"Reine?" Kotori turned her gaze on the analyst. "Meaning?"

"…Look at this," she said, and threw a chart up onto the monitor. It apparently showed the shifts in Mukuro's mental state and feelings toward him, and for a second, Shido couldn't see what she wanted them to see.

The reason was simple. The chart was made up of nothing but parallel lines with absolutely no changes in the inscribed values.

"…We were monitoring her the whole time she and Shido were talking, but we saw no change in any of her emotional indices or likability. Apparently, her statement that her heart was locked was neither a joke nor some kind of turn of phrase."

"Wha…?!" Kotori's eyes flew open in surprise. Of course they did.

In order to seal a Spirit's power, Shido needed to kiss the Spirit. And if the target Spirit's heart was not open to him when he did, he couldn't lock away her Spirit power. As shown on this chart, his likability when it came to Mukuro remained zero despite their rather lengthy conversation. Spirits had hated him before, but this was the first time that conversing directly had not shaken a Spirit's heart one iota. Naturally, he wouldn't be able to seal her powers like this.

"…Mukuro's key Angel, Michael," Reine continued. "You also saw its power before. The target of the locked key is functionally locked up. Assuming she really did use this on her own heart, that means that no matter what anyone says to her, it won't cause so much as a

ripple of emotion in her heart.”

“That’s… So what exactly are we—?” Shido started to say with a perplexed look on his face, when he heard a creak from the door of the command room.

“…? What’s that?” Kotori said suspiciously, and turned in the direction of the sound.

In the next instant, the door opened, and the Spirits that were supposed to be on standby in another room came tumbling into the control room.

“Gah!”

“Eek…!”

“Pressure. You’re heavy, Kaguya. Would you not be better off going on a diet?”

“How dare you assume all this weight is me?!”

They had apparently all been eavesdropping outside. After falling like playing cards onto one another, they all staggered to their feet again.

“Y-you guys,” Shido reflexively cried out. “What are you doing there?!”

“Mm. Sorry. We didn’t mean to listen in.” Tohka shrank into herself apologetically, while Miku grabbed her shoulders to support her.

“It’s not Tohka’s faaaaault!” she wailed. “You’re in the wrong, daaarling, for telling us not to worryyyyy!”

The other Spirits nodded in agreement.

“You lot. Honestly…” Kotori sighed heavily and scratched her head, a troubled look on her face.

Origami looked her directly in the eye. “We heard the story, albeit only the last part. There has to be something we can do.”

“Well…” Kotori was at a loss for words. No doubt, she personally would rather not have exposed the Spirits to danger insofar as it was possible. But it was indeed hard to argue against how useful they and their powers could be.

As if reading her mind, the Spirits raised their voices one after the other.

“The world’s, like, in real danger, yeah? So is this really the time

to hold back? Plus, I'd be majorly grumped if I didn't get to finish this manga I'm super into at the mo."

"If Mukuro knew the good parts of this world, she wouldn't want to destroy it! Please. Let us help, too!"

"Gang…" Kotori leaned back as if overwhelmed by their intensity and cast a glance at Reine.

"…" Reine nodded slightly as if to say they had no choice.

"…Haah." Kotori sighed in resignation. "Fine. You can stay."

The Spirits' faces lit up with delight.

"But this Spirit isn't the kind of opponent where a show of force is gonna work," Kotori continued in warning. "If we don't get her likability up, we can't seal her powers. But every emotion she's got is apparently locked up tight."

"Question. Does there exist a method for reopening Mukuro's locked heart?" Yuzuru asked Reine. All eyes followed her lead and turned to Reine.

"…I can't say for sure," the sleepy-eyed woman said slowly. "But assuming there does, it'd be just the one."

"So there's a way?!" Tohka said, her eyes growing wide. The other Spirits also leaned forward eagerly.

"…I didn't mean to get your hopes up," Reine said by way of preamble as she continued. "A heart that's been closed by the key Angel can only be opened by that Angel. Mukuro will have to use Michael one more time."

"That's…" Shido half groaned.

It was exactly as Reine said. An Angel was a miracle made manifest. The only way to undo the effect of an Angel was to use the power of the Angel.

But while this was only natural, the literal key that was Michael was held in the hands of Mukuro herself. And her heart was locked off, meaning none of their voices could reach her. The problem was the same as a locked treasure chest with the key inside of it.

"Hmph." Kaguya threw her head back with a self-satisfied snort. "If it is Angels you seek, then here you will find any number of them. We shall pry that heart open by force." She made a gesture like she was thrusting a lance in.

Despite this bravado, Yuzuru looked troubled. "Doubt. Assuming that was possible, there is still the matter of Mukuro being in space. How would we get to her?"

"Ngh. I…" Kaguya groaned.

"…True." Shido put a hand on his forehead.

Just as Yuzuru had said, the fact that Mukuro was in space was a real problem. To start with, he had only spoken with her through a projection, and it was absurd to think that her heart would be opened or closed by conversation at such a distance. They had to find a way to first get to where she was.

"Space… Outer space, hm?" Kotori flicked the stick of the Chupa Chups in her mouth as the corners of her lips twisted up in a confident grin. "Good timing. We might just be able to work something out."

"Huh?" Shido cocked his head to one side.

◇

"Annihilation?" Ellen said dubiously, upon receiving the report on the fate of the ships that had flown up into stationary orbit a few hours earlier. The light of several monitors shone in the dimly lit communications office of the Japanese branch of DEM Industries, hazily illuminating the area where she was seated glaring at the dark screen that was only transmitting sound.

"*Yes*," came the slightly trembling voice of her subordinate over the communication device. "*Three airships, ninety Bandersnatches. However, the Spirit was unharmed. Additionally, she counterattacked the earth in simple retribution.*"

"Marvelous," Westcott said from behind her, seemingly pleased. "Naturally, I never thought we would defeat her with this vanguard. But to think that she is a Spirit in possession of this much power! Heh-heh-heh! It truly is marvelous."

Ellen glanced at him before falling into thought.

It was true that none of the Adeptus numbers, their main battle force, had been part of the first squad in stationary orbit. This

vanguard's mission had been not to defeat the Spirit sleeping so comfortably in space, but to investigate her power and threaten her so that she would flee to the earth's surface. But this strategy had ended in failure. Beyond failure, in fact. The remnants of the destroyed DEM ships had been turned into meteorites crashing into locales all over earth as a bonus.

Ellen sniffed with displeasure before sighing. If this was how it was going to end up, then maybe she shouldn't have felt herself above the whole thing and should have set out for the Spirit herself right from the start.

"Is the Spirit still in the same location?" she asked.

"*Y-yes. The target is still in that stationary orbit*," her subordinate replied. "*She's presumed to be preparing for an attack on the earth.*"

"Mm-hmm." Ellen groaned again and then lifted her face and looked at Westcott. "Ike."

Having apparently guessed her intention, Westcott nodded theatrically. "Mm. I'd rather not have any more holes poked in our facilities. You and Artemisia deal with it. And I expect results."

"Yes. Absolutely," she replied briefly, then bowed and left the communications office.

"…Er, MD Westcott?" the remaining Wizard said to Westcott timidly.

"Mm." He turned to her. "What is it?"

"Are you certain about sending Executive Leader Mathers into outer space?" she asked hesitantly.

"Hm? Are you saying my judgment is mistaken?" he asked, cocking his head to one side, and the Wizard's face drained of color as she shook her head vigorously.

"N-no! Definitely not that! It's just…," the Wizard said, her voice weaker now. "I simply wondered if Executive Leader Mathers would prefer another strategy if she were aware of that issue."

"Mm-hmm." Westcott shrugged and sighed. "I suppose so. But that is precisely why it's better this way."

He raised his right hand and manifested the black book

Beelzebub. He dropped his gaze onto the words inscribed there—a certain bit of information found after searching for the locations and arrangements of new Spirits.

"While I would very much love to take Ellen along, I would also like to avoid this long-awaited reunion turning into a bloodbath, hm?" he said, his thin lips taking on the shape of a smile.

◇

The low hum of a motor and a continuous vibration hit Shido's eardrums and shook his body. He was not in the temporary command center below the city of Tengu, but rather an enormous transport helicopter. And he wasn't alone. On the long bench seat across from him were the Spirits and the crew of *Fraxinus*.

"…Hey, Kotori?" he asked the person in charge of the operation, who happened to be sitting next to him. "Where are we going anyway?"

It had been a few hours since they'd all been half forced onto the transport helicopter, and they still had not been given any kind of explanation. Shido would have been lying if he said he wasn't a tiny bit anxious about where they were being taken. At least Tohka, Kaguya, and some of the other Spirits appeared to be enjoying their first ride in a large helicopter.

Kotori seemed to have guessed his concerns, but she only sighed as she flicked the stick of her Chupa Chups up and down rapidly. "Sorry, but I can't give you a detailed location. It's not that I don't trust you, but the place we're heading now, you could say it's the backbone of Ratatoskr technology."

"…Once we're there, though, we'll be able to get to Mukuro?" he asked.

"Yes. I think we should be almost—" Kotori started to say, when a voice came over the speakers.

"Commander, we're arriving at our destination. Please prepare yourself."

"Oh-ho! Looks like my internal clock is right on the money, huh?"

Kotori said jokingly, and issued instructions to her crew.

A few minutes later, he felt a slight impact, and at the same time, the vibration and motor hum stopped. He heard a *clunk*, and the hatch to the rear of the helicopter fell open.

"Welcome. Please come this way." A man who was apparently an employee urged them all outside.

After glancing at one another, Shido and the Spirits followed Kotori out of the helicopter.

"Where are we?" Shido looked around and furrowed his brow slightly. The scene around them was different from what he had anticipated. Naturally, given that he hadn't been informed of where they were going, it wasn't as though he'd had a clear image in mind. But he'd vaguely expected a heliport at least.

But Shido instead found himself in a large space closed in on all sides by tall walls. He turned his eyes upward and found that he couldn't see the sky. All kinds of devices were set up along the perimeter, likely for use in maintenance of machines, while personnel in work clothes were busy at their own individual jobs.

"An aircraft hangar…?" he asked finally.

"Well, more or less. This way. Follow me." Kotori began walking, her heels clacking against the hard floor. When the *Fraxinus* crew formed a line behind her, Shido was somehow reminded of the group rounds of a hospital director he'd seen on an old TV show.

"Shido, we should go, too," Tohka said, urging him on.

"Right…I guess so." He started after Kotori, and the party proceeded through the hangar, whirling their heads around to take it all in.

After they came out of the massive enclosure, they walked down a long hallway and went through several doors with strict security measures before they came to stand in front of a large door reminiscent of the entrance to the hangar.

"This is it," Kotori said with a glance back at them all, and then placed the palm of her hand on the device on the wall next to the door. After a small electronic beep, the massive door parted to either side, and the group got their first look at what lay inside.

"…! This is…!" Shido's eyes flew open.

The Spirits behind him also let out cries of surprise.

"Ooh…!"

"Kah-kah! I see the sense. Indeed, in this manner, we should be able to journey to most anywhere."

"Woo, wow! What *is* this? Hey, li'l sis? Can I take pics for reference? Just a couple!"

"You obviously cannot. This is top, top secret." Kotori rolled her eyes at the excited Nia.

Shido could understand her excitement, though. He might have made a similar request if he were seeing this for the first time, too. He gulped hard and looked up at this thing before his eyes once more.

There was a large hangar on the other side of the door as he'd expected, but unlike the earlier hangar, it had stored inside of it not a transport helicopter, but an impossibly enormous ship.

He couldn't have been the only one who felt the numerous contradictions included in that word.

The vehicle's sharp body was white and lapis lazuli, with armaments enclosed in its center. The rear of the ship spread out like the branches of a large tree with countless glittering metal leaves. Its form was fundamentally different from the ideal blueprint for a battleship.

But this was only natural. Because this ship did not sail the stormy seas, but rather the heavens high above all creation.

"Fraxinus…!" His voice trembled slightly as he spoke the name of the vessel.

Yes. The pride of Ratatoskr, the airship *Fraxinus*. It had been undergoing repairs after taking significant damage in the battle with the inverted Origami two months earlier, and now it sat before them in perfect condition once more.

Not quite. He refuted this thought in his head. This was indeed *Fraxinus*, but he felt like it was not quite the same shape as the *Fraxinus* in his memory.

"Is the…shape. Different?" he asked almost to himself, and Kotori sniffed in a triumphant way.

"Good eye. Yup. This isn't the old *Fraxinus*. She's new and

improved, equipped with Ratatoskr's most cutting-edge Realizers and with every feature upgraded. *Fraxinus Excelsior*!" she cried jubilantly.

Kannazuki behind her spread out his arms and legs to take on a pose like the letter *X*. The rest of the crew struck symmetrical poses to either side of him. The odd person out, Reine pulled confetti from her pockets and tossed it into the air with a blank look on her face.

"Uh. *Excelsior*…?" Shido asked hesitantly.

"Yes. The battle with Origami was what put *Fraxinus* out of commission, but the fact is, she was already pretty beat-up in the previous world thanks to Ellen Mathers's *Goetia*," Kotori said with a shrug. "I figured just putting her back the way she was wasn't going to cut it. That's why it took so long. We were doing more than repairing her."

The previous world. She was talking about when Shido had gotten the help of the time Spirit Kurumi and traveled back into the past. And changed history. In the world prior to this change, *Fraxinus* had apparently been dealt serious damage by a DEM ship.

"Uh-huh," he said slowly. "So then this can get us to Mukuro?"

"Yes. In a single leap," Kotori said, making a gesture like she was throwing a paper plane. "We're still tinkering and fine-tuning things, so it'll be a minute yet before we can get moving. But we should be able to go inside now at least. Come on. There's someone I want you to meet." She gestured with her fingers, beckoning him.

He cocked his head curiously to one side. "Someone you want me to meet?"

"Yep." She nodded. "Well, in a sense, you used to see her all the time. But this is maybe your first meeting in this form."

"…?" He frowned, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Come and you'll see. Check it out." She started toward the base of *Fraxinus*.

"Mm? So it's someone you know, Shido?" Tohka asked.

"No… I dunno." Perplexed, Shido trailed after Kotori, together with the crew and the Spirits.

Once they were all gathered beneath the body of the ship, Kotori raised her face and called out, "Now, please!"

Before he knew it, he and the others were enveloped in a faint

light, and a curious buoyant sensation came over him. In the next instant, the hangar interior transformed into the interior of the ship.

"Whoa!" he cried.

This was the work of *Fraxinus*'s Realizer-powered transporter device. He'd experienced this sensation any number of times, and yet it still gave him a jolt of surprise after so long.

He took a deep breath to calm his racing heart and looked around. The bridge of the ship was split into two different levels, with the captain's chair in the center and the crew seats below. Consoles and personal monitors were set up in front of all the seats. It was a little larger than the old *Fraxinus*, and there were more monitors than before. But something else had caught his attention.

"So the transporter can take us directly to the bridge now," he said, looking down at his feet. They were near the entrance to the bridge, and he could see a transporter terminal built into the floor. On the previous version of the ship, the transporter had been in the lower part of the airship, and whenever you wanted to leave the ship, you had to walk all the way there first.

"Yes," Kotori said. "We set up a number of terminals inside the ship so you can choose where you want to transit. You can also move from terminal to terminal, so the living quarters are a blink of an eye from the bridge."

"Very cool. So then, who's this person you wanted me to meet, Kotori?" Shido asked, looking around the bridge. He'd assumed the person who'd activated the transporter would have been waiting for them, but as far as he could see, the bridge was empty except for the crew he'd arrived with.

Kotori grinned and lifted her face slightly as she spoke, as if to the ship she was standing on. "Hello. It's been a while, huh, *Fraxinus*?"

A monitor ahead of him lit up hazily at this greeting.

"Yes, it has been a while, Kotori." A girl's voice came over the speakers on the bridge.

"Huh?!" Shido reflexively reeled, and the Spirits around him looked similarly surprised.

"Wh-what is thaaat?"

"That was…a surprise."

"*That is quite rude of you, Shido*," the voice said in a lecturing tone. "*If I were a Spirit, that alone would lead to a demerit.*"

"Wh-what the…?" He looked around, baffled by the feeling that the ship itself was talking to him.

"What are you so surprised about, Shido?" Kotori asked with a smirk. "You know the *Fraxinus* AI. I mean, she's always helping you out, yeah? As part of the repairs, we made it so that we can communicate via speech now."

"Hello. I suppose it would be weird to say I haven't seen you in a while. But it is nice to see you again. My call sign is Maria. I'm looking forward to working together from now on as well, Shido."

"Right," he replied with a smile, feeling strangely moved. "Can't wait, Maria."

The Spirits pushed past him from behind like an avalanche to get in front of the monitor. This did not show Maria's face or anything of the like, but because of the letters *M-A-R-I-A* displayed on this monitor, it seemed almost like her personality was housed in it.

"Ooh! This is amazing! How does it work?"

"Hooeee. This is really something. Amazeballs."

"…So this voice is gonna give those options? For real?"

Surrounding the small Maria, the Spirits began to chatter with excitement.

Kotori clapped her hands with an air of exasperation. "Come on, now, don't bug her. She's still got work to do." Once the group had quieted, she said to Maria, "So how long until takeoff?"

"I would like another ninety minutes for mechanical adjustments."

"We don't have time for that. You've got an hour."

"You are as merciless as ever. I feel terribly sorry for your future husband."

"…Your functionality might have increased, but your sense of humor's still not quite there, huh? Maybe I'll have them readjust once this mission is over," Kotori said, rolling her eyes.

Maria appeared to pay this no mind as she spoke to the crew. *"The settings on your personal consoles are the same as before, but please do confirm this yourselves. For this work, I can adjust and*

work in parallel."

At these words, the crew nodded firmly. Maria continued as if to add a note.

"And please refrain from bringing personal items onto the bridge. The living quarters are a private space, so I do not intend to complain about that, but I doubt there is any need for straw effigies or beautiful girl figures on the bridge."

Nailknocker Shiizaki and Dimension Breaker Nakatsugawa both gasped, stunned.

"B-but?!"

"You never mentioned any word of this before!"

"I simply had no way of telling you. If you absolutely insist, please summarize your reasons in fewer than twelve hundred words and submit them to me."

"I-it's so that if there is an enemy attack, I'll be able to curse the opponent…"

"Without my wives nearby, I simply cannot perform at peak condition!"

"*Rejected*," Maria said point-blank. The other members of the crew—Mr. President Mikimoto, Bad Marriage Kawagoe, and Deep Love Minowa—laughed out loud.

"That's the end of the story, then. It's true that there's no need for these in the performance of duties."

"Mm-hmm. We've thought the same for a while now."

"Well, you do have to keep personal and business separate."

"Oh. I'm also sorry to say that I will no longer be allowing any personal calls to ex-wives or to the girl at the bar. Requests to send drones to watch former lovers are also out of the question."

"…What?!"

All three crew members opened their eyes wide in surprise.

"You lot…" A throbbing vein popped up on Kotori's forehead. "You were using *Fraxinus* for that kind of stuff?"

"Oh! No. Uh."

"I-it's a misunderstanding! We always put ourselves to the task of our work quite seriously…"

The crew stammered and tried to explain away their crimes. After

watching their performance for a moment, their commander let out a sigh.

"At any rate, we don't have the time for this right now," she said. "Finish up the final adjustments with Maria, would you?"

"Yes, sir!" the crew cried, and bowed.

"Now then, We will—" Kotori started, but was interrupted by Maria.

"Before we continue, there is someone on the base who is requesting a meeting with you and the others, Kotori. What would you like me to say?"

"Someone wants a meeting? Who?"

"Yes. Chairperson Elliot Woodman."

"…Huh?" Kotori's jaw dropped.

◇

After leaving *Fraxinus*, Shido and the others slipped through the hangar and walked once again down the long hallway. Because the crew were all proceeding with the adjustments on the bridge of the ship, it was only Shido and the Spirits now. They walked with Kotori in the lead, their footsteps clacking against the hard floor.

"…Shido. Shido," Tohka said from behind him.

"Hm?" He glanced back at her. "What's up, Tohka?"

"Oh, um." She hesitated briefly before continuing. "Who is this Woodman person? Kotori got a whole lot more formal all of a sudden."

Shido turned his eyes toward Kotori. It was true that the moment Maria had said Woodman's name, Kotori had hurriedly slipped her arms through the sleeves of the jacket hanging over her shoulders and buttoned it up properly.

"Lord Woodman is the chairperson of the Rounds, Ratatoskr's decision-making arm," Kotori herself replied, still facing forward. "The head of Ratatoskr for all intents and purposes, and its founder. You could say that without him Ratatoskr wouldn't exist."

"…!"

The head of Ratatoskr, more or less. Shido's eyebrows arched slightly. *"What do you—? No, who is it that stands behind this position you take?"* The words Mukuro had spoken flashed through his mind.

It wasn't that he harbored doubts about Ratatoskr. It was more like he was concerned about the fact that although he'd made up his mind to take action with Mukuro, he'd had no idea how to respond to her when she'd said this.

Abruptly, he noticed that Nia next to him looked fairly troubled.

"…Nia?" he asked. "What's wrong? You're making a real face there."

"…!" She jerked her face up in surprise. "Hm? Ha-ha-ha! Nothing's wrong, though?! Or what, are you watching me so closely, you're noticing all the little changes, boy?"

"Whoa, hey…," he replied with a pained smile, and her face grew serious.

"…It's just, you know," she said quietly. "I've heard the name Woodman before."

"Huh?" he asked, just as Kotori, walking ahead of them, stopped in front of a door.

She pressed a button on the intercom-like device there, and once their arrival had been announced, she pulled the door open. "Go on, then," she urged them, with a glance back over her shoulder. So Shido stepped inside with the others.

The space on the other side of the door looked like someone's study. The walls were lined with overflowing bookshelves, and the overall atmosphere was in stark contrast to the somehow mechanical building outside. Two people were positioned on the other side of a large desk toward the back of the room. One was a middle-aged man sitting in a wheelchair. He seemed gentle, with thin-rimmed glasses and long hair tied back in a ponytail. Beside him stood a woman in a suit, also wearing glasses. Her posture was tall and straight, as if she had an iron pole at her core.

"Huh?"

"Mm?"

Shido and Tohka both frowned.

The reason was simple. They had met these two before. Walking along in town one day before Natsumi entered their lives, Shido and Tohka had been stopped by a foreign man using a wheelchair.

"M-Mr. Baldwin…?" Shido said, baffled.

The man smiled like a mischievous boy, out of line with his age. "Aah, it's been a while, hm? Lovely to see the young lady there looking so well. Allow me to introduce myself anew. Elliot Baldwin Woodman."

Shido and Tohka glanced at each other, their eyes growing wider.

"…! Lord Woodman, you've met them before?" Kotori looked back and forth between Woodman, Shido, and Tohka.

"Briefly." Woodman winked at her teasingly. "When we were in Tengu one day."

"You're kidding me!" Kotori was outraged. "What if something had happened?!"

"Ha-ha! Terribly sorry," Woodman said, without seeming the least bit sorry. "I'll be more careful."

Kotori pressed a hand to her forehead and sighed.

Shido had been a little on guard after hearing what a VIP Woodman was, but he seemed quite friendly.

"Now then." Woodman abruptly grew serious and turned again toward Shido and the Spirits. "I apologize for how sudden this is. Normally, I would have come to you, but…"

"No, it's fine," Shido replied quickly.

The older man lowered his eyes as he continued. "First, my gratitude. Thank you for saving the Spirits."

"Huh? Oh. Uh." Shido scratched his cheek. He felt almost baffled at being thanked all over again. "I should actually be thanking you. If it wasn't for Ratatoskr, I might not have ever known the Spirits existed. And just the thought of how DEM and the AST would have kept attacking them… I can hardly stand it. Plus, I'm grateful to you for saving Kotori when she was turned into a Spirit by Phantom five years ago. Thank you so much." He bowed neatly.

Woodman accepted this with a graceful nod before looking Shido squarely in the eye. "Next, my apology. I'm truly sorry for involving you in all this. And let me also apologize for the Dáinsleif incident.

I've given strict orders to prevent anything like that from every occurring again."

"Oh…," Shido said quietly.

Dáinsleif. He saw Kotori's eyebrows twitch up at the sound of it. He himself didn't remember it very well, but Dáinsleif was the name of the weapon of annihilation that Ratatoskr had at the ready for use specifically on Shido in a worst-case scenario. After all the chaos had died down, Kotori had told him that one of the Rounds executives had gone rogue and activated it without permission.

"…No." He shook his head slowly. "I know it's a bit complicated, but I think you need to have a weapon like that given the possibility that I might lose control. And…even if you had told me about it beforehand, I think I still would have probably said I wanted to save the Spirits."

"Shido…," Tohka murmured, sounding happy, but also somehow worried about how dangerous he was. When Shido smiled slightly, she tousled his hair.

He had managed to save her and the other Spirits. And the touch of her hand now assured him that it had not all been a giant mistake. But for some reason, something still nagged at his heart and his conscience.

"…"

Yes. The words Mukuro had tossed at him earlier.

As these returned to the front of his mind, he opened his mouth, half-automatically. "Um. Can I ask you something?"

"What is it?" Woodman replied.

"I'm super grateful to Ratatoskr," he said. "But why *is* Ratatoskr trying to save the Spirits?"

"…Mm-hmm." Woodman cocked his head slightly to one side. "Did something happen to make you…question us?"

"No… I just—I was curious." Shido waved his hands back and forth in a panic. He felt like Woodman could see right into his heart.

"I've also been curious about that." Origami spoke up as if to lend him her support. "Ratatoskr saves Spirits. That's good. On that point, I am also grateful. But what is the end goal? What is the reason that you would expend such vast sums of money to collect Spirits?"

Woodman nodded as if this question were the most natural thing in the world. "It makes sense that you would be curious about that. For you Spirits, the organization Ratatoskr is no doubt too good to be true. It's no wonder that you would find us suspicious." He gave her a pained smile. "But I must admit, I'm stuck here. I perhaps can't give you a reason you could easily understand."

"…Meaning?" she pressed.

"Saving Spirits," he said. "That is my overall objective."

"…"

Origami furrowed her brow the tiniest bit.

"Isn't that a bit *too* white knight?" Nia said from the opposite side of the room. "No one likes the whole holier-than-thou, et cetera, et cetera. Seems a little sus when you go that far, y'know?"

Shido unconsciously widened his eyes at her attitude, which was suddenly more severe than her usual easygoing, big-sister style. "Nia…?"

But she ignored him and continued, her eyes locked on Woodman's. "Woodman. Elliot Baldwin Woodman. That's your name. No mistake there, yeah?"

"Mm-hmm." Woodman nodded agreeably. "No mistake."

"So then allow me to ask," she said. "How can you, a founding member of DEM Industries and the very person who made a Spirit manifest in this world for the first time thirty years ago, talk like the whole world's our oyster?"

"Wha…?!"

Shido and the Spirits gasped.

"Wh-what are you talking about, Nia?" Shido asked, utterly baffled. "Woodman and DEM…? And he made the Spirits manifest?"

"Mm." She scratched her head. "Last month, back when I still had the complete Rasiel, I had reason to do a little digging. About when the primeval Spirit showed up here."

"…?!" His eyes flew open in surprise. "Wh-what'd it say?"

"Yeah, so I found out, okay?" she said in a somewhat defiant tone. "Isaac Westcott. Ellen Mathers. And…Elliot Woodman. The three founders of DEM Industries were involved in the appearance of the primeval Spirit."

Woodman sighed at length. "I see. So your Angel is the all-knowing Rasiel. I wasn't trying to hide it, but this does speed things up… Yes. Together with Ike—Westcott and Ellen—I did in fact make the primeval Spirit appear in this world."

"…!" Shido gasped again. The fact alone that Woodman had once been colleagues with Westcott and Ellen was a surprise, but to think he'd even been a part of the Spirits' manifestation in their world…

"Aah, that reminds me," Woodman said, as if he'd only just remembered. "I should have introduced her sooner. Karen here also worked at DEM and eventually absconded with me."

The assistant-like woman on standby behind him bowed slightly. "Karen Nora Mathers. It's a pleasure."

"Yeah, nice to— Wait. Huh?" Shido started to return the greeting automatically, and then twisted his head around. He felt like he'd heard that name before. "Mathers?"

"Yes." Karen nodded. "Ellen Mathers would be my older sister."

"Whaaaaat?!"

Shido and the Spirits all cried out in surprise at the sudden announcement of this shocking fact.

"Th-*that* Ellen is your sister…?!"

"Panic. But now that you mention it, there is a resemblance."

"D-does this mean…?" Miku looked around chaotically. "Will I get to do the sister saaaandwiiiiich?!"

"…Miku. Stop. Deep breaths," Natsumi said in a calm voice.

"R-right. Yes, of course, I'm caaaalm," Miku agreed docilely. But then she grabbed Natsumi by both arms and pushed her face into the smaller girl's pile of fluffy hair as she inhaled and exhaled. Natsumi kicked and flailed in protest, but eventually, the strength drained out of her as she gave in to the enthusiastic bear hug from Miku's slender arms.

Shido pressed a hand to his own chest as if to slow his racing heart and looked Karen over once more. And indeed, if she took her glasses off and let her hair down, he felt like she would look very much like that Wizard. But while Ellen appeared to be barely in her late teens, her supposedly younger sister appeared to be in her twenties, which gave him pause.

That said, however, there was something more pressing that he needed to clarify. He shook his head as if to get his thoughts back on track and turned toward Woodman. "Wh-why Spirits? And how…?"

Woodman opened his hands as if to put Shido at ease. "Let's start at the beginning. First… Shido Itsuka, Origami Tobiichi. I must ask you a question." Woodman glanced toward Origami before continuing. "Just as Nia Honjou says, I was a founding member of DEM. At first, like Westcott, I thought to use the power of the Spirits."

"…"

Shido swallowed hard. And that was an understandable reaction. This was the head of the organization that had made every effort to save the Spirits. Of course he was tense.

"But when I actually set eyes on that primeval Spirit, I changed." Woodman smiled wryly as he continued. "I abandoned everything I'd worked for up to that point, fled DEM, created Ratatoskr, and resolved to guard the Spirits with my very life. Even if it meant turning my back on my former allies."

"…What exactly happened?" Shido asked in a voice trembling with nerves.

"Well." Woodman's cheeks softened into a smile, and he shrugged. "I fell in love is what happened."

"…Huh?" Shido's eyes flew open. He hadn't seen this coming. "L-love?"

"Mm-hmm. My heart was stolen from the first moment I saw the primeval Spirit. I was utterly head over heels for her, nothing to be done about it. I was furious at myself for even thinking to take her power from her," Woodman recounted passionately, the picture of a boy in love. "Which is why I couldn't stand it if any creatures like her were to suffer. You might laugh and say this is a foolish reason, I know. But it's why I try to save the Spirits. That's the long and short of it."

"…"

Shido was astounded, at a loss for words. And while he couldn't see into Woodman's heart just from listening to him speak and

watching his face, for some reason, he believed Woodman was telling the truth. He gritted his teeth and shook his head.

"It's not…foolish at all." He took a step forward. "In fact, it's… I'm glad the person who formed Ratatoskr is someone who feels this way."

Woodman looked momentarily surprised before his face abruptly eased into a smile. "…Thank you. You're very kind. I'm glad that the one who has the ability to seal the Spirits' power is a boy such as yourself."

"Oh, no, uh…" Shido shook his head awkwardly.

Origami, who had been listening to all this with a meek look on her face, let out a short sigh and turned her gaze toward Karen. "So then why did you follow him in leaving DEM?"

"…"

Karen responded without so much as twitching an eyebrow. "Because I am in love with Elliot."

"…Hrrk?!" Shido began to choke at yet another unexpected declaration. "Y-you are…? But Mr. Woodman's in love with that primeval Spirit."

"There is no logic that dictates that one must abandon pursuit if the object of one's desire is fond of another," Karen said evenly. "Isn't it true that if he were to have a change of heart, I could not be selected if I were not by his side?"

"Th-that…," Shido stammered. "That may well be true, but…"

"To speak of my own desires," she continued, "I would like to receive his seed while copulation is still possible. While I intend to respect and abide by Elliot's feelings, it would nonetheless be a great loss to the world to not leave descendants for posterity."

"…?! Uh. Uh-huh…" Shido was completely dazed by how forthright and unaffected she was in speaking of something like this. She held her head so high that he almost started to think that he was maybe the weird one for being shocked.

"Ha-ha…" Woodman gave a pained smile. "Well, this is a pickle."

"There is no need for you to be 'pickled,' Elliot," Karen told him, in the same even tone. "I am acting on my own initiative."

After listening to Karen's story with a serious expression, Origami

marched over to her and held out a hand. "I completely understand. I acclaim and applaud your noble resolution."

"And I extend my appreciation," Karen said, taking Origami's hand and shaking it. "You are the third person to approve of my thinking."

"…"

It seemed they were communicating with each other in a way that was beyond Shido's reckoning. He sensed in it a nebulous sense of danger to himself, but they were getting along so nicely; there was no need to butt in with any unnecessary comments.

Woodman adjusted the position of his glasses and leaned over the desk in front of him. "I'm sorry, Shido Itsuka. Would you mind letting me have a good look at your face? My vision's gotten considerably worse lately."

"Huh? Oh… Sure." Shido drew nearer to the older man.

"…I see." Woodman peered intently into his face and nodded as he murmured almost to himself, "You do indeed look like the boy from that time."

"Huh?" Shido frowned, puzzled. "That time? What do you—?"

Before he could finish his question, the room began to shake fiercely.

"Whoa…?!"

"Aaah?!"

"Eeeek!"

Some kind of impact, like a bomb exploding nearby, shook the walls, the floor, the ceiling. The books on the shelves all fell to the floor in a jumble.

"I-is everyone okay?!" Shido cried out.

"Mm. No problems. But what exactly happened?!" Tohka demanded as she looked around.

"It can't have…," Yoshino said fearfully, "been…Mukuro?"

"What? You mean we got a meteorite dropped on us?" Yoshinon, the puppet on her left hand, pressed its hands to its cheeks dramatically.

But Kotori shook her head, a hard look on her face. "No. That was—"

"Lord Woodman!" A panicked, staticky voice came over the

speakers set up in the room. *"It's an emergency!"*

"Calm down," Woodman said. "What exactly happened?"

"A-an attack! An airship signal was detected above the base! It's… DEM!"

"Wha…?!" Shido shivered in fear.

"DEM?! How? They couldn't have found the base—," Kotori cried out, stunned, but then cut herself off with a gasp. She had no doubt remembered that it was pointless to try and hide things from DEM Industries anymore. "Beelzebub!"

Yes. The omnipotent Demon King Beelzebub.

Nia winced and nodded. "…Probably. I did everything I could to mess up the search function, but at best, that just bought us some time. And it wouldn't do anything about anything they looked up before I jammed it up."

"Ngh! Well, he's really done it, hasn't he? Him looking us up and attacking now, that's got to mean he's got his sights set on *Fraxinus* now that repairs are finished! Or…" Kotori looked toward Woodman. "Is it *you*, Lord Woodman?"

"…Hmm." Woodman placed a hand on his chin, and after setting his mind to work for a few seconds, he lifted his face again. "At any rate, we have to move. Now that our opponent knows of this place, sitting here is akin to waiting for death." He threw his hands up. "Commander Itsuka. Take the Spirits and hurry to *Fraxinus*. Go immediately to Zodiac. You must save her."

"Understood, sir. We will," Kotori answered, furrowing her brow anxiously. "But what about you?"

Woodman's face softened into a smile. "Karen and I will make our exit via another route. It would be somewhat of an inconvenience were Westcott to capture this facility as it is. There are a few loose ends that must be taken care of. And more than anything else, I would only slow you down with these blocks of wood." He patted his legs.

"But!" Kotori gave a strangled cry as she clenched her hands into fists.

"It's all right. No need to worry, we have an escape route secured. I have no intention of giving up this head of mine so easily.

I've already decided that when I die, it will be in the arms of the woman I love," Woodman said teasingly, and winked at them.

"Mr. Woodman…," Shido half said, half murmured, and Karen tilted her head back, her glasses glinting in the light. "My arms are open at any point."

"Whoopsy." Woodman shrugged. "Now I really can't die. I can't have a person as talented as you accompanying me on a journey to the other side."

While Karen's expression itself didn't change, a delight at his praise and a sadness at being rejected for death could be seen bleeding onto her face.

Woodman turned back to Kotori and gave her a firm nod. "Go, Commander Itsuka. I wish you luck in battle."

She hesitated for a few seconds before returning a neat bow. "… Understood. Be safe, sir."

Woodman nodded again, while Kotori whirled around to face Shido and the others.

"Now then, let's get going. It'll be no joke if *Fraxinus* falls into enemy hands." Her face was filled with resolve and a sense of duty. But her clenched hands alone trembled ever so slightly. Naturally. She was no doubt anxious and bewildered herself. But as Ratatoskr's commander, she couldn't show the Spirits that fear.

"Right…" Shido let out a short sigh and then nodded firmly. "We gotta go."

"Mm. Let's hurry!" Tohka agreed.

"O-okay…!" the other Spirits said.

Shido exchanged a momentary glance with Kotori, and they nodded at each other before he bowed his head toward Woodman and led everyone out of the room.

They ran down the long hallway, retracing the way they had come. The sounds of explosions and gunfire and destruction by Territory echoed around them.

"Hngh," he groaned, after they'd been running for a few minutes. "How many of them managed to get in here anyway?!"

"I don't know! But given that an airship was detected—," Kotori started, but was interrupted by the wall ahead of them exploding.

"Whoa?!"

"Wha…?!"

Chunks of concrete and drywall went flying as white smoke puffed up around them. As the dust began to settle, a distorted human figure revealed itself to the fleeing group. It had metallic skin, long arms, and a single eye dug out of the center of a round head. The machine advanced slowly as if searching for its prey, enormous claws wriggling.

"…Bandersnatch!" Shido cried with a frown. DEM Industries' uncrewed weapon.

A camera on top of the Bandersnatch's head turned toward him.

"Hngh!" he grunted.

"Move, Shido!" Origami called, and half a second later, a beam of light shot out from behind him, grazing his hair as it went past.

"Whoa…?!"

The light stream made up of concentrated Spirit power shot through the Bandersnatch's head and silenced it completely.

He looked to his rear and found massive wings had popped up to float behind him at some point. Origami's Angel Metatron. "Th-thanks, Origami," he said, and she nodded, seeming the slightest bit pleased with herself.

But they couldn't dawdle here. The sounds of battle still came from all around them, and the fact that the Bandersnatches had penetrated this far meant that the hangar housing *Fraxinus* was in danger.

"Anyway, let's hurry. We don't—" There he stopped. Actually, he was forced to stop.

"Oh-ho, well, well." An unexpected voice rang out from ahead of them. "I never fancied that you lot were here, too."

"Wha…?!" Shido frowned at the cool tone that seemed out of place in this tense atmosphere.

A man dressed in a dark suit leisurely stepped forward from within the slowly clearing cloud of white smoke, together with a Wizard equipped with a CR unit.

There was no way Shido could forget this face. "Westcott?!" he cried.

Yes. The head of DEM Industries and the fated enemy of Shido and the Spirits, Isaac Westcott, in the flesh.

"…!"

"What?!"

Wariness colored the faces of the Spirits at the sight of Westcott. But this, too, was only natural. Even if the location of their base had been revealed to the enemy, it was normally unthinkable that the head of the aggressor organization would come himself to the scene of the conflict. In fact, Westcott had so far left all such violence to Ellen.

But that didn't mean they could let their guard down. This Westcott was essentially an entirely different being than the man they'd encountered the previous month.

"Metatron!" Origami called out, as if to rip through Shido's thoughts, and the Angel's light beam stretched out in a straight line toward Westcott.

Just as it was on the verge of hitting him, the page of an old book appeared, wrapped itself up around the blow from Metatron, and melted away into the air.

"Master Westcott!"

"Are you hurt…?!"

The Wizards to either side of him cried out in confusion. But Westcott himself showed no signs of bewilderment; he nodded almost elegantly.

"Wonderful," he remarked. "No hesitation at all. And a perfectly accurate shot."

"…Tch." Origami clicked her tongue in disgust.

"But unfortunately, the power of a limited Angel can't touch me now." Westcott smiled boldly and raised his right hand in front of him. The space near his hand twisted and distorted to produce a book radiating a sinister aura. "Beelzebub."

"…!" Shido gasped. Beelzebub. The omnipotent Demon King that Westcott had stolen from Nia. And the act of summoning it indicated only one thing: Westcott was preparing for battle.

The Spirits also sensed this new shift. Each of them focused her mind and began to manifest her limited Astral Dress and Angel.

“Haah!” After manifesting her limited Astral Dress, a pale veil of light, and the massive sword of her Angel Sandalphon, Tohka kicked at the ground and swung at Westcott.

The Wizards on standby to either side of him leaped out in front of him, laser blades readied, and met her blow.

“Hngh!”

“Get out…of the *way*!!” Tohka shouted, fierce enough to rip the air itself, and swung her sword to mow the Wizards down.

They had apparently increased the strength of their Territories, but they were still thrown back helplessly against the wall and groaned in anguish. “Hrnnf!”

“…!”

Tohka turned to Westcott.

Even now with an enemy within striking distance, he had a smile on his face. “You are brave, my magnificent Princess. But regrettably, while I would love to have a little fun with you, you lot are not the reason I’ve come here today.”

“Shut up,” Tohka snarled. “You think I’m letting you run away?!”

“Ha-ha! I haven’t the least intention of that. But it does seem like you will continue to be a thorn in my side should I simply leave you here,” Westcott said with a charming smile, and he moved his hand as though flipping through the pages of the book hanging in midair. “Ah, yes. This is perfect. Show me your strength. Beelzebub,” he chanted at the book. “*Ashufiriya.*”

“…! Tohka!” Shido cried out reflexively. He didn’t know what this attack was, but he felt a chill running down his spine.

In the next instant, the space at Tohka’s feet twisted up just as she was about to slice into Westcott, and an enormous book manifested from inside of the large hole.

“Wha—?!” She gasped and tried to leap backward.

But she was too late. The massive book slammed shut and swallowed her. She was snapped into it like she was a flower being pressed.

“Tohka!” Shido screamed, and lunged forward to try and rescue her. But just as the tips of his fingers brushed the book, it vanished into thin air.

And that wasn't the end of it.

"Eee…!"

"Wh-what is this?!"

Cries rang out from the rest of the Spirits.

Shido hurriedly looked back at them and learned the reason for those cries. Enormous books like the one that had swallowed Tohka had appeared at the feet and backs of the Spirits.

"Ngh…!"

"*Tch!* Rasiel!"

"Girls! You have to—," he shouted.

But it was pointless. One after the other, the books in the hallway closed, taking the Spirits into their pages.

"Ah! Wh-what…?!"

"Sh-Shido—"

And then they disappeared, leaving only the cries of the Spirits behind.

Able to do nothing but watch, Shido turned to Westcott with wide eyes. "Dammit! What did you do with them, you bastard?!"

"Ha-ha! No need to froth at the mouth," Westcott said, his lips turned up in a grin. "They're fine. You'll see them soon enough."

The book that had swallowed the others now manifested at Shido's own feet. "Wh-whoa?!" he cried.

"I will have my fun with you after I take care of Elliot. Until then, stay lost in the world of fantasy."

The book wedged Shido in among its pages and snapped shut.

"Hmm. Well, not bad for a first attempt." Westcott turned the page as he half stroked the cover of Beelzebub. He knew that the pages inside were now inscribed with text that hadn't been there moments earlier.

"Master Westcott!"

The Wizards who had been knocked flying earlier by Princess—Tohka—roused themselves and returned to Westcott.

"Our sincerest apologies. That was our mistake!"

“Not a problem. Thanks to that, I got to take Beelzebub for a test drive.” Westcott smiled faintly, and the Wizards looked around curiously.

“But…where exactly are the Spirits?” one of them asked.

“Mmm.” The corners of Westcott’s mouth twisted up as he dropped his gaze to the neat text lining Beelzebub’s pages. “In a story. A vortex of people’s delusions and all that.”

“A story…?” The Wizard cocked her head curiously to one side.

Well, there was no way she could understand, and there was no need for anyone other than himself to understand the power of the Demon King anyway.

He closed the book and lifted his face. “At any rate, we really ought to prioritize our objective right now, don’t you think? I’ve been so looking forward to seeing my old friend.”

The Wizards snapped to attention. “Yes sir!”

Chapter 4

Fairy Tale

"…Mm. Unh…" Groaning, Shido opened his eyes and rubbed them to clear his blurred vision.

The hazy scene before him gradually took on some clarity.

"…?"

In exchange for being able to see clearly, he was overcome with an overwhelming sense of wrongness. It seemed that he was lying in a bed, but the space around him was completely unfamiliar.

"Where am I…?" Frowning, he sat up. And heard a rustling sound.

Apparently, the bed was made out of straw. He looked more closely and realized that the walls and even the ceiling of the room he was in were all made of a similar material.

"Is this…?" His shoulders shot up. Until moments ago, he had been in the Ratatoskr facility facing Westcott. Then a book had swallowed him up.

"So is this…inside the book?" He grimaced, disturbed, and got up from the bed. The movement was strangely difficult. Curious, he glanced at himself and found he was clothed in a heavy mascot suit.

"What am I wearing? I can barely move in this." He furrowed his brow as he squirmed and wriggled out of the costume. He tore off the mask over his face, grabbed the collar of the suit, and pulled it off his body. He looked down at the head of the discarded costume and cocked his head to one side. "…A pig?"

Yes. Pink skin, folded ears, and a characteristically large snout. He had been wearing a silly caricature of a pig costume.

He froze in sudden realization.

"…A pig in a straw house. Is this—?"

Wooomph! A fierce gust of wind blew up and knocked the straw

house flying.

"Wh-whoa?!" The wind was strong enough to knock him over, too. "Ow-ow-ow… What the—?" He sat up, rubbing his head, and then gasped.

The reason was simple. An enormous shadow fell across the ground and onto him.

"…"

Ever so timidly, he lifted his face and found the figure of an enormous beast there, terrifying to even look upon.

An enormous mouth with rows of sharp teeth. Brightly glittering eyes. A huge body covered in brown fur. Twice as tall as Shido, it walked on two legs like a cartoon character for some reason. It was a typical fairy-tale villain—the wolf.

"Gweh-heh-heh-heh! I bet you hate this, you tasty little piglet. Gonna eat you up in a single bite!"

The wolf licked its chops in a melodramatic fashion. Drool dropped onto the ground and Shido's head.

"Uh. Umm." Sweat sprang up all over Shido's face as he spoke in a trembling voice. "Hold on a minute. Let's just calm down. I—"

"Graaaaaaaar!" But the wolf wasn't interested in hearing what he had to say. It opened its enormous mouth and charged.

"Ah! Aaaaaaaah?!" Screaming loudly enough to shred his own throat, Shido practically tripped over himself as he fled the scene. While the wolf's silhouette and posture were those of a silly monster, the wild intensity and the animal stench on its breath immediately conjured the word *death* in his brain.

"*Ha-ha! You're not getting awaaaay!*" the wolf roared, setting the air itself trembling, and chased him.

Shido kicked at the ground desperately as he tried to somehow sort his scattered thoughts. The pig costume he'd woken up in, the straw house sent flying. And the wolf chasing him. It was almost like…

"'The Three Little Pigs'?!" he shouted, as he raced across an open field.

The famed fairy tale "The Three Little Pigs." Three pig brothers each build their own house, but the oldest builds his out of straw

and the middle brother builds his out of wood. The Big Bad Wolf easily destroys them and eats the brothers while he's at it. Only the youngest brother is saved, because he has taken the time to build his house of brick. That was the basic plot anyway.

Shido overlaid the details of this story onto his own situation. The place where he'd been asleep was without a doubt a straw house. In other words, that meant…

"I'm the oldest brother?!" he cried out, half sobbing. "I get eaten first?!"

"*You just wait, little piggyyyyyyyyy!*" the wolf howled as if to drown him out.

Perhaps this was the silver lining. Walking comically on its back legs as it was, the wolf couldn't move as fast as if it were on all fours, so it couldn't quite manage to overtake Shido. But Shido was reaching his own limits. Every muscle in his body shrieked in agony, and his heart and lungs began to cry out.

"Henh…! Henh…!"

But the second he stopped moving, he would be inside the wolf's stomach. He tried to keep running as fast as he could while he racked his brain for a way to shake off the beast.

"…!"

Before long, he spotted a small house up ahead. And it wasn't a simple wood house like that of the middle pig brother in the fairy tale. This structure wouldn't be so easily destroyed. It was a gift from the heavens.

He knew it was rude, but he raced into the house, slammed the door shut, and locked it.

"Haah! Haah! Haah!"

He leaned back against the door, and in the next instant, he heard a *bang bang bang*. Even as he started in fright, he kept his weight pressed against the door to keep the wolf from kicking it in.

The wolf beat on the door and scratched at the walls for a while, but eventually, the world grew quiet around Shido. It seemed that the wolf had realized it couldn't destroy the house and had given up.

"Th-thank goodness…" Shido slid down to the floor. He took one deep breath after another to get his heart rate back under control

and then jerked his face up with a gasp.

He had remembered the ending of "The Three Little Pigs." He was pretty sure that once the wolf realizes it can't destroy the youngest brother's brick house, it tries coming in through the chimney.

"But this house doesn't seem like the little pig's brick house. Who lives here…?"

It would be pretty bad if the house's resident was assaulted by the wolf coming down the chimney. Shido raised his voice to warn them of the danger.

"Excuse me! Is anyone here?!"

"Y-yes." He heard a faint voice from a room farther back. "Who might you be?"

So someone did live here. Shido was about to tell them that the wolf might break into the house when he cocked his head to one side abruptly. "…Hm?"

The reason was simple. He'd heard that voice before. Furrowing his brow, he walked toward where it had come from and peered into the room.

Just as he'd expected, he found a girl he knew well there. Wavy hair, small physique, and a rabbit puppet on her left hand.

"…! Sh-Shido…?!"

"Oh! Shido! Finally, someone we know!"

Yoshino and Yoshinon opened their eyes wide in surprise when they saw him.

He let out a sigh of relief as he stepped into the room. "Yoshino, Yoshinon! I'm so glad. Are you okay?!"

"Y-yes… I'm glad it's you, too, Shido."

"*Mm. But, but, Shido! What exactly is this place?*" Yoshinon asked, cocking its head to one side.

"Oh, uh. I don't really know, either. When I woke up, I was wearing this mascot costume from 'The Three Little Pigs'…" There, he stopped himself. He'd been so enormously relieved at their reunion that he hadn't really noticed at first, but Yoshino and Yoshinon were also wearing strange outfits. These were cute, too, like something out of a fairy tale. White blouse, frilly skirt, and…a cape with a red hood.

The Spirit looked almost like the perfect picture of Little Red Riding Hood.

"Y-Yoshino," he stammered. "What are you wearing?"

"I don't know," she said, looking down at herself. "Before I. Knew it, I was dressed like this. And someone told me to. Go to Grandmother's house…"

"*Yes, right. Doesn't make much sense*," the puppet added. "*We can't use Spirit power or the Angel, and we didn't know what else to do, so we came to this grandma's place.*"

"…"

Shido felt sweat bead up on his forehead.

Which only made sense. There likely wasn't a person in Japan who had never heard a word of this story.

"Little Red Riding Hood." A fairy tale that was just as famous as—actually, even more famous than—"The Three Little Pigs." He was pretty sure by the time Little Red Riding Hood arrives at her grandmother's home, the grandmother is already—

"…Goodness, Red Riding Hood." The large bed farther back in the room wriggled with movement. *"You have a guest?"* The voice was rather more forceful than that of a grandmother.

"Y-yes," Yoshino said. "Um. Grandmother. I should really get going. I'll leave the bread and wine right here, okay?"

"Aah…" The grandmother hidden under the blankets moved like she was chuckling. *"You're such a good girl, aren't you? Such a lovely child. Bringing not just your own self, but this tasty-looking little piglet, too!"*

The blankets were thrown off to reveal an enormous wolf. While it was disguised as a grandmother in a hat, nightshirt, and glasses, it was still definitely the wolf that had been chasing Shido earlier.

"Eeeeeah?!"

"Hooo-ee! Grandmother's in Beast Mode?!"

Yoshino and Yoshinon shrieked.

"Hey-oooo!" The wolf peeled off its disguise and laughed loudly. *"How ya been, little piggyyyyyyyyyy?! Bet you thought you got awaaaaay?"*

"…The wolf?! How?!" Shido screamed. This was clearly weird.

How could the wolf have been snuggled into this bed when Shido was being chased? Common sense said there was no way it could be the same wolf.

"Ha-ha! You're asking how in this *world?"* The wolf laughed even harder. *"Well, fine. At any rate, I'll swallow the both of you up whoooooole!"*

"…! W-we gotta run, Yoshino, Yoshinon!"

"O-okay…!"

Shido grabbed Yoshino's hand, practically kicked the door down, and raced out of the house as fast as he could.

He ran across the same field as before to escape from the wolf. But that didn't last long, either. He was fleeing with Yoshino in tow, and his body had already reached its limits. Abruptly, the strength drained out of his legs, and he tumbled forward spectacularly.

"Hngh…!"

Because he immediately let go of her hand, Yoshino was not pulled down with him, but once his legs stopped moving, they didn't seem like they would be doing anything again anytime soon.

"Shido!" Yoshino cried, and tried to help him up.

But it was too late. A massive shadow loomed over him, prone on the ground with Yoshino tugging on his arm.

"Looks like this is the end of the line, huh?" The wolf's big eyes shone brightly as it peered into their faces.

Shido choked on his breath and pushed Yoshino's back. "Yoshino! You have to run. Go!"

"But…! I can't. Leave you, Shido…!" she cried.

"Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" The wolf was thoroughly amused. *"Lovely. Just beautiful. Then I'll go ahead and help myself to the both of youuuuuuuuu!"* It opened its mouth wide and came in toward them to swallow them whole.

Shido held Yoshino to him tightly to protect her and gritted his teeth for the pain to come.

But it didn't, even as the time ticked by.

Instead, he heard a metallic sound like a sword being drawn, several gunshots, and then the wolf's anguished cries.

"Hngh… You. Who are you?!"

"Huh…?" Shido lifted his face to see two girls standing between him and Yoshino and the wolf, as though to protect them.

"You okay, Shido?! What about you, Yoshino?!"

"Eh-heh-heh! Just in the nick of time, eh, boy?"

"Tohka! And…Nia?!" Shido's eyes flew open when he saw their faces.

Yes, appearing in what was truly the nick of time were Tohka—gripping a sword and wearing a traditional battle coat, *kiri-hakama* trousers, and gaiters—and Nia in a long black coat with both hands wrapped around a silver gun. Both were, like he and Yoshino, dressed in fairly idiosyncratic outfits, but he could tell that unlike he and Yoshino, they were based on battle-ready characters.

They had clearly attacked the wolf to stop its attack on Shido and Yoshino. The wolf's fur was riddled with sword slashes and bullet holes.

But the beast showed no signs of retreat. It grinned even more luridly as it thrust its paws against the ground and began to growl. *"Heh! I dunno what this is, but it's fun. I'll invite you all into my stomach!"*

"…*Tch!* This guy really is tough, huh? We're not gonna win this on power alone," Nia muttered, annoyed, as she readied her pistols. She glanced over at Tohka. "Hon, you mind giving him one of those little dumplings you got hanging around your waist there?"

"Mm? These?" Tohka cocked her head to one side as she took a dumpling out from the pouch hanging from one side of her waist and tossed it toward the wolf as Nia had instructed. "Hup!"

"Graaaaaar— Ah?" The dumpling rolled right into the wolf's mouth just as it was about to charge Tohka and Nia, and the wolf swallowed it with a dubious look on its face.

In the next instant, the wolf sat up like a perfect little dog, as though it had always been an obedient pup.

"Huh…?" Shido's pupils narrowed to black points, showing his shock.

"Aah, little piggie, Red Riding Hood." The wolf bowed its head apologetically. *"I am sorry about that, hm? I was just hangry really."*

"Oh, uh. Sure…," Shido said, completely taken aback by the wolf's

impossibly sudden transformation.

"Eh-heh-heh!" Nia cackled. "That's Momotaro's special dumplings for you. Instantly effective on all canines!" She patted Tohka on the shoulder. And indeed, just as she said, Tohka's costume was one known to all Japanese people, Japan's number one hero, *the* Momotaro himself.

"…But, like, is that what the sweet dumplings do…?" Shido asked with a frown.

"Well, let's not bother with the details," Nia said with a shrug. "We're saved. Huzzah, hurray."

He was still curious about a number of things, but she was indeed right. He finally heaved a sigh of relief, staggered to his feet, and turned to face the newly arrived Spirits. "Guess so. Thanks, Tohka, Nia."

"Mm. I'm just glad you guys are okay!" Tohka grinned as she slipped her sword back into its scabbard. Her hair was tied back into a ponytail, and she wore an armored headband that glinted in the light, both of which strangely suited her. "Mm? What's wrong?"

"Oh… It's nothing. Anyway, Nia? Where are we exactly?" Shido asked. "Were we swallowed up by Beelzebub?"

"Mmm." Nia groaned, a troubled look on her face. "You're maybe not far off the mark there. It's definitely channeling Beelzebub, but we're not actually *inside* of Beelzebub. If I had to say, it's like we're in this space that's kinda like a super-teensy small-scale parallel world that Beelzebub made."

"Parallel world…?!" Shido furrowed his brow. Parallel world. That was the name given to the other space where the Spirits lived.

"Oh, no, I just mean that roughly speaking, that's probably the closest to what we're looking at here, not that that's what it actually is, y'know?" Nia said quickly. "Put simply, we're locked up in a space that's cut off from the outside world."

"I—I get it," he said slowly. "So then what's with the outfits?"

"Hmm." She paused for a moment. "So this is Ashufiriya. A space created based on people's daydreams, fantasies, and stories."

He frowned. "…Meaning?"

"Yeah, well, basically, it's a world where all the stories collected

by Beelzebub mix together," she told him. "And once we got sucked into it, we got mixed in with the stories, too."

"Stories?"

"Yup. Taking a gander at you, boy, you look normal, but… You didn't notice anything weird?"

"Yeah." He nodded slowly. "When I woke up, I was wearing this pig mascot costume and being chased by the wolf."

Nia sputtered with laughter. "Dang, man! 'The Three Little Pigs'? Huh. How come you ditched the costume, though? I would've loved to see that."

"Sh-shut up," he said, and looked around at the Spirits once more. It was true that they were all dressed like fairy-tale characters. Shido's "The Three Little Pigs," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Momotaro," and…

"…Hm?" He frowned when his eyes settled on Nia. "What character are you, Nia?"

He could tell at first glance what characters the rest of them were supposed to be, but Nia's costume was a mystery to him. At the very least, he'd never heard of a fairy-tale hero with a black coat and a pair of pistols.

"Me?" She laughed. "I'm Fatima from *Silver Bullet*."

"*Silver Bullet*… Wait. That's your manga, isn't it?!" he cried out in bewilderment.

Now that she said it, though, he did feel like her costume looked a lot like the hero of Souji Honjou's *Silver Bullet*.





"Heh-heh-heh!" She grinned at him. "No fences between creations, boy. The more well-known the story, the more likely it'll float to the surface. So of course fairy tales are the law of the land, but with this story, I'm the creator herself, see? Seems like the story was guided by that connection and manifested or whatever."

"I-is that how it works?" he asked. "I assumed it was just fairy tales."

"O' course it's not," she told him. "Any story anyone's come up with exists in some corner of this world somewhere. More recognizable characters that are more well-known, even if they're more recent, they'll be walking around clear as day. Ah, speaking of, that's the world's most famous mouse—"

"Stop!" Shido half shrieked and shook his head vigorously from side to side. "I feel like we should definitely not go there… A-anyway, even if I don't totally get it, I still get what kind of place this is, more or less. But I must've passed out when I came here. Do you have any idea how much time's passed since the book got us?"

They had been on their way to *Fraxinus*. And now while they were stuck here uselessly, the Ratatoskr base was perhaps being overrun by DEM. It was even possible that DEM's demonic hand was reaching once more for Mukuro in space.

"Okay, whoa there." Nia spread out her hands to calm him down. "Panic is prohibited, boy. It's times like this you gotta keep cool. The passage of time is slower in this space than in the outside world, so there shouldn't be any big thing or anything to deal with right this second."

"R-really?" he asked, surprised.

"Yeah." She shrugged. "That said, though, we can't really dawdle, either. We gotta figure out a way out of here."

"…! Right. I wanted to ask about that, too. How exactly are we supposed to escape?"

Nia crossed her arms, a troubled look on her face. "The for sure way would be Westcott using Beelzebub and opening up the channel one more time, but…"

"Wh-whoa. Hold up…" Shido scowled. They couldn't go pinning their hopes on the enemy who had captured them. First of all, if

Westcott were to release them, that would no doubt mean that he'd achieved all his own objectives.

"Outside of that…" She paused thoughtfully. "I guess our only option'd be to find a character with enough power to smash this world from the inside. You know, like the hero in a story breaking free, some kind of almighty superhero."

"That'd be convenient," he said. "But does a character like that even exist?"

"Hmm." She crossed her arms. "Well, we got all kinds of stories from all over and all eras mixed together in this world, y'know? There's gotta be one like that somewhere in here. But we don't know where they are, and even if we found them, we don't know if they'd actually help us or not."

"Hngh…" Shido unconsciously furrowed his brow. He didn't know how big this world was, but this sounded like looking for a needle in a haystack. Still, it wasn't as though they could simply stay here. He exhaled at length to calm himself down and lifted his face. "At any rate, let's go and find the others. They had to have been sent somewhere in this world, too, right?"

"Yeah, prob'ly," Nia agreed.

"Then that's job number one," he said, and the group nodded in agreement. "Even if we do figure out how to return to the outside world, it's pointless unless we're all together."

"But, Shido." Tohka crossed her arms, a serious look on her face. "How are we going to find them?"

"Unh! That's…" He was pressed for a response. As a general policy, this was definitely the way forward, but to be honest, he had no clue how to find anyone.

"Excuse me?" The wolf, having kept quiet and turned its ears to their conversation, now tentatively raised its paw. *"Are you perhaps looking for the other people who came to this world with you?"*

"Huh? Oh. Yeah… We are?" Shido replied, bewildered by the wolf, who was now the picture of politeness in a one-eighty from its previous attitude.

"In that case, my nose might be of service to you." The wolf pounded its chest. *"In this world, you are all what might be called*

foreign objects. You possess a distinctive scent. I might be able to follow similar scents."

"…! R-really?!" Shido cried.

"Ooh! Look at you, wolfie!" Tohka's face brightened, and she patted the wolf's head.

The wolf almost purred, extremely pleased, perhaps thinking that Tohka was its master after she had given it the sweet dumpling. *"Now then, shall we set out immediately? It is faint, but I do detect that scent in the castle town to the north."*

"Okay, thanks—whoops!" Shido pushed against the ground and stood up. But the legs he had worked so hard had not yet fully recovered; he staggered and nearly fell down. "Ah, whoops."

"Mm." Tohka looked at him in concern. "You okay, Shido?"

"Yeah. I'm fine, no worries," he replied. "Just a little unsteady for a second there."

"I do apologize." The wolf flattened its ears against its head, despondent. *"This is my fault, isn't it? To let you know how sorry I am, I shall carry the little piggy."*

"Huh? O-oh, no, I'm—"

"No, no, don't stand on formality. Go ahead and climb into my mouth. As a general rule, I swallow my prey without chewing, so you'll be fine when I vomit you up later."

"…"

This was an entirely too disturbing prospect, and all Shido could do was shake his head back and forth, wordlessly.

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"…ri! Kotori!"

"…There…nothing."

Kotori heard a voice in her hazy consciousness. But her body wouldn't move in response. And it wasn't only her body. Even hearing her name called, her brain would not connect this to thought.

She was in the grips of a deep, powerful desire to sleep. She no

longer felt anything at all in her limbs, which until earlier had been so cold, so icy, she could hardly stand it. If she sank into sleep now, she would most likely never wake up again. But even as she was aware of this, she couldn't muster the strength to fight back against this intense drowsiness. She was losing what little remained of her consciousness like the sands falling in an hourglass.

"Ah! Shido. You came in an excellent moment. Kotori does not wake."

"Appeal. She is in danger. Please commence CPR."

"…Ooh, the sudden clutching. Must you engage?!"

"Disregard. This is an emergency. It's all right if only for a moment. Go ahead."

"…What are you dooooiiiiiing?!" Kotori couldn't help shrieking when her chest was squeezed and massaged. But when she opened her eyes, she discovered that it was not her older brother Shido massaging her breasts, but two girls with identical faces.

"…What is going on, Kaguya, Yuzuru?" she asked, rolling her eyes, and Kaguya and Yuzuru looked at each other before turning back to her.

They were both clad in rough outfits made of bits of rags patched together and carrying some kind of baggage. Although their costumes were similar, for some reason, Kaguya was in pants while Yuzuru was in a skirt. With their physiques and hairstyles, they almost looked like male and female twins.

"Kah-kah! You have been deceived, Kotori."

"Assent. It appears that we were correct in our anticipation that the power of love would wake you if we spoke the name of Shido."

The pair said all this with their hands still on Kotori's chest, moving their fingers up and down in small increments.

Kotori pushed their hands away with an indignant snort and tried to stand up. And then wobbled and fell back down.

"Hey. You okay?"

"Worry. You're quite weak."

"…Well, of course, I'm weak." Kotori sighed a puff of white air as she looked at her surroundings once more.

They were in a town in a foreign country, the kind you'd see in a

fairy tale. The issue was the weather—white as far as the eye could see. She didn't know how long it had been snowing, but the townscape was blanketed in a platinum white because of it. She had been thrust into this in nothing but a rough dress without any real protection against the cold. This would definitely make a person weaker.

She glanced down at the basket in her own hands. It was filled with matches.

"…Dammit," she cursed. "This is basically 'The Little Match Girl.'"

"'The Little Match Girl'?"

"Question. What is that?"

The twins cocked their heads curiously to one side.

"A fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen," Kotori told them. "A poor little girl sells matches in town in the winter, but the night passes and she's barely sold any. When the cold gets to be too much, she lights the matches to try and get war—ah-ah-ahchoo!" She sneezed loudly. And of course she did. Although she had been awakened by the Yamai sisters, she was still in the same terrible situation as before.

"We must move, at any rate. This cold is significant."

"Assent. Let us get to a place out of the snow."

Kaguya and Yuzuru took Kotori's hands and held her up as the three of them walked away, leaving footprints in the snow.

And then a few minutes later, they came to a narrow alley. Naturally, it was still cold, but there was a shed of sorts, and at the very least, they were sheltered from the wind, and there was no snow on the ground, thanks to the overhanging roofs of the tightly packed buildings.

"I'd prefer to be indoors," she said. "But this is better than that place before anyway."

"Unity. It would also be lovely if we had a fire, but—" Yuzuru dropped her gaze to the basket Kotori was carrying.

As if guessing at her thinking, Kotori pulled out a box of matches. "Yeah. They're merchandise, but I guess this isn't the time for that. We're here and all. So how about we use them, Little Match Girl–style?" She took a match out of the box.

“That reminds me,” Kaguya said. “You were in the middle of telling us. What happened when the Little Match Girl lit the match?”

“Oh, well, she…” Kotori struck a match, and a flame appeared. A second later, hot soup, a whole cooked turkey, and all kinds of feasts made a hazy appearance in the space illuminated by the flame.

“Whoa?! What the—?!”

“Shock. There is a meal floating in a place where there was nothing.”

The Yamai sisters opened their eyes wide in surprise.

Kotori was no less surprised. She knew that this was the story of “The Little Match Girl,” but she’d never imagined that this would actually happen.

However, the match couldn’t burn forever. The uncertain flame vanished in mere seconds, and with it, the feast also disappeared.

“Oh! It’s gone.”

“Admiration. Mysterious things do happen. I suppose there was an ingredient included in the match to show us visions.”

“No, I don’t think it’s anything as dodgy as that,” Kotori said with a wry smile.

Kaguya stared in fascination at what was left of the match. “So is this the rest of the story?”

“Yeah.” Kotori nodded. “Since the match goes out right away, the girl keeps lighting matches, sees beautiful visions, and then it ends with her dead in the morning.”

“What? That’s so sad.”

“Suggestion. In that case—” Yuzuru went and picked up some small pieces of the scrap wood from farther back in the alley and began to put them together into a pyramid. “Appeal. Kotori, please try lighting this on fire.”

“Huh? Oh, sure.” She struck a match and set fire to the scrap wood. The flickering, faint flame eventually became a large fire.

And a scene like before filled the alley, proportional with the intensity of the fire. So much food it would be impossible to eat it all. A warm fireplace. And even a gently smiling Shido.

“Whoa! Wow! It’s an illusion?! It’s hella real!”

“Shock. Even Shido is here. I suppose it is in fact responding to

your heart seeking him, Kotori."

"Sh-shut up… But, well, at least we can get warm here." Kotori couldn't help feeling that the Little Match Girl using her matches to build a fire wrecked the whole mood of the story. But desperate times called for desperate measures. No matter how beautiful the story, now that she was inside of it, she was very much not interested in freezing to death in the snow.

She held the palms of her numb hands out toward the fire to warm them. Sensation at last returned to the tips of her frozen fingers as her stomach growled loudly.

"Oh? Do you perhaps hunger?" Kaguya returned to her pompous way of speaking like she'd only just remembered.

"Ngh…" Embarrassment colored Kotori's cheeks. "Not my fault. I was on the verge of freezing to death there… If only this feast were edible." She reached out to the delicacies floating around them. But they were indeed only an illusion, and her hand closed around nothing but empty air.

"…Of course it wouldn't be that simple," she groaned, vexed.

Kaguya clapped her hands. "Ah, yes. Yuzuru, earlier."

"Perspicacious. Now that you mention it, there was that."

"…? What. Come on." Kotori furrowed her brow dubiously.

Kaguya and Yuzuru opened up the large bundles they carried and showed Kotori what was inside.

"This…!" Her eyes flew open.

But this was only natural. Those bags were filled with biscuits and candies and all kinds of sweets.

"Where on earth did you get all this?" she asked.

"Hm? Upon our return to our senses, Yuzuru and I were in the 'schwarzwald.' Black Forest, mm. We ambulated some time and came upon a dwelling comprised of sweets."

"Explanation. Since we were hungry, we took part of the wall and the roof from this place."

"Wha…?!" Kotori stared at them incredulously. But when she considered this story against the situation she'd found herself in, she nodded as if convinced. "I get it. You're Hansel and Gretel."

"Hansel?"

“Doubt. What is Gretel?”

The pair cocked their heads to one side.

“Right.” Kotori nodded slightly. “It’s another fairy tale. A brother and sister are abandoned by their mother, and they find a house made of cake in the woods. But… Hey. Wasn’t there anyone living in that house of sweets?”

The twins nodded as if they had just remembered something.

“Now that you mention it, indeed, an old lady was present. She attempted to draw us into the home, but she was quite suspect, so we paid her no mind.”

“Assent. When we did so, she chased after us with a very angry look.”

“Kah-kah! However, such an elderly woman could never hope to best the powerful walking skills of we Yamais!”

“Truth. Kaguya ran away sobbing at the woman’s sudden transformation. She probably also peed her pants.”

“I did *not* pee my pants!”

“…”

Kotori managed a crooked smile at their back-and-forth. In the story, Hansel and Gretel get caught by that witch, but apparently, that was not a concern for these two.

“Well,” she said. “I’m just glad you’re okay. So can I have some?”

“Of course. You would do well to eat a quantity you prefer,” Kaguya said, and threw her head back with a smug chortle as she offered the sweets.

“Okay, thanks.” Kotori reached a hand out. She tossed cookies and donuts and other high-calorie treats into her mouth and chewed them up. Normally the enemy of a purehearted young girl, these sweets were a reliable source of energy in a situation like this. As the sugar gently coated her mouth, she felt strength rushing into her limbs.

“Phew,” she sighed. “This is giving me life. Now if I just had a Chupa Chups, I’d be as content as a bug in a rug. Well, I guess beggars can’t be choosers, right?” She popped a candy with no stick attached into her mouth and moved her tongue back and forth like she was flicking the nonexistent stick.

The Yamai sisters' eyes grew round as they *ooh*ed.

"I can see it. The stick that should not be seen is visible…!"

"Admiration. It is an air Chupa Chups."

Kotori couldn't help smiling at this overreaction. "What're you going on about…? Well, you saved me at any rate. Thanks, Kaguya, Yuzuru."

"Kah-kah! 'Tis a small thing. A mere trifle for we Yamais."

"Assent. We are all in this together."

The pair grinned at her.

Kotori nodded in response and then got a serious look on her face as she brought her hand to her chin. "Still… Our situation hasn't really changed. Exactly what is happening now? We can't actually have been locked up in the world of the book?"

Her last memory before getting lost in this world was of facing Westcott at the Ratatoskr base and being swallowed up by an enormous book. She knew that this was the power of the Demon King Beelzebub, but she didn't know exactly where that power had sent them.

"We have to do something to get back to where we were," Kotori said, and Kaguya crossed her arms with a considered groan.

"That is indeed so, but in what manner exactly are we to move?"

"That's… I don't know. But the fact that we managed to find each other means there's a strong possibility that everyone else is somewhere in this world, too. We need to meet up with them and strateg—" Kotori was interrupted by the sound of a horse-drawn carriage passing the entrance to the alley, followed by the voices of people talking.

"…Tut tut! Quite a few carriages today. Is something going on?"

"Didn't you hear? There's a ball at the palace today. I guess they're going to unveil something incredible."

"Something incredible? What, the king's love child?"

"No, no… A woman I know who serves at the palace, she says they found a reallive mermaid. They took her to the palace, so she's the king's now. And I guess he thinks she's really something, so he's going to present her to all the dignitaries at the ball."

"A meeermaid? Please. Mermaids don't actually exist."

"It's true, though! Apparently, she sings 'Daaarling, daaarling' at just about everything."

"…"

The gossip was blunt and obvious, almost as if the speakers intended Kotori and the twins to overhear them.

The three girls looked at one another.

"…What d'you think?"

"Ah, I mean…"

"Panic. I do have the very powerful feeling that I may know who that mermaid is."

After a few seconds of silence, the three girls stood as one.

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Alarms blared on the bridge of *Fraxinus*. The monitors displayed feeds from the cameras within the base, as well as a blueprint of the base's layout and red dots moving through it, fanning chaos among the crew.

"The aerial bombing has stopped. But now shootouts are taking place within the base!"

"S-signals for DEM Industries Wizards and numerous Bandersnatches detected on base!"

"Where is the commander?!"

"I've pinged her repeatedly, but she's not responding!"

Nakatsugawa had his hands clasped together as offering up prayers to the idol decorating the top of his console, a figure of a beautiful girl that had supposedly been prohibited. "Wh-why is this happening?! Aaah, dear god! Dear Mistyyyyy!"





Cries mixed with anger and grief filled the air. But this was only natural. According to the information coming in from the Ratatoskr base, a DEM Industries airship had appeared in the sky above and proceeded to attack. To the crew on the bridge of *Fraxinus*, busy with the arrangements for their departure to outer space, it was like a punch out of nowhere to the side of the head. A surprise attack of this nature was a first even for this crew, which had seen its fair share of bloody surprises.

"…! …!"

One crew member, Hinako Shiizaki, placed a hand to her chest to try and quiet the enthusiastic dance beat of her pounding heart. But the more she tried to calm herself, the more quickly and violently her heart raced.

And then the letters *M-A-R-I-A* popped up on her personal monitor.

"Huh…?" Her eyes grew round, and she heard the voice of *Fraxinus*'s AI, Maria, come from the speakers attached to her monitor.

"Please calm down, Shiizaki. In a situation such as this, losing your head in the chaos is more frightening than the enemy itself. Let's calm down and proceed just as in your training. It's all right. I know best of all how capable you all are."

"Huh? Uh. Um… Okay." Hinako nodded as if taken aback by the directness of Maria's words. She glanced around and saw the same thing happening with the other crew members. The monitor in front of them flashed, and Maria spoke to all of them. They were as surprised as she was, but like her, they did regain their composure at last.

"Well, well," Vice Commander Kannazuki said, his voice carrying easily across the bridge. "It would appear she got the jump on me. Let's listen to Maria and proceed with cool heads. Any dispatches from the base?"

"Sir! We are to proceed to Zodiac space and execute the mission once we recover Commander Itsuka, Shido, and the Spirits!"

"Mm-hmm." Kannazuki nodded to himself. "Excellent. In that case, we must complete all preparations and defend *Fraxinus* until

the commander returns."

The crew swallowed hard and then called out in unison, "Roger!"

In the next instant, a deafening *boom* sounded nearby, and *Fraxinus* rocked violently from side to side.

"Ngh…! What was that?!" Kawagoe said, rubbing his head where it had slammed against the console, and his monitor shifted to show the exterior of *Fraxinus*. He spotted a number of Bandersnatches and Wizards with CR units in the hangar. The enemy had already reached the ship.

"Shots fired at the lower decks!" Minowa reported. "Minimal damage, but enemy Wizards are trying to board the airship!"

A shiver of fear raced through the crew.

"Not good. We need to stop them immediately!"

"But we can't exactly fire in the hang—"

Chaos erupted on the bridge once more.

Kannazuki clapped his hands loudly to get everyone's attention. "There is a way out of this. Maria, Territory. Range, fifty. Attribute, jamming."

"*Understood. Basic Realizer activated. I am deploying the Territory*," Maria said quietly, and a faint humming echoed throughout the ship as an invisible Territory spread out around it.

Instantly, the enemy Bandersnatch devices in the hangar collapsed like marionettes with their strings cut.

"The Bandersnatches?!"

"Yes. We neutralized the enemy Territories with our Territory. A fatal blow for those dolls powered by generative magic, I suppose."

"Th-that's our vice commander!" Mikimoto cried out in appreciation.

But Kannazuki didn't so much as take a moment for a smug smile. "However," he said, his face grim as another explosion shook the ship, "at best, this simply obstructs their Territories. It cannot counter flesh-and-blood people and actual bullets."

"Wha…?!"

"So it's meaningless, then?!"

The crew shrieked, and there was a *pop* from the door to the bridge. Three Wizards in wiring suits charged in, guns blazing.

"All of you! Hands up!" one barked.

"Do anything funny, and we'll shoot!" another snarled.

"E-eeek?!" Hinako shrieked and held her hands up high above her head. The other crew members also froze in place, their hands in the air as instructed by the enemy.

After confirming their orders were being obeyed, the Wizards signaled one another with their eyes and nodded slightly.

"Huh. So this is the famed *Fraxinus*?"

"Ha! Lookit how huge it is. Even *Arbatel* couldn't bring this sucker down, and now us three nab it, no probs. Mister Westcott's gonna love this."

"…Don't let your guard down. Save the chitchat for after we restrain the crew and put the AI to sleep," a man who appeared to be the squad leader said, and the two Wizards in front nodded to indicate their understanding.

"Woh-kay. Sorry, but we're going to have to tie you up. Don't worry, though. Mister Westcott thinks you're all great. He won't do anything too terrible." One Wizard stepped toward them, gun still carefully readied. He twisted up the hands of the closest crew member, Hinako, and started to push her down to the floor.

"Eeek!" she squealed.

"Don't resist. We were told to take you alive if we—," the Wizard started to say, when an enormous tiger head appeared above Hinako's head and roared at the Wizard.

"Wh-whoaaaaa?!" The Wizard let out a stunned cry and pulled the trigger on his gun. But the bullets passed right through the massive beast and hit the wall of the bridge, ricocheting with a *clang*. Which was when the Wizard realized that the creature was a three-dimensional projection.

"Wha…?!" The other two Wizards were also momentarily distracted by the phantom tiger.

Kannazuki instantly disappeared, and the Wizard holding Hinako's hands fell backward with a brief cry of anguish.

"Huh…? Ah—" A second later, he realized what had happened. Faster than the eye could perceive, Kannazuki had closed in and kicked the Wizard in the jaw.

“A fine play, Maria. We’ll polish the dynamic part later,” Kannazuki said with a strange gesture.

“*That is disturbing somehow, Kannazuki*,” Maria replied in an icy tone.

The stunned Wizards came back to themselves and turned their guns on the vice commander.

“You…!”

“Don’t res—”

But a second before they could pull the triggers, a shriek echoed across the bridge.

“Ah… Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!” It was Nakatsugawa.

“Wh-what the—?!” One of the Wizards turned the barrel of her gun toward him.

But Nakatsugawa paid her no mind. He simply wailed and sobbed. In an unlucky turn, the bullet intended for the attacking tiger had struck Nakatsugawa’s figurine and knocked her upper body clean off.

“You… You you you you you you bastaaaaards! My precious Mistyyyyyyyy!” he howled, his voice filled with blood and rage, and he lunged for the Wizard with the gun pointed at him.

He could not have been said to be slim, and now that weight turned him into a literal human bullet closing in on the Wizard.

“Hnngh…?!” The Wizard turned the barrel of her gun toward him and pulled the trigger. The bullet grazed his shoulder, and blood dripped from the wound.

But he didn’t so much as flinch in fear or pain. He tackled the Wizard, and his momentum brought them both to the ground.

“Hngaah?!” The Wizard let out a cry of anguish when the back of her head bounced hard against the floor.

But Nakatsugawa didn’t stop. He climbed on top of her and began to intently pummel the Wizard.

“Gaaaaaaaah!”

“Hey— Ngh! Errrk!”

She might have been a Wizard, but without her Territory, she was no different from any other human being. With Nakatsugawa

straddling her like a horse, the Wizard covered her face with her hands to try and protect her head.

"Ngh! Damn you!" The last Wizard turned his gun on Nakatsugawa. The distance between them was perhaps ten meters. And Nakatsugawa wasn't moving now. Hitting him would be like shooting ducks in a barrel for a trained Wizard.

"…!"

Hinako put her hand in her pocket and yanked out a straw doll. And then quickly focusing her mind, she squeezed the doll's chest tightly.

"Eez?!" The Wizard with the gun let out a curious cry and bent over like an invisible hand had forced his head down.

Kannazuki didn't let the opening pass him by. He closed in on the lead Wizard instantaneously, kicked up the hand holding the gun, wrapped his arm around his neck, pressed down on his carotid artery, and knocked him unconscious.

Time-wise, the whole sequence of events hadn't even taken three minutes. During this mere instant, *Fraxinus* had faced danger. And overcome it.

"Phew," Kannazuki said, brushing his hands together. "We did manage it all right, then."

With the exception of Nakatsugawa, the entire crew heaved a sigh of relief.

"Haah, I thought we were dead there."

"Absolutely. It's bad for the heart," Minowa said. "Oh! Nakatsugawa, she's unconscious. You should stop now."

"Unh, unh…" Nakatsugawa stopped punching at last, still shedding hot tears and sobbing. "Misty. I'm so sorry, Misty…"

And then the pain of being shot perhaps caught up with him at last; he let out a scream and rolled over.

"My shoulder! It hurts! Aaaugh! Aaaaaaugh!"

"Oh, come now," Kannazuki chided him. "Don't go carrying on like that! Analyst Murasame, could you please assist?"

"…Sure. Let's get that bleeding stopped," Reine said, and began first aid on the injured man. "Looks like the bullet went clean through. Shouldn't be any issues once we get you in the medical

Realizer for a bit. Anyway, take off your jacket."

"*Everyone, excellent work*," Maria said. "*While the Wizards are unconscious, let's collect their Realizers and weapons and restrain them. And, Nakatsugawa, Shiizaki.*"

"Unh, unnnnh… Yes?"

"Wh-what?"

They lifted their heads at the sudden sound of their names.

"*I have confirmed the efficacy of your figures and straw dolls in battle. I will investigate the possibility of allowing them onto the ship as a special measure*," Maria announced briefly.

◇

"Bwaaaaahchoo!" Nia sneezed, in a very unladylike manner. "Ah! Dammit."

"Hey, whoa." Shido reflexively grinned. "You okay there?"

"Not even. How can it be this cold?" Nia pulled her head deeper into the collar of her coat.

This was no wonder at all, however. Guided by the wolf, Shido's party had passed through hills and fields to arrive at last at the castle town in question. But the moment they'd stepped onto its streets, the season, the weather, and even the time of day had all changed in an instant. White snow covered everything. The sky was already dark, and the streets were illuminated by street lamps. It was a totally different scene from only seconds earlier. This, too, was likely the hallmark of a world where stories mixed.

"Say, boy? You didn't happen to bring that mascot costume, did you?"

"No. And, like, you've got a whole coat at least. Tohka, Yoshino? Are you okay?" Shido asked, and the two nodded at the same time.

"Mm. Nothing serious."

"Yes. I'm used. To cold."

Nia sneezed dramatically once more. "…Aaack, dammit. Boy, let's hurry up and find the girls, and get back to someplace warm already!"

"Yeah, that's the plan. Umm. The wolf said the scent was coming from that castle, yeah?" Shido turned his gaze toward the large palace visible deeper in the town.

They had parted ways with the wolf at the edge of town, anticipating the commotion that was sure to arise if they marched into town with an enormous canine at their side. In fact, the passersby did send curious glances toward Shido and his party and their strange outfits. Well, he and his friends were very obviously people of a different worldview and nationality, so this was no surprise. But it didn't make him feel too great.

"At any rate, let's head for the castle," he said. "We don't have any other leads anyway."

Everyone nodded their agreement, and they started down the main street of the town. After walking for some time, they were nearly at the castle when they stopped.

The reason was simple. There was some kind of fight happening.

"That's…" Shido squinted and stared. Three girls were facing a man who appeared to be a guard at the gates. It was…

"Kotori! Kaguya! Yuzuru!" he called out the girls' names, and they all turned around.

"Shido! You're oka— What's with the outfits?" Kotori said, screwing her face up dubiously as soon as she saw them.

He smiled as he hurried over to the girls. "So you're all okay, too, huh? What a relief… So what exactly are you doing?"

"It's as you witness it." Kaguya crossed her arms unhappily. "We would peer at this so-called mermaid inside, but…"

"Mermaid?" Shido asked with a frown.

"Mm-hmm." She nodded. "A rare beast that is said to cry out 'Darling, darling.'"

Sweat beaded on Shido's forehead as he produced a pained smile. This was extremely persuasive.

"This guardsman, however, refuses us."

"Dissatisfaction. He is saying that we may not enter the palace."

"*Of course not!*" the guard said, a stern look on his face. "*Today is the ball, a day when our peerless nobility gather in the palace. I could never allow in such a ragged bunch as yourselves!*"

"What say you? You dare to declare that you are unseeing of the authority that our bodies do exude?!"

"Wrath. Only the lowest of the low would judge the worth of a person solely on the basis of their clothes."

"Shut your traps! And now some new stragglers come wandering along! Not just ragamuffins, but entirely suspicious! Enough! Be gone, the lot of ye! Else I'll toss you in the dungeon!" The guard's voice grew rougher, and he waved his hands to chase them away. Apparently, the arrival of Shido and his party had stoked his doubts… Well, that made sense, though.

"Doesn't look like we're gonna be getting into the palace like this," Shido groaned.

"Still, we can't just walk away," Kotori said. "Should we sneak in?"

"No. The faster means would be rendering him unconscious."

"Praise. That is an excellent proposal."

Kotori and the Yamai sisters tossed around ideas, evil looks on their faces, and the guard's expression grew even more severe.

"I can hear every word you say, you brats! Ehhh, I'm not taking any more of this. You're all—" The guard cut himself short and gaped, his eyes as wide as saucers, as a carriage raced up to the gates.

"Hm…?" Shido looked back and understood the reason for the look on the guard's face.

An exquisite vehicle ran along the main street drawn by white horses with gleaming coats. The carriage itself glittered brightly, bathed in the light of the streetlamps. It was like something straight out of a dream. The Spirits were momentarily speechless, dazzled by the fantastical sight.

The focus of all attention now was the carriage up in front of the palace. The driver reverently opened the door, and a woman stepped out wearing a dress that radiated light as if embedded with precious gems, and with a face that was no less radiant. Breathtaking glass shoes sparkled on her feet. Her appearance was so sublime that the guard, the nearby ball guests, and the passersby all gasped.

"…Wait." Only Shido—and his friends from the outside world—

responded a bit differently.

She was indeed beautiful. It was truly no wonder she captured the eye. But before all that, this woman was…

"Natsumi?!"

One of the Spirits who had been sucked into this world together with Shido and the others.

"Oh my, Shido. And the ladies," Natsumi said, a gentle smile rising up on her face. "How do you do?"

However, this both was and wasn't Natsumi. She had a tall, slender body and silky hair. It was very clearly Natsumi after the power of Haniel had transformed her.

"Wh-what's going on, Natsumi?" Kotori asked. "You look— You weren't actually able to use your Angel, were you?"

"Mm-mm." Natsumi quietly shook her head. "This witch came and turned me into this. Hee-hee, look at these glass shoes. Aren't they pretty?" She twirled on the spot, making her dress flare up around her.

Shido met Kotori's eyes and intuited from her gaze that his little sister had also realized what story Natsumi was mixed up in.

Natsumi seemed not to notice this moment between them as she walked smoothly toward the guard. "Good evening," she purred. "I wonder if you might let me through?"

"Y—! Yes, go ahead. Please enter." The guard stepped aside, his attitude entirely different now.

Kaguya pursed her lips together with displeasure. "Oi, you. Does not your demeanor differ from when you spoke with us?"

"*Qu-quiet, you!*" the guard cried. "*She's a noble lady and you're nothing but tramps!*"

"Oh dear." Natsumi arched an eyebrow. "Were you all also trying to get into the palace then, Kaguya?"

"Indeed," Kaguya responded. "But that dunce has obliged us to stay outside."

"Hmm. Is that right?" Natsumi turned to the guard and caressed his chin with a bewitching hand. "These ladies are my attendants. Would you mind letting them in with me?"

"Ah…?! B-but that's—" The guard inhaled, sharply, his eyes

growing wide.

"Come ooon." Natsumi giggled, her lips slackening into a smile as if this was all a game. "It's all right, isn't it?"

"*Ah…Pl-please, go a—,*" the guard started.

Gong, gong. The large clock on the wall of the palace sounded the hour, and Natsumi's body began to glow.

Poof! She shrank abruptly.

"Gaah?!" she cried, as the gown she was wearing turned into a patchwork dress, and the carriage she'd ridden in transformed into a pumpkin. "Wh-what is going on?!"

Natsumi, in a panic, was now herself and not noticeably different from Yoshino in size.

Shido looked up at the big clock, and everything came together when he saw the time. The hands of the clock were pointed squarely at midnight—the hour when the magic wore off in "Cinderella."

"*…*"

The guard, who had only seconds earlier been utterly transfixed by Natsumi, grew stern once again and glared at the now-tiny Spirit. She jumped, her shoulders shaking, and hid behind Yoshino.

"Argh! What magic is this?! Witch, you shall not pass!" Glaring at Natsumi and the others with hostile eyes, the guard blocked the way forward to the palace. It seemed this had all only fanned the flames of his suspicion.

That said, however, Shido and his party couldn't exactly give up. He groaned, took a step back, and began to whisper to the others so that the guard couldn't hear him. "This is no good. We have to do something."

"But what. Exactly are we supposed to do?" Yoshino said, her eyebrows furrowing.

"Ah!" Nia held up a finger. "Maybe we could give him one of Tohkki's sweet dumplings like with the wolf. I mean, those things are good on dog, monkey, bird, y'know? And when you think about it, human beings are a kind of monkey. Could work, yeah?"

"Ah, even if it could, he's not going to eat anything some weirdo gives him," Shido said. "But if we were actually dressed properly like Natsumi before, then he'd have to let us in, right?"

Kotori scowled. “Then the question is how we’re supposed to get dresses. Sorry, but I don’t have a penny to my name. I was about to freeze to death there ’cause I’m so broke. About all we’ve got are sweets and match—” She stopped abruptly and put a hand to her chin like she’d just had an idea.

“Hm?” Shido looked at her. “What is it, Kotori?”

“…Gang, mind coming with me a sec?” Kotori said, and then moved away from the castle.

The guard snorted and made a shooing gesture like he was chasing off a dog.

“Oi, where are we going, Kotori?” Shido called.

“It’s fine. Just come.” She walked along the road until she came to an alley and turned into it. She picked up a piece of scrap wood there, and then she ripped the hem off her skirt and wrapped it around the piece of wood. Almost like she was making an impromptu torch.

“You’re…,” he said slowly.

“What I’d like to do is soak it in oil, but, well, it’ll last for a while at least like this,” she said with a shrug. She took a match from her basket, closed her eyes in something like prayer, and set the match to the torch.

Illuminated now by the flames of the torch, her outfit transformed before their eyes into a vivid red dress.

“Whoa?! What the…?!” Shido’s eyes flew open in surprise, and the Yamai sisters clapped fists into palms.

“Ah, yes. The illusion matches of the Little Match Girl!”

“Understood. This does indeed look like you are wearing a dress.”

Even as Kaguya and Yuzuru spoke, their clothing also changed into dazzling dresses as all the Spirits within range of the light of the torch were transformed into noble ladies.

“Ooh! What?”

“It’s. Beautiful.”

The Spirits let out cries of surprise.

Shido didn’t understand the principle behind whatever was going on, but like this, they might actually be able to fool the eyes of the guard. When he looked down at his own body in the light of the

torch, however, beads of sweat popped up on his forehead.

"…Uh. Why am *I* in a dress?"

Yes. For some reason, he was also in a fancy gown. And there was makeup on his face, and his hair was long, falling down his back. He looked like his cross-dressing persona, Shiori.

"This is the Cinderella ball, so I figured it'd be easier for girls to get in," Kotori told him. "Like, the Prince is looking for someone to marry, so he probably invited all the noble girls in the area. I didn't do it to be mean."

"…For real?" Shido asked, side-eyeing her very hard.

She nodded in the most nonchalant fashion. "Uh-huh."

"…"

Although this still didn't sit entirely well with him, he couldn't argue the point. He let out a short sigh before following Kotori and the others back to the castle.

Chapter 5

Hero

"Oooh!" Tohka, dressed fabulously thanks to the match of illusion, looked around with glittering eyes. She wasn't alone. The Yamai sisters and Yoshino were also taking in the scene excitedly.

This was perhaps inevitable. The ballroom where they found themselves was magnificent, a splendid space literally only seen in the world of fairy tales. There was a sparkling chandelier and a long seamless red carpet. Intricate designs covered the pillars and even the railing on the stairs, and tables that could have been ancient antiques were piled high with luxurious delicacies.

The people assembled in the lavish space were equally brilliant, no doubt the daughters of distinguished families. They wore gorgeous gowns and chatted pleasantly as they glided elegantly through the room.

Thanks to Kotori's quick-wittedness, Shido and the Spirits had finally made it past the guard at the castle gates. Although he had still been somewhat suspicious when they suddenly appeared before him in their finery because he remembered them quite well from their earlier visit to his post.

"Aah, gang. I get how you feel, but don't go wandering, okay?" Kotori said, brandishing the impromptu torch. "If you move outside the light, people'll see what you really look like. That goes double for you, Tohka. You'll be Japan's most wanted in five seconds flat. Plus, it'd be a whole lot of yikes to show up at a party full of VIPs with a Japanese sword."

"Mm-hmm! I understand!" Tohka replied enthusiastically.

But a few seconds later, the Yamai sisters let their enthusiasm carry them beyond the range of the torch.

"Whoa?!"

"Panic. We've done it now."

The twins cried out in bewilderment as the lovely dresses they wore abruptly reverted to patchwork outfits. They twisted their bodies about like acrobats and leaped backward.

Several people heard the commotion and looked over dubiously, but it all happened so fast that they apparently didn't see Hansel or Gretel.

"Honestly, I *just* told you." Kotori sighed, heavily. "Be careful, yeah? I worked hard to get us in the door here."

"S-sorry…"

"Apology. We will be careful from now on."

The pair bowed their heads, sufficiently chastened.

"Woh-kay." Kotori shrugged in exasperation. "So. Where is this mermaid, then?"

"Mm." Shido whirled his head around to take in the ballroom. "I don't see a mermaid anywhere."

"*Hello, miss. You're looking lovely,*" someone said out of nowhere.

"Huh?" Shido turned the direction of the voice and found a young man in a smart tuxedo standing there.

"*Might I have this dance?*" He smiled winningly and extended a respectful hand.

Shido looked down at Kotori. "Ha-ha! He's inviting you to dance. Look at you, Kotori, queen of the dance floor. Your big bro here's jealous."

But the young man cocked his head curiously to one side and looked Shido squarely in the eye as he spoke once more. *"No, not the smaller lady there. I was asking you."*

"……What?" Shido was baffled for a moment but quickly remembered that he was currently in a dress in his Shiori persona, thanks to Kotori's illusion match.

But he was not interested in dancing with men, and more importantly, the second he stepped out of range of the flames, he would return to his male form. And a woman turning into a man in the middle of the dance was very much not a Cinderella story.

"…So *not* her, then?" Shido indicated Kotori with his eyes, a trickle of sweat running down his cheek.

The young man shrugged his shoulders as if to say, *Still you jest?*

"You do have a sense of humor. But such a joke does in fact make me feel bad for the young lady. Look there. That table has many delicious cakes on it, yes? Why don't you go and have some?" He smiled at Kotori as though placating a child.

Instantly, a vein started throbbing on Kotori's forehead. "Wh-what did you say?!"

"Wh-whoa, calm down, Kotori." Shido grabbed her shoulders in a panic. It wouldn't do them any favors to cause a commotion.

At exactly that moment, a woman dressed as a chamberlain appeared on the stage at the far end of the ballroom.

"*Ladies and gentlemen*," she said to the special guests gathered there. "*Please excuse me for interrupting your pleasant conversation. I would ask that you direct your attention to the stage now. I have the pleasure of presenting to you a rare sight, a mermaid who will sing for us.*"

Murmurs rippled through the hall. The man who had invited Shido to dance turned to the stage with a fascinated "*Ooh*."

"S-see, Kotori?" Shido said. "That's what we're here for. Let's move to where we can see better."

"…Hmph. Well, fine. Let's go, gang." Still looking unhappy, Kotori beckoned the rest of the group with one hand and started to walk toward the stage as the curtains slowly parted to either side.

Instantly, the hall was abuzz with chatter and cries of admiration.

"Goodness…"

"It truly is *a mermaid."*

"It's beautiful, don't you think?"

A thin sheet of water had been laid out across the stage with large rocks scattered about sparsely, perhaps intended to conjure a visual of the shore. On top of one of those rocks was a girl lovely to behold, a fish from the waist down. Her hair was slightly damp, her swimsuit appeared to have been fashioned from seashells, her skin was flawless, and her eyes were limpid pools. She really did look like a mermaid straight out of some fairy tale.

But exactly as they'd expected…

"Eek!" she shrieked, splashing her tail in the shallow water. "Wh-

what is this place?! Where is my daaaarling?! Where iiiiis everyone?!”

It was the Spirit Miku, also swallowed up by the book and brought to this world with Shido and the others. At a glance, she was picture-perfect, but the panicked screeching somehow ruined the effect.

“*Come now, be quiet*,” the chamberlain reproached her. “*You’re in front of an audience.*”

“B-but that doesn’t change aaaanything…,” Miku said weakly, her eyebrows pulled up into an inverted *V*.

“*You mustn’t complain at this late stage*,” the chamberlain continued, half whispering in Miku’s ear. “*You have been bought and paid for by the king. In which case, you must serve His Majesty. Now sing. Legend has it that mermaids have the most exquisite singing voices. Our honored guests have come from all over. You must let them hear you sing.*”

“I will not!” Miku indignantly turned her face away. “The exquisite singing voice part is true, but I don’t recaaall agreeing to serve some king I’ve never even seeeeen! I have a rule that I never do work I haven’t agreed to!”

Miku’s attitude set off another flurry of whispers in the ballroom.

The chamberlain sharpened her gaze and glared at the mermaid, no doubt unhappy at her antagonistic attitude toward her king.

“You have been purchased by the crown, and that makes you the king’s property. If you do not do as you are told, His Majesty will be very cross with you.”

“Hmph!” Miku sniffed in outrage. “He can be as croooooosssss as he likes!”

“I suppose it’s come to this, then. A mermaid who will not sing is of no use to anyone. I shall get permission to use you as an ingredient in tomorrow’s soup.”

“Eeaah! I adoooore singing!” Miku plastered a forced smile across her face as sweat beaded on her forehead. Apparently, she was decidedly uninterested in being made into a broth.

Shido smiled helplessly. “Miku’s really gotten herself caught up in something again, huh?”

“Uh-huh. Looks like she got put into ‘The Little Mermaid,’” Kotori

said, and then cocked her head curiously to one side. “Was this how the story went, though?”

Either way, they couldn’t leave her like this. It would be pretty awful if she was turned into a soup, and it would also be a pity if she was forced to sing.

Shido stepped closer to the stage together with Kotori and the others, and Miku’s eyes grew round as she caught sight of them.

“Daaarling!” she cooed. “Everyone! You’re oooookaaaay!”

“Yeah, more or less,” Shido said. “We heard there was a mermaid in this castle, so we came—”

“Ah! What are these amaaaazing dresses you’re all wearing?! And darling, you’re in Shiori mooooooode?! What?! What?! I want to hear all the detaaaaaails! Is there any video?!” Like a literal fish dropped into water (although, well, she’d been in water from the start), Miku perked up, her eyes growing bright, and she splashed the water surface with her tail.

Shido was happy she was feeling better at least, but if she kept squealing, he’d never be able to talk with her. He held out placating hands.

“C-calm down. You have to tell us how you ended up like this, Miku,” he said, sweat beading on his forehead.

“Riiight…” Miku waggled her open hands above her chest as though pushing back her excitement. “I woke up and I had a tail! And I was in the ocean. And when I went to look for you all, this evil witch showed up and said she’d trade me for my voice if I wanted to become huuuuuman!”

“Ohhh. I get it.” Shido nodded his understanding. This did indeed happen in the fairy tale “The Little Mermaid.” Although he was pretty sure that the little mermaid first fell in love with a prince on land and went to the witch herself to ask her how to become human. “Wait. But you’re still a mermaid?”

“Yes! I can’t believe she would try to taaaake my voice! When I said no and left, she kept coming after me. The nerve!” Miku said with a grin. “So I gave her a slaaaap with my tail and swam away!”

Shido gave a pained laugh. While the witch may not have known it, she had gotten more than she’d bargained for. Miku was an idol

and a singer. Her voice was her life. She would never have made a deal like that.

"But, weellllll," Miku sighed. "I still didn't have any legs, and when I went looking for you again, I was caught by a fisherman on the shore."

Shido nodded again. Looking the way she did, she would indeed stand out, and on land, it would have been hard for her to run away.

While they were having this conversation, the chamberlain interjected, with a dubious look, "*…Pardon the intrusion, but what are you to this mermaid?*"

"Oh. Right. She's actually a friend of ours. I guess you can't just let her go, huh?" Shido asked plainly, and the chamberlain furrowed her brow, her expression growing more severe.

"Friend… You're friends with a mermaid? This is quite difficult to believe. And even if this were the case, she belongs to the king. I cannot grant your request. Please leave."

"Th-that's tyranny," Shido protested. "What about what Miku wants?"

"*Her wishes are of no import*," the chamberlain said curtly. "*As I said, she belongs to the king. A belonging has no need for desires.*"

The Spirits on standby behind Shido narrowed their eyes sharply.

"Mmph. You don't have to say it like that."

"Th-that's. Right…! Miku is not an object…!"

"Oh, but the whole 'you're mine, you don't get to say no' thing is seriously shoujo manga. Kinda thrilling, y'know? I think the issue is who's speaking here. Boy, you try saying it."

"…You're just making things worse," Natsumi said, rolling her eyes. "Maybe just shut up, Nia?"

"…"

The chamberlain scowled at the rebellious Spirits and clapped her hands loudly.

Clap, clap!

"Attendants! The young ladies are departing. Please see them off politely!"

A group of armored soldiers marched into the hall and surrounded Shido and the Spirits. The ball guests immediately began

to whisper and chatter.

"Wha—?!" Shido gasped.

"Oh-ho? So it is war you would have?"

"Counterattack. Now that it's come to this, we must break through with force."

The Yamai sisters narrowed their eyes and leaned forward slightly to take on aggressive stances. Put on the defensive by this movement, the soldiers also dropped down, ready to leap.

"Kah-kah! Is this not a proud posture?! Very well, then. Those who fear not for their lives would do well to come forward. While we may not have use of our Angels, the Yamais would not fall to the likes of you."

"Appeal. Yuzuru and Kaguya will create a way forward. Shido, everyone, please rescue Miku."

"Ngh…" Shido scowled. He didn't want to get violent, but given the situation, he didn't have much choice. "Well, I guess that's where we're at. Gang!"

"Yeah!"

"Woh-kay!"

Tohka drew her sword and Nia her pistols…although thanks to Kotori's illusion match, these looked like bouquets of beautiful flowers. At any rate, the Spirits and the soldiers both readied themselves for battle. The ballroom was suddenly a tinderbox on the verge of war. One wrong move, and the place would explode.

"What exactly is all this fuss about?" A clear voice rang out from the spiral staircase leading to the floor above the ballroom.

"…!"

The chamberlain looked up in a panic, her eyes wide, and the rest of the guests followed the direction of her gaze.

"O-oi…"

"That can't actually be…"

"Impossible. I never dreamed I would lay eyes on…!"

The ball guests let out cries of surprise, while the chamberlain dipped her head respectfully in the direction of the staircase.

"I apologize for the commotion, Your Majesty. A group of vagrants have come forward to try and take the mermaid from your

possession, and thus, we were in the process of removing them. We will take care of the situation im—"

"The king?!" Shido threw his head back, stunned.

And that was only right. This was a real windfall. The king was the master of these guards, and while Shido hated to say it, in this world, he was Miku's owner. If they could get the king's agreement, they could settle the situation once and for all.

"Uh. Um! We're friends of this mermaid! So—" he started to plead, and then stopped. Because he had seen the face of this "king" before. "O-Origami?!"

Yes. Standing there draped in a luxurious red cloak with a crown on her head was none other than the Spirit Origami.

"Shido," she said in a quiet voice, and looked out over the ballroom. Finally, she nodded as though she understood everything and tossed her cloak back.

Shido and the Spirits gasped and gaped. Miku alone let out a cry of excitement. "Goooodnesssss!"

But they couldn't have reacted any other way. Whatever else, Origami was not wearing a stitch of clothing beneath the red cloak.

Origami herself showed no sign of any kind of embarrassment. In fact, she looked somewhat smug as she slowly descended the stairs.

"I-is that the*…?"*

"Yes… Wh-what a magnificent garment!"

"I-it really is! So ephemeral, like a mist or a fog…!"

The assembled guests began to clamor once again. But for some reason, their words sounded forced this time.

Paying no mind to them, Origami strode forward. Once she reached the stage, she flipped the cloak dramatically again, and declared, "These are my personal guests. Don't you dare lay a hand on them. Return to your posts."

"B-but—"

"Do you intend to make me repeat myself?" Origami flapped her cloak and posed, turning at the waist, as she fixed her eyes on the chamberlain.

"Eeep…! M-my sincerest apologies!" The chamberlain bowed deeply once again before leaving with the guards.

After watching them go, Origami turned back to Shido and the Spirits. “Shido, girls. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Y-yeah… Same here…,” Shido said, not exactly certain where to rest his eyes. “I mean…you *are* okay…right?”

Origami cocked her head to one side curiously. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Uh… It’s just, were you, um…mugged or something?” Shido chose his words carefully, not sure how to state the obvious in a tactful manner.

“O-Origami!” Tohka snapped a finger out at her. “What are you even doing? You’re *naked*!”

Instantly, the hall erupted in noise.

“How dare *she?!”*

“Daring to take issue with what the king wears! Execute her!”

Outraged cries could be heard from all over, and Shido wondered what kind of an iron fist Origami ruled with to make her this feared. Although, well, Origami had only been incorporated into the story at some point. He couldn’t exactly lay the blame for any tyranny at her feet.





But Origami herself was not angry with Tohka. In fact, she was shaking her head, as if pitying her. "I bought this outfit from a traveling tailor. Those with no love for Shido can't see it. So the fact that it's invisible to you, Tohka, means…"

"Wh-wha—?! H-hang on a minute!" Tohka said in a panic, and peered closely at Origami. "M-mm… This is… The cloth is so magnificent, almost like human skin…"

"…Please don't force it, Tohka." Kotori patted her shoulder. "Origami, you were lied to… You are without a doubt in 'The Emperor's New Clothes.'"

"…"

Origami stiffened briefly and then drew her cloak around in front of her.

"Aaaw!" Miku cried in dismay. "Just a bit more! Just a liiiiittle longer!"

"The Emperor's New Clothes." Shido was pretty sure this was the story of a king who was tricked by a tailor into buying a suit invisible to fools and then thoroughly shamed. It was well-known enough that most Japanese people had also heard it at least once.

"I absolutely did not realize," Origami said, shaking her head slightly from side to side.

"…You didn't think it was weird?" Kotori asked with an arched eyebrow.

"When they told me that the suit couldn't be seen by those who did not know love, I felt like I could see it somehow."

"Y-yeah…? Wow, you Wizards have some real imaginations, huh?" Kotori gave her a pained smile, sweat trickling down her cheek. "W-well, at any rate, we're all back together. Now we have to find a way out of this world. I guess subjective time's different here from the outside, but it's still been a decent chunk of time since we got dragged into this place."

Kotori turned her eyes on Origami and Miku, and briefly got them up to speed on this world before asking, "You were both sent to separate locations, yeah? You see any characters or items or anything that looked like they could help us escape from this world?"

Origami and Miku looked at each other before shaking their heads

from side to side.

"Nothing that jumped out at me."

"I didn't see anything, eeeeiiiither. The only people I met were the witch and the fisherman."

"Huh…" Kotori likely hadn't expected too much, but she nevertheless let out a rueful sigh.

"But I'm the king of this land right now," Origami continued. "I can send out a proclamation. I should be able to order the citizens to look for that sort of character or item."

"Right… Human wave attack, huh?" Kotori nodded thoughtfully. "That would be way more effective than us going out looking by ourselves. Would you?"

"Roger that. But what specifically should they be looking for?" Origami asked.

"Mm-hmm, right. Yeah," Nia responded. "Very broadly speaking, this world allows for pretty much anything, so any item that's treated like it grants wishes inside of a story should be okay. Like the magic lamp in 'Aladdin' or the magic hammer from 'Little One-Inch.' Prob'ly characters from manga or video games who could teleport and stuff, but my bet is, more people know the magical items, so those should be easier to find."

"Makes sense. Understood. I'll—," Origami started, when she was interrupted by the earsplitting sound of glass shattering.

The castle wall broke apart, pieces tumbling to the ballroom floor, and an enormous wolf charged in through the opening.

"Eeeeeaaaaah?!"

"A monsterrrrrr!"

The ball guests screamed at the monster that had appeared out of nowhere and clearly did not belong in this place.

Crushed by the wave of people pouring toward the ballroom exit, Kotori dropped her torch. "Ah…!"

It was a simply made torch, nothing but cloth wrapped around a piece of scrap wood, and so it had likely already nearly burned up anyway. Either way, the fire fortunately did not spread when the torch hit the ground. The flames simply vanished in a puff of black smoke.

No longer illuminated by the fantastical light, Shido and the Spirits found themselves back in their old clothes immediately. But their dress was no longer the most pressing issue they faced. They had an even bigger obstacle before them now.

Without so much as a glance at the fleeing ball guests, the wolf lumbered straight for Shido and the Spirits.

"*Heyyyyyy, if it isn't the kind little piggies*," the wolf growled with annoyance. "*Really amazing how you turned me into your little maidservant, hmmmm?*"

Shido furrowed his brow. "The wolf from before…?! How, though? I thought you were all nice now thanks to the dumpling from Tohka?!"

"*Ha!*" the wolf roared as it patted its stomach. "*I digested that thing and crapped it out ages ago!*"

"Is that how the dumpling thing works?!" Shido cried reflexively, as the palace guards marched back into the hall and turned their lances toward the wolf.

"Your Majesty, please get back!"

"We'll handle this!"

The wolf swung a tree-trunk arm and knocked them flying. Guards rolled into tables and slammed against the wall as the wolf snarled, "*Cheeky bastards! Stay out of this!*"

"Yikesies," Nia said, drawing her holstered guns. "Guess a famous storybook villain really is on the next level, huh? Tohka, babe. You got another of those dumplings?"

"Mm." Tohka nodded and thrust a hand into the pouch at her waist. "I got this. Hey, wolf. Try eating this!" She tossed a dumpling toward the wolf's large maw.

But just as the dumpling was about to hit its tongue, it stopped in midair.

"Wha—?!" Tohka cried out in confusion.

"Keh-keh-keh." An old woman with a hooked nose and wearing a loose black robe materialized out of empty space and laughed in an unsettling manner. She crushed the dumpling she'd caught in her hand. *"Wolf, perhaps you should be more careful?!"*

The Yamai sisters gasped.

"Whoa. You're…!"

"Shock. It's the old woman from the house of sweets."

"*Keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh!*" the witch cackled. "*It is indeed, my despised Hansel and Gretel. You take what you can of my house of sweets and then run off! I was planning to eat you after fattening you up soooo nicely, but I can't wait anymore. I'm going to gobble you up from your heads to your toes right now.*"

"*Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! So full of life, hm, Granny?*" the wolf said, laughing loudly. "*But the little piggies and Red Riding Hood are my prey, yes?*"

"Ngh…" Kotori's face grew hard abruptly. "The wolf alone's annoying enough, and now we've gotta deal with this witch, too?!"

"Hrrm? I think you have the wrong idea."

"What…?!" Kotori furrowed her brow, and the wolf grinned broadly from ear to ear.

"Who said we were alone?"

Seawater gushed in through the broken castle wall and flooded the ballroom. It swirled and burbled and rose up to create the form of an older mermaid.

"Wha—?! This is—" Miku snapped her finger out toward it. "Aaaah! You're the sea witch who tried to steal my voice!"

"…Kah-kah-kah! That I am." A lurid smile rose up on the face of the sea witch. *"I'll have my revenge for that slap on the cheek you gave me. It won't be just your voice. I'll yank that whole tongue of yours right out of your mouth!"*

Apparently, all the villains with a grudge against Shido and the Spirits had joined forces.

Half a second later, the world around them shook with heavy footfalls, and an enormous demon in a tiger-striped waistcloth burst through the castle wall and entered the hall brandishing a metal bat.

"Mm. Is that the demon that was on the island?!" Tohka cried, her eyebrows rising on her forehead.

"We are well met." The demon twisted its lips up, revealing sharp fangs. *"I waited and waited, but you never came. So I decided to come to you."*

"Why would you come if you don't actually have anything against

her?!" Shido shrieked. He didn't know what the deal was with the witch from the woods or the one from the sea, but from the way this demon was talking, it hadn't even met Tohka.

But the party didn't end there. One after the other, the wolf's comrades filed into the ballroom. The door to the hall had no sooner opened than three ill-tempered women in dresses appeared.

"*Ohhh-ho-ho-ho!*" one of them cried. "*Cinderella! How rude of you to go to the balllllll!*"

"Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters?!" Shido yelped. "Wait. Okay, yes, sure, you're villains. But you're kind of on a whole other level from demons and witches!"

Now a small boy ran in. "*The king is naked… My father was put in jail because I said that… But even so! I will keep crying out the truth! The king is naked!*"

"Was 'The Emperor's New Clothes' this heavy of a story?!" Shido stared in disbelief.

Next, flames roared to life in empty space, and the figure of an old woman with dark eyes appeared from within them. "*Granddaughter*," she intoned. "*You must light more matches… And then come to me…*"

"The grandmother of the match girl turned into a total evil spirit?!" Shido cried, and now bats flew in through the broken window and assembled into human form. Zombies pulled themselves out of the wet floor, followed by monsters that Shido had never seen before but were undoubtedly terrifying to look at.

"Th-that's…"

"Ah! This is me," Nia said nonchalantly. "Vampires from the first part—the vampire arc; living dead from the second part; the immortal king and a bunch of notables from the old gods arc—the third part. Silver bullets slaughter the strange. The grown-up battle fantasy *Silver Bullet* is currently running in *Weekly Shonen Blast* to great acclaim!"

"And now superpowered jerks from a shonen magazine?!" Shido replied with a cry that bordered on a shriek.

Before he knew it, an array of unusual monsters and villains had shown up in full force in the ballroom and deployed themselves in a

circle so that Shido and the others couldn't get away, Now they crept closer and closer, steadily closing the distance between them.

"Ngh…!" he groaned through gritted teeth.

The pressure he felt now was far greater than when the guards had tried to throw them out earlier. But that was only natural. The majority of monsters and villains he faced now were infamous fairy-tale monsters and villains. On top of that, the Spirits couldn't use their Angels. Shido's body quickly detected this mortal danger, changed the signal into a pounding in his heart, and tried to communicate the perilousness of his situation to his brain.

The Spirits around him looked similarly tense and panicked.

"I'm not losing to you losers!" Tohka cried out, breaking the silence. The sword in her hand flashed. She kicked at the ground and flew at the demon directly ahead of her.

But just as her sword was about to strike a killing blow, the witches to either side cast magic spells to attack Tohka. *""Hyaaaaah!""*

Bullets of light hit Tohka in midair on both sides, causing tiny explosions.

"Ngah?!" She let out a cry of anguish.

While she was momentarily defenseless, the demon raised its enormous metal bat and swung it hard at her. *"Ha-ha-ha-ha! You're soft, Momotaro!"*

"Hnngh…!" Tohka immediately tried to block the bat with her sword, but unable to brace herself in midair, she couldn't stop the blow. She was knocked back and slammed into seawater pooling on the floor.

"Tohka!" Shido cried, and was about to hurry to her side.

However.

"Whoopsy! You should watch where you're going, little piggyyyyyy!"

At the same time as he heard the wolf's voice from above, something hit his stomach hard.

"Hnnnaah?!" he yowled, and a heartbeat later, his brain caught up. He had been mowed down by the wolf's enormously thick arm. He flew helplessly up into the air, crashed into the wall of the

ballroom, and slid to the floor. "Ngh… Ah…"

"Shido!"

"Sh-Shido…!"

The Spirits cried out in concern and started for his side.

But the wolf and the other villains stepped forward to block their way.

"Oooh, sorry. You're not going anywhere."

"Ngh…!"

"Y-Yoshino…"

"I-I'm. Okay, Natsumi…!"

The Spirits huddled together, frustrated or perhaps anxious. The assembled villains grinned and closed in on them.

"Now then… Prepare yourself!"

"Keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh! Not to worry. I'll make sure to make a taaaaasty meal of you."

"Bwah-ha-ha! Let's see what kind of sound a mermaid's tongue makes."

"Ee-eeek!" Miku pressed her hands over her mouth and splashed around. She wasn't the only one shivering in terror, however. Each Spirit showed it in her own way, but sweat glistened on all their faces as they glared at the encroaching monsters.

"Ngh… Damn you!" Shido half groaned, half shouted, and managed to pull himself up somehow. "Don't you…touch them!"

But having been thrown hard into the wall, his body would not move the way he wanted it to. Unable to get his legs to support him, he made a loud *splash* as he collapsed once more.

"Hnngh…!" He grimaced and gritted his teeth against the pain. He could just barely move his upper body still, so he began to drag himself across the floor toward the Spirits.

But he was too late. The storybook villains had already reached the girls and were wrapping their hands around slender throats.

"Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! First you!" The wolf yanked Yoshino up with its claws deftly.

"Aah…!" she cried.

"Y-Yoshino! You… What are you doing, you stupid mutt?!" Natsumi wrapped herself around the wolf's legs, but the beast paid

her no mind.

"Hmm…" It eyed Yoshino very carefully, head to toe. *"You look so very yummy, hm, Red Riding Hooood?"*

"Eeep…!"

"*Wakaaah!*" the puppet on Yoshino's left hand shouted. "*You eat Yoshinon and Yoshino and we'll give you a stomachache, okay?!*"

"Ngh…!" Shido would never make it in time. His heart pounded violently with panic. Even if he did make it, there wasn't much he could do. Maybe buy some time, and just barely that. The wolf would knock him flying again, and his only achievement would have been to delay Yoshino being eaten by a few seconds.

Abruptly, he heard Mukuro's words again in the back of his mind.

"Assume Muku did allow you to seal my power. Would I truly be any safer on the planet than I am here? Have the Spirits you saved thus far never been assaulted by this enemy?"

"…Ngh!" The hand reaching out toward Tohka and the others stopped for a moment. "I…am…!"

Watching the monsters attack all the Spirits whose powers he'd sealed, Shido wondered if he himself wasn't the cause of this situation. Wasn't he? If he hadn't locked away their Spirit powers, they might not have been taken prisoner by Westcott's Beelzebub. In fact, it wasn't only that. It was just like Mukuro had said—Tohka and the other Spirits had been dragged into all kinds of dangerous situations since they'd met him.

He kept sealing their powers in order to save the Spirits. But in doing so, hadn't he taken possible futures from them? He felt the confidence in his heart crack. Had he actually done the right thing? Was "saving the Spirits" just his own ego, as Mukuro had said?

"*Oi, oi. It's not like you to struggle with that stuff in a place like this, now is it?*" a voice suddenly said, out of nowhere, and it seemed that the speaker had seen into his heart.

"Huh?" Shido said, baffled.

"*Err?*" the wolf murmured dubiously. "*What? That voice…*" Still hoisting Yoshino up in one hand, the wolf sent its gaze racing around suspiciously, looking for the owner of the voice.

For the split second when its eyes were not trained on Yoshino—

impossibly, in that moment, a line raced across the wolf's arm.

"…?! Wha—?!" It stared at its arm in disbelief. *"Wh-what the—?!"*

"Eek…!" Yoshino's small body dropped toward the floor together with the wolf's severed arm.

"Whoops!" A boy dashed forward and gently caught her before she hit the ground. *"You okay, Yoshino?"*

"Huh? Uh. Um…" Yoshino looked up at the boy's face in confusion. She wasn't the only one, either.

"Uh?"

"Wh-what's going on?"

The Spirits and Shido gaped at the boy. Naturally. Whatever else, the sword he held was without a doubt Tohka's Angel Sandalphon.

"*Now then, villains. I'll keep you busy*," he declared. "*Me, the protector of the Spirits—Shido Itsuka.*"

The brave face that made this declaration was definitely that of Shido himself.

"Wh-what?! You?! Showing up out of the blue, talking all tough!" The wolf looked down at its severed arm and glared at *Shido*.

But in the next moment, *Shido* drew Sandalphon and neatly sliced the wolf's massive bulk in two.

"Ah… Aaaaaauuuugh?!" Shrieking with the pain of death, the split wolf turned into a page torn out of a book and fluttered to the ground.

The remaining villains gasped.

"Wh…! The wolf is—?!"

"You… Who are you?!"

The two witches shouted, a tremor of fear in their voices.

Shido yanked the corners of his mouth up into a grin. "*Just a passing high school student*," he responded, before kicking at the wet floor and swinging Sandalphon as he lunged toward the villains.

Battling the witches' magic, he easily cut through the demon's metal bat and kept going to cut a hole in the demon itself. Like the wolf, the demon let out an earth-shattering shriek and changed into a ripped-out page.

But *Shido* did not stop his steady advance. Nimbly and yet powerfully, he manipulated Sandalphon like one of his own limbs as

he slashed and hacked at the assembled villains.

Shido gaped, stunned at the sight. "Wh-what *is* going on…?"

"Shido!" Tohka and the others came running over to him. "Are you okay? You're not hurt?!"

"Y-yeah… I'm fine. But what on earth is…?" Baffled, he turned his eyes back toward the fight with the villains unfolding before them.

"That is definitely you, huh?" Kotori's brow was similarly furrowed. "You use some kind of avatar technique or something?"

"No, pretty sure I was never the apprentice of a ninja," he replied slowly, still staring at the battle.

"Hmm?" Nia put a thoughtful hand to her chin. "So, like, maybe boy number two is a character in this world?"

"Huh?" He frowned dubiously yet again. There was indeed a certain logic to what she said. But in that case, a different question came to mind.

And that was only right. This was a fantasy space where stories mixed together. So long as Shido wasn't featured in a story, the character *Shido* shouldn't exist—

"Aaaaah!" Natsumi abruptly shouted.

"Wh-what, Natsumi?"

"…I—I know…" With a trembling finger, she pointed at the *Shido* clashing with the villains. "I…know who he is!"

"What?" Shido said eagerly. "Really?!"

"R-really. I mean… We *all* know him! That guy—*that* Shido, we *drew* him last month!"

"…!!"

Shido and the Spirits all gasped, their eyebrows shooting up.

Now that she mentioned it, right. There was that. The story he thought didn't exist. A story with Shido Itsuka as the hero.

Last month, they had concocted a plan to make Nia weak in the knees after she'd insisted that she could only love two-dimensional characters. And that plan had been to draw a manga with Shido as the main character and get Nia to read it.

"B-but," he protested. "That was a doujinshi! The hero of that story coming to save us now, I mean, it's just too pat!"

"Nyuh-uh." Nia shook her head slowly. "I told you, boy. There are

no walls between creations. So long as the story exists, it's possible for it to be a part of this world. And all the artists who drew that particular story are assembled here now. You couldn't *ask* for more of a connection to lure the character out!"

Dressed as her own manga character, Nia continued somewhat excitedly.

"Not to mention, boy number two both is Shido Itsuka and *is not* Shido Itsuka. *That* Shido Itsuka was drawn for the doujinshi. He was *created* to save Spirits and make me weak in the knees in the process!"

"B-by which you mean?"

"Appeal. We request an explanation."

The Yamais cocked their heads to one side, and Nia threw her hands up into the air.

"Meaning!" she shouted. "*That* is the super-cool, super-strong boy you all dreamed up!"

Shido unsheathed Sandalphon and slaughtered the last villain standing, an enemy from Nia's manga.

"Phew…" He casually pushed his hair back and walked slowly over to Shido. *"'Sup. You okay, me?"*

"Y-yeah…," Shido replied, baffled by the use of the pronoun that was normally not used for other people. "You really saved us. Thanks…me."

"*Ha-ha! Calling each other 'me' like this, we're like Kurumi, huh?*" *Shido* said with a laugh.

It was like looking in a mirror. Shido offered a pained smile at the strange sensation.

"*But…what a car wreck this is, huh? I guess us being here in this world is the work of Westcott?*" *Shido* said, gaze sharpening slightly.

"…Yes." Kotori nodded firmly, still disconcerted by the fact that there were two Shidos. "You get it, so no need to waste time explaining. You got any ideas about how to get back to our world? We have to get back as soon as possible."

"Oh yeah." Shido nodded nonchalantly. *"You let me handle that."*

"Huh?!" Kotori let out a cry of surprise. But of course she did. *Shido* was so casual about the fact that he held their fate in his

hands. "Y-you can get us out of here?"

"Uh-huh." Shido indicated Sandalphon in his hand. *"This world was created with the power of an Angel. The power of another Angel should be able to break it down. Our existence might be fictional, but the Angel I can use in this world is the real deal. However, all I can do is make an exit out of this world. Which means there's a good chance you'll walk back into your world and straight into Westcott."*

"Wha…?!" Kotori's eyes flew open, a shiver of fear coloring her face. "That's… So then, what should we do? We have to get to Mukuro right now if not sooner."

"I figured this might happen!" Nia shouted abruptly.

"Wh-what are you shouting about, Nia?"

"Eh-heh-heh! I always wanted to say that. So? I sound like a girl who gets the job done?"

"…Could we save the jokes for later?" Kotori said, rolling her eyes.

"Aah, sorry. Whoopsy." Nia scratched her head sheepishly. "I really do have us covered, though. Boy Number Two, you don't need to worry about the channel or whatever. Can you just go ahead and do it?"

"Hey, what are you talking about?" Kotori demanded. "I mean, sure, we can get back to our world. But if we walk out smack into Westcott, we're right where we started again!"

"*Tch, tch, tch!* That's not gonna happen!" Nia waggled her finger back and forth like the pendulum on a metronome as her lips stretched out into a grin. "Right before I got sucked into this place, I made sure to manifest Rasiel in the world on the other side. Beelzebub and Rasiel are two sides of the same coin. So my Angel should be able to act as a channel to this world, too."

"…! You mean—" Shido said, and Nia bobbed her head up and down.

"Yup. Unless that guy's been lying in wait this whole time, the chances of bumping into him are next to none," she said with a wink.

The Spirits began to squeal in excitement.

"That's incredible, Nia!"

"Kah-kah! You do manage it!"

"Praise. You are not merely a drunkard, after all."

"Oh-ho-ho! You're making me blush." Nia threw her head back smugly. "Keep it coming."

Shido raised Sandalphon above his head and turned his eyes on Shido and the others. *"All right. So I should do this right now, yeah?"*

"Yes, please," Kotori said, and *Shido* nodded his understanding before closing his eyes as if to focus his mind.

"Haaah!" With a ferocious cry, he brought Sandalphon down. A wind gusted up around them, and a "tear" opened up in the space sliced into by Sandalphon's blade, large enough for a person to pass through. *"You should be able to get back to your own world through here."*

Shido grinned as he rested the tip of Sandalphon on the floor.

"This Mukuro you mentioned—she's a new Spirit? Good luck, me. You make sure you save her."

"…"

Shido's words resembled Westcott's parting remarks, and Shido felt his heart leap up in his chest.

"…? What are you doing, Shido? Let's go." Kotori looked at the silent Shido with a curious expression as she led the group to the tear.

"Thanks a bunch, *Shido*. Take care of yourself."

"*You bet*," he said with a smile. "*I'll say hi to all of you on this side, too.*"

"Ha-ha! Right, I guess if the characters from that doujinshi are here, that means we're here, too, huh? Feels kinda complicated somehow," Kotori said with a wry smile, before waving goodbye and throwing herself into the tear with a strange resolve.

The Spirits also said their goodbyes to *Shido* before being sucked into the tear. And then after everyone had returned to their world, *Shido* turned his gaze on Shido.

"Mmkay, you're the last one, me. Go on and get over there. Kotori and them are waiting for you."

"R-right…" He turned to the fissure as his double urged him to.

But then he stopped.

Shido*.* The fictional *Shido* that he and the Spirits had created. And the ideal *Shido* who specialized in saving Spirits.

Faced with this *Shido*, a tiny germ of a wish sprouted on the outlying edges of his heart. The decision he thought he'd made. The conflict he should have shaken off. They settled to the bottom of his heart and sat there still like sediment.

"Hey… Me?" he asked, turning back.

"Hm? What's up, me?"

"…You guessed it before. I'm going to go to this new Spirit, Mukuro, now. But…" He scowled as he haltingly recounted the story of his meeting with Mukuro. How she had rejected him point-blank. How she told him to leave her alone, she wasn't looking to be saved. And how he hadn't been able to say anything in protest.

"…"

Shido listened to all this with a serious look and then finally let out a sigh. *"Uh-huh… Sounds like you got a pretty difficult Spirit on your hands."*

"…Before, when all those monsters were attacking us, I had this thought. Like, would they be in this situation if I hadn't sealed their Spirit powers? I mean, of course, I know if I hadn't, something even worse would've happened to them. But…"

He couldn't really pull together his thoughts. He ran his hands through his hair as he continued.

"…Seal Mukuro's powers. I'm on board with that. I mean, I really am. If I don't do it, DEM will attack her again. But I don't know how I'm supposed to do it… What do you think, me? Do you think this me has got any right to stand in front of her again, when I still don't know how to respond to everything she said to me? Do you think I can open her locked heart?"

Shido paused like he was thinking this through before he opened his mouth. *"If it was me, I'd go. One more time."*

"But Mukuro wants peace…"

"That might be true, but… It's strange when you really think about it, yeah? The idea that she's not lonely by herself because her heart is locked. It sounds to me like she's saying she was so lonely

she couldn't stand it unless she used the power of her Angel to lock her heart, you know?"

"…! That's…"

Shido was exactly right. If Mukuro hadn't felt loneliness or sadness or anger right from the start, she would have had no reason to go to the trouble of locking her heart. And no reason to tell Shido about it.

"To be honest, I can't help thinking it's an actual SOS from Mukuro. So I'd go. No matter what she said. And…if you're looking for the key to unlocking her locked heart, I already have it, don't I?"

"Huh…?" Shido cocked his head to one side, not understanding. But a heartbeat later, he realized what *Shido* was saying. "…! You don't mean—"

"Exactly." Shido nodded, satisfied. *"But one other thing. That's even if you're keeping this separate."*

He bumped his fist up against Shido's chest.

"So what do I think? Well, you've done nothing but talk about Mukuro. And yeah, you gotta think about her. That's important. But I mean, if that's all you do, you're not going to be able to pick up on some stuff with her. So come on, me.

"What do I *want to do about Mukuro?"*

"…!"

Shido gasped, his eyebrows leaping up on his forehead. And then after a few seconds of silence, he took a deep breath and let it out again. "…Aah. Right… Right," he said very slowly.

It was hardly an answer to the question. But the moment the words came out of his mouth, he felt like they lured all the gloomy air filling his lungs out into the open.

Shido grinned. *"Good luck, high school student."*

"…You, too, passing high school student." Shido bumped his fist up against *Shido*'s and leaped into the tear in space.

◇

"…Unh!" Shido regained consciousness to the sensation of his

shoulders being shaken back and forth. He let out a quiet groan and opened his eyes a slit. And saw Kotori drawing back the open palm of her hand in front of his eyes.

"…What're you doing, Kotori?" he asked.

"Oh my. You're awake," she said, sitting back. "If you'd been another second, I was going to give you the twentieth slap."

"…Wait. You mean you slapped me nineteen times?!" Shido cried, pressing his hand to his cheek.

Kotori shrugged with a grin. "I'm kidding."

He confirmed that his cheek was pain-free as he looked around. This was not the straw house where he'd woken up before, but rather a hallway on the base, with walls and floors crumbling here and there. The other Spirits were all there with Kotori, and Tohka had her hands on his shoulders as if to shake them. Instead of patchwork outfits and dresses, they were once again wearing their usual clothes.

"Honestly… I told you we needed to hurry." Kotori let out an indignant sniff as she crossed her arms. "What were you dawdling for?"

"Oh… Sorry. But—" Shido pushed himself to his feet and clapped his hands against his cheeks as if to psych himself up. "I'm okay now."

"…? Okay. Well, as long as you're ready to do this." Kotori cocked her head to one side curiously. But then she decided they couldn't be wasting time here and jerked her chin up to urge them all on. "Anyway, let's get a move on. Looks like less time than I thought's passed, but there's a good chance *Fraxinus* was attacked, too."





"Mm!"

"Roger."

The Spirits raced after Kotori down the hallway. Shido followed suit and proceeded through the base, where the sounds of explosions and gunshots still echoed. They encountered and destroyed Bandersnatches twice before finally reaching the hangar where *Fraxinus* was waiting.

"…! Commander!" Kannazuki's voice came over the speakers the moment they stepped inside. *"How wonderful you're all right!"*

"Yes. Sorry to keep you waiting," Kotori replied, raising a hand briefly, and strode toward the ship. Shido and the Spirits trailed after her, and with the same trick as before, they were instantly transported to the bridge.

"Situation report." The second she was on the bridge, Kotori undid the buttons on her jacket and swung it over her shoulders as she walked forward briskly, heels clacking. She then held her right hand out to one side where Kannazuki stood at the ready. He bowed reverently as he offered her a Chupa Chups on a tray. She took it, peeled the wrapping off, and popped the candy into her mouth, all while she settled down into her captain's chair. Shido was strangely impressed at the smooth flow of this dance.

"Sir. One *Arbatel*-class airship is currently in the air above the base. Approximately one hundred twenty Wizards and Bandersnatches are assumed to have invaded the base itself. At present, twenty-one casualties have been reported. One hundred eighty-five evacuees have been confirmed."

"… I see." Kotori grimaced, and the word *M-A-R-I-A* was displayed on the main monitor.

"*You do not have the luxury of sadness now, Kotori*," the AI said. "*You must take action.*"

"Yes. I know." She let out a quiet sigh before lifting her face as though she had firmed up her resolve and put aside any lingering regrets. "We have a job to do. *Fraxinus Excelsior*, prepare for departure. I assume everything's ready, yes?"

"Yes sir!" the crew replied as one.

"But the hangar's electrical system was hit in the enemy attack,

and the hatch won't open," someone added.

"*Tch!* Of course. Smash through it," Kotori commanded, and threw a hand up into the air. "Activate Basic Realizer parallel operation, deploy Territory, initiate Invisible and Avoid."

"Roger. Basic Realizer parallel operation starting."

"Territory deployed. Whenever you're ready, Commander."

Over the voices of the crew, the faint hum of motors starting up came from somewhere in the ship and grew louder.

"Here we go." Kotori gave a slight nod and glanced back at Shido and the Spirits. "Might wanna grab onto something, just in case."

"Right. Got it." Shido reached out for a pole by the wall. The Spirits did the same, except for Origami and Nia, who grabbed hold of Shido. In the end, they were peeled off by Tohka and the others.

Kotori let out an exasperated sigh before turning her face forward again and raising her voice. "*Fraxinus EX*, go!"

The ship shuddered, and the walls of the hangar displayed on the monitor were pressed outward in a circular shape as though crushed from the inside by some invisible force. And then a strange sense of buoyancy enveloped the entire ship as the scene displayed on the main monitor instantly changed to the sky.

"Whoa…!" A cry slipped from Shido's throat as he got his feet under him.

Rather than getting lift and flying like a plane, the airship used Realizers to wrap the massive ship in a Territory and make it float, which allowed it to dance through the sky in a way that common sense insisted should be impossible.

Just as a large silhouette came into view in the sky shown on the monitor, an alarm began to go off inside the ship.

"Enemy airship confirmed in the air above the base." Maria's voice came through the speakers. *"What will you do?"*

Furrowing her brow, Kotori flicked up the stick of her Chupa Chups. "We have to get into space right now."

"Yes."

"Even if we know there'll be more massive damage coming, we can't take any time for that thing."

"Yes."

"You get what I'm trying to say, right, Maria?"

"*Yes*," Maria replied dispassionately.

Kotori grabbed hold of the stick of her Chupa Chups and snapped the lollipop out in front of her. "You have one minute to finish them."

"*The decision I knew you'd make, Kotori*," Maria said, somehow happily.

Kotori began to issue orders to the crew. "Fire Yggdrafolium numbers one through thirteen. Use jamming mode to get them into the enemy Territory, then change the attribute to mine mode."

"Roger. Firing Yggdrafolium numbers one through thirteen."

On the silhouette of *Fraxinus* shown on a sub monitor, the tree branches of the rear of the ship blinked red, and a number of "somethings" flew through the sky on the main monitor.

The reason for describing them as "somethings" was simple—they were cloaked in Invisible, and Shido couldn't see them. But he could just barely make out the slight distortion of their trajectories as the transparent Yggdrafolium flew toward the enemy ship at top speed.

A few seconds later, they reached the DEM airship hovering ahead of them and exploded as one.

Most likely, the enemy had no clue what had happened. The broken DEM ship dropped toward the ground, plumes of smoke jetting from it.

"Hmph." Kotori snapped her thumb out downward.

"Time required was fifty-two seconds."

"Not too shabby. We'll get that time back, though," Kotori said. "Increase altitude. We're busting out of the atmosphere."

"Yes sir!" the crew shouted, and *Fraxinus* shuddered faintly.

The scene displayed on the main monitor flowed downward at an impossible speed. It was almost like watching a video recorded by a camera on a bubble played on fast-forward. In mere minutes, the scene on the main monitor had the sky below them.

The blackness of space filled the screen, stars invisible from the earth's surface glittering against the velvet backdrop. Shido had seen this same sight through the drone camera. He swallowed hard and stared at the feed from the drone searching the area.

And then. There. The figure of a girl sleeping quietly, long golden hair drifting around her.

"…! Mukuro…!" Shido called, clenching his fists.

His voice couldn't possibly have reached the outside of the ship, but her eyebrows twitched nevertheless.

"…Hmmm?" She slowly raised her eyelids, turned her gaze in the direction of *Fraxinus*, and stretched out from her sleep position curled up like a fetus. *"…Oh-ho, my. Quite a few visitors todaaay."*

He heard a quiet voice, but definitely that of Mukuro, over the speakers. *Fraxinus* was probably picking it up from the outside. Her voice normally would not have been transmitted through the vacuum of space, but her Astral Dress was likely performing the role of a makeshift Territory. Her voice was quiet but clear in his ears.

"I believe I warned you. Do you come at a different angle from the earlier lot? …Nnngh." She stretched, raised her right hand, and parted her lips. *"Michael."*

A scepter in the shape of a key materialized out of thin air and settled into her waiting hand. She thrust the tip of the scepter into space, turned the key, and created a large door.

"Lataib."

She raised her hand, and when she brought it down again, the array of space debris floating in the area was sucked into the door.

In the next instant, exits opened up all around *Fraxinus*, and speeding bullets rained down on the ship.

"Wh-whoa?!" Shido reflexively shrank from the projectiles that came flying at them.

But Kotori showed no signs of panic. "Territory, protect!" she ordered.

"Yes, sir!"

The image of *Fraxinus* shown on a sub monitor glowed faintly. At the same time, the stones flying toward the airship bounced back and shattered just as they were on the verge of making contact.

"Th-this is…" Shido stared in disbelief.

"A direct attack from the Angel might be another story, but this little peashooter thing can't even scratch the upgraded *Fraxinus*," Kotori said with a satisfied sniff, and spun her captain's chair around

to face him. "So, Shido. Do or die here. You ready?"

"Yeah. Of course." He nodded firmly, letting his resolve show, and her eyes widened slightly.

"I don't know what you talked about with the Shido over there, but that's a good look for you. Excellent. Let's get this mission going, then."

She jerked her chin toward the sub monitor. A diagram of a circle radiated outward from the image of *Fraxinus* shown there.

"We're going to extend *Fraxinus*'s Territory to Mukuro's position. This way, you'll be able to just go without having to worry about air or cosmic radiation. A date in space, though. Kinda ridiculous, huh?" She shrugged and chuckled before continuing. "You can just leave the basic controls and defense to us, no worries. We should be able to stop attacks like the one just now with the Territory. You focus on getting close to Mukuro and start *your* attack."

"…"

Shido looked once more at Mukuro floating in the center of the main monitor and let out a sigh.

"…Uh. Um." Natsumi abruptly spoke up from where she stood hiding behind Yoshino.

"Hm?" Kotori turned to her. "What's up, Natsumi?"

"…Oh, no. I mean, if that's what's happening, that's fine," Natsumi said haltingly, avoiding Kotori's eyes. "But I was just sort of thinking…she seems kinda rowdy and maybe it'd be better if we were there, too…or maybe not, I don't know…"

As if the dam had been broken, the other Spirits also raised their voices.

"Oh. Um. I. Would like to. Help, too. If I can. If Mukuro attacks with something the Territory can't block, Zadkiel could…!"

"Gooodness, that's such a bonne idée! My Gabriel's wall of sound might be useful, toooooo!"

"Ooh! Then I'm going, too!"

They spoke up one after the other and turned pleading eyes on Kotori.

Kotori got a troubled look on her face, but eventually, she sighed in resignation. "…Okay. If you all insist. But you *only* step up if

Shido's in trouble. This is, after all, a mission to make Mukuro weak in the knees. A whole crowd out of nowhere's gonna put her on edge."

"Okay!"

The Spirits nodded firmly.

Shido couldn't help smiling at the group all coming together like this. "Thanks, gang. But I'm going to try to not need your help. That's the best route, if I can manage it." And then, on firm feet, he stood on the spot where he had been transported to the bridge earlier. "Okay, Kotori. Please and thank you."

"Yup. We'll transport y—," Kotori started, when suddenly, red lights lit up the bridge, and a shrill alarm began to ring. "What is it?!"

"…! It's…the enemy! Three—four DEM ships from earth!" Minowa shouted as several enormous ships popped up on the monitor.

"…Now of all times." Kotori scowled in annoyance. "I expected this. So they're really here. But no matter how many small-fry ships they—" She stopped abruptly, her eyebrows shooting up. She stared at the smallest of the four ships on the monitor, and her expression grew hard, until it transformed into something with the slightest hint of excitement bleeding into it.

Compared with the rough silhouettes of the other three ships, the fourth had a distinctive platinum streamlined form. Given its appearance here and now, this airship was no doubt built for the purpose of war, but its refined lines suggested a ship for ceremonial use for nobility.

Kotori flicked the stick of her Chupa Chups up and down as she gave voice to its name. *"Goetia…!"*

"Wha—?!" Shido's eyes flew open.

Goetia. This was the first time he'd seen it with his own eyes, but he'd heard the name from Kotori a million times. It was Ellen Mathers's personal ship, probably the most cutting-edge high-speed ship in the world. And it was also the ship that had felled *Fraxinus* in the previous world.

Sweat trickling down her cheek, Kotori licked her lips. "…Isn't this just perfect? A revenge match on the day of the new *Fraxinus*'s arrival in the world."

"Are we okay…?" Shido asked, brow furrowing slightly.

"*There is no need for concern*," Maria replied over the speakers. *"I am not the same ship as before. We will make them learn the name of the world's top airship."*

"You said it, Maria." Kotori tugged her lips up into a grin and barked orders to the crew. "Deploy duel Territory! Expand layer one to point six-two-two, set attribute to space control. Set layer two to defense! We're going to war!"

"Yes, sir!"

The crew began to tap at their consoles.

"Woh-kay. You take care of Mukuro, Shido. I pray for your success in battle—wait, not that. I pray for your success with the ladies."

"Ha-ha! What even is that?" Shido smiled at Kotori's strange and yet entirely appropriate parting words. "You, too, Kotori. Stay safe."

"You bet," she replied briefly, as his body was transported outside of the ship.

His view changed from the inside of the bridge to the emptiness of space, and a sense of buoyancy enveloped him.

"Whoa…?!" he cried out reflexively. His body had been abruptly freed of gravity, and it felt like he would start spinning around on the spot. But just as Kotori had said, he felt a curious stability, like he was being supported by an invisible hand. No doubt they were keeping Shido upright with the Territory.

Naturally, he had never swum through space without protection before, so he couldn't push aside his misgivings entirely. But he could indeed breathe, and the air around him felt like it was the usual temperature. He wouldn't have any trouble having a conversation like this.

"Woh-kay." He nodded to himself, bent his knees slightly, and then moved as if to kick against space. His body gained propulsive force and moved toward Mukuro.

"Hmmm?" She noticed his approach and turned her gaze in his direction. As soon as she saw his face, however, she narrowed her eyes slightly. "You… You gave your name as Shido. I believe I told you to never show yourself before me again?"

For the first time, he was hearing Mukuro's actual voice, not her voice filtered through any devices. With a faint anxiety and excitement, and a sense of mission and resolve, he met her eyes.

"I'm honored you remember my name," he said sincerely. "Did you maybe miss me?"

"…Hmmm?" She cocked her head to one side. But her confusion didn't seem to stem from a lack of understanding of his words. It looked more like she was doubting his sanity.

But he continued, heedless of this. "Brace yourself, you spoiled brat. My ego is unfathomable."

In a world of everlasting darkness looking down on heaven and earth, the curtain opened on the rendezvous between Spirit and human.

To be continued.

Afterword

How have you been? This is Koshi Tachibana. I have delivered to you *Date A Live 14: Planet Mukuro*. What did you think? I do hope you enjoyed the book.

While the characters it is written with are *six* and *eat*, her name is pronounced "Mukuro." Absurd. It's a pile of kanji with the most difficult reading since Kurumi and the most disturbed kanji since Natsumi. Extremely cool. When I told my editor her name, I remember being quite passionate about how it was so cool to use the casual form for the "eat" kanji instead of the more polite one.

Now then, we have this time the impossible space arc together with the fairy tale arc. In terms of positioning of the story, you might think of it as the latter half of the Nia arc and the first half of the Mukuro arc.

The Spirits of the fairy tale world are adorable, though, hm? I want to keep going and put other characters into the fairy tale world, too. I will do some thinking on this.

Sleeping Beauty Reine (who can't sleep because of insomnia). Princess Kaguya Tama (who ends up having no suitors because she has too many demands). The wolf and the seven young Kurumis (where the only development I can imagine is them all ganging up on the wolf). Ali Baba and the forty Kurumis. (There wouldn't be even a scrap of Ali Baba's flesh left.) One hundred and one Kurumis. (Nothing but despair.)

This is actually pretty amusing, which is a real problem. I'll have to write these as short stories.

Now then, this book is once again thanks to the efforts of so many. Illustrator Tsunako, thank you so much for the lovely illustrations once more. You always go above and beyond my expectations for the character designs, so I can hardly wait to see them every time. Mukuro is super cute!

To my editor, who I make trouble with every single volume; the book designer, Kusano; everyone in the editorial and sales departments; all the booksellers, and you, who have picked up this book, I offer my sincerest thanks.

Will Shido be able to make Mukuro weak in the knees in volume fifteen? I do hope we will be able to meet again.

Koushi Tachibana
Feb. 2016

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