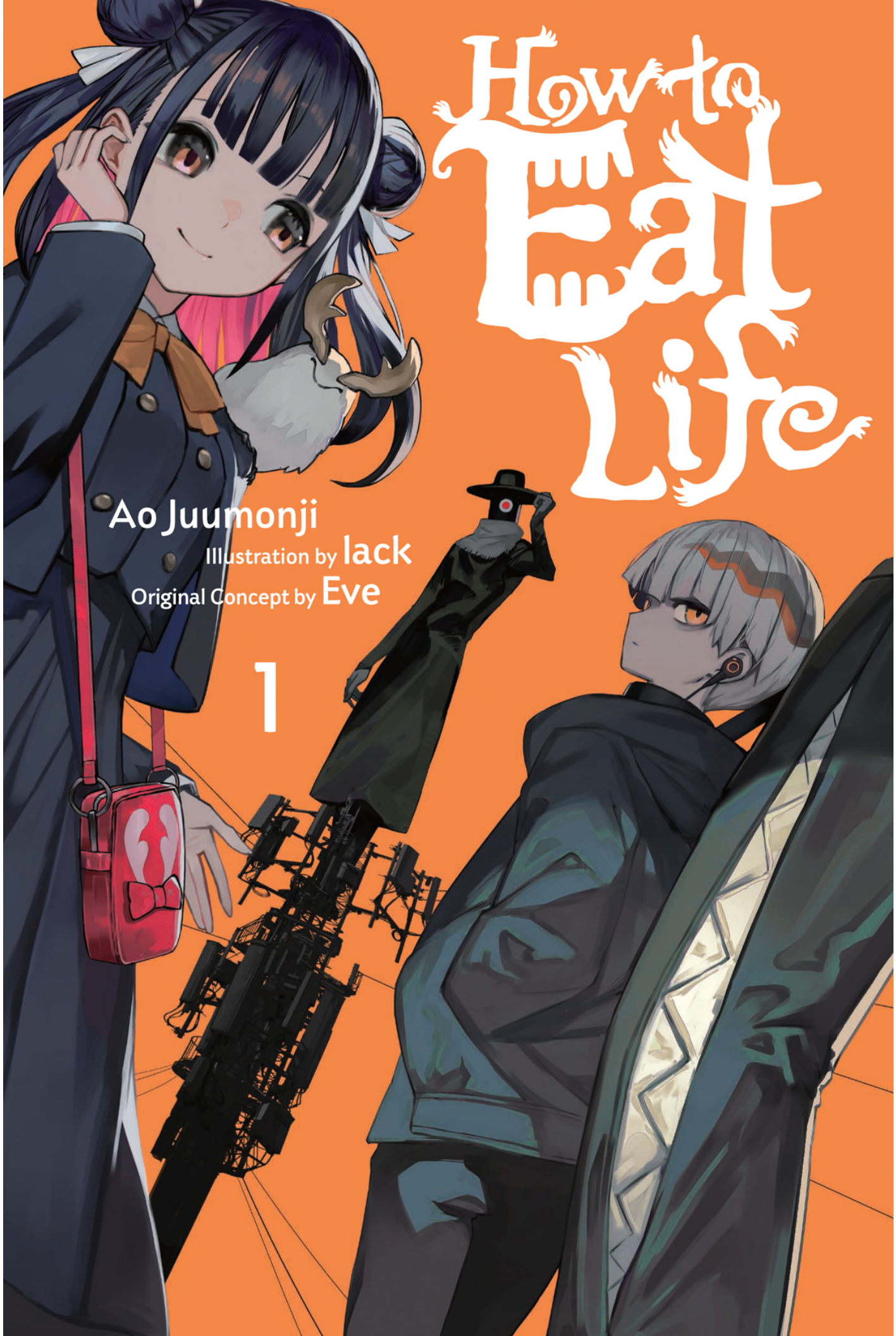
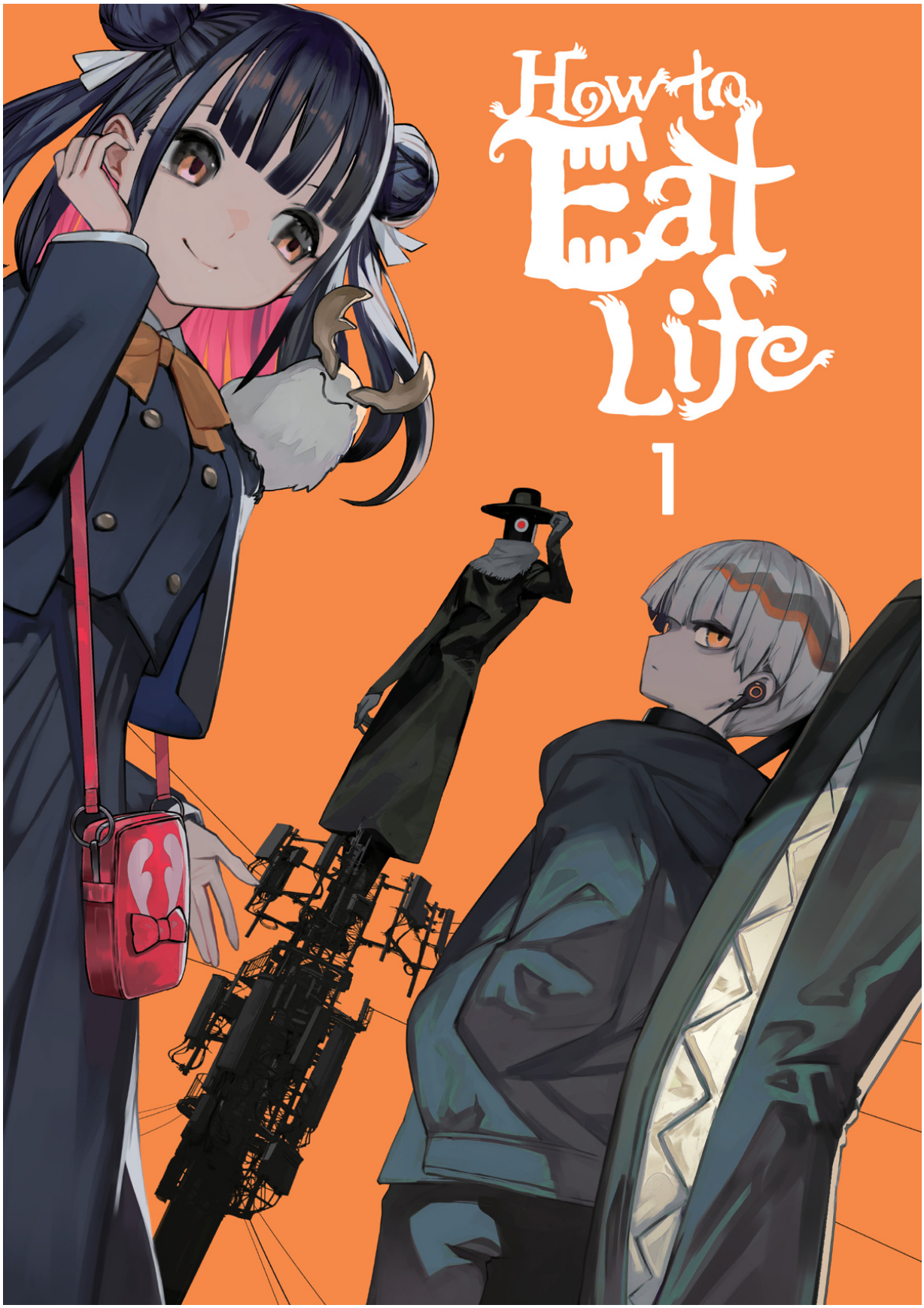

How to Eat Life
Ao Juumonji
Illustration by lack
Original Concept by Eve
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How to Eat Life
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Frontispiece, Book Illustrations by Iack

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How to Eat Life




Tobi Otogiri
An eighth grader in search of his missing brother. His partner Baku is a talking backpack.
Ryuuko Shiratama
Tobi's classmate. Carries her "pet," Chinurasha, around with her in a bag.
Itsuya Haizaki
A janitor at Tobi's school. There's more to his identity than meets the eye…
Miss Dhole
A member of Dahlia Four. Pursues a target known only as "Sullivan" with the help of her zingai partner.
Seki Otogiri
Tobi's older brother. His current whereabouts are unknown.
The One-Eyed One
A mysterious entity that appeared before Tobi when he was a child and left behind Baku.





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Illustration by lack
Original Concept by Eve

YEN ON
New York

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How to Eat Life 1

Original Concept by **Eve** **Ao Juumonji**

Translation by **Tristan Hill** **Cover art by** **lack**

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Up until now, Tobi Otogiri's story has only been depicted through music videos and the manga *Kara no Kioku*. After a period of in-depth planning between me and the novelist Ao Juumonji, however, I'm pleased to announce that it is finally ready to be presented to you in the form of a single story. In addition, I was lucky enough to have lack—an artist I've been a fan of for quite some time—provide the illustrations, so be sure to check those out.

I believe that everyone who's listened to "How to Eat Life" or watched its music video has their own personal interpretation of the story it tells. I hope you'll appreciate the version you're about to read as one more interpretation, the combination of a world dreamed up by a musician and a plot devised by a novelist.







#0 /
PST=.BYND

Past Equals

Dot Beyond



Tobi Otogiri grasped the horizontal vaulting bar before him with one hand. He kicked lightly off the ground, pulling himself up into a one-armed back hip circle—but instead of following through with his swing, he planted a foot on top of the bar partway and heaved himself all the way up, standing atop it with his arms crossed.

"Oh, gimme a *break*, Tobi," the backpack slung over his shoulder scoffed. "Just for the record, normal people don't do crap like that! You're making yourself look like a total freak right now, y'know?"

Tobi pretended not to hear his bag's voice as he surveyed the playground. He saw the horizontal bar beneath his feet. A slide. Two trees and two benches. A water fountain. A streetlight. A two-seat swing set, currently occupied by a pair of younger boys—fifth or sixth graders, most likely. Judging by the looks on their faces, both of them were wondering why on earth a scary middle schooler was climbing all over the equipment.

"What'd I tell ya? Geh-heh-heh!" Tobi's backpack let out a nasty, grating cackle.

Tobi clicked his tongue. *Shut your trap, Baku*, he thought. He would have said it out loud, if it weren't for the grade schoolers nearby. They couldn't hear Baku's voice—nor, in fact, could anyone else. Tobi was the only one in the world who could speak with his backpack.

Tobi leaped off the bar.

"For real, though, how'd you even get that nimble? You're like a damn monkey," Baku jabbed.

Tobi ignored the bag's incessant ribbing and made for the slide next, climbing on top of it. The other boys were no longer paying attention to him. They were so focused on their smartphones that they'd stopped bothering to swing.

Once he reached the top of the slide, Tobi squatted, half sitting on his heels. When he was those kids' age, he reflected, he'd been about this tall standing.

The slide was made of metal, its unpainted, silvery surface dotted with a number of conspicuous dents. The yellow paint on its handrails was heavily weathered and peeling away in patches.

"…Hey, you think this is the place?" Baku asked in a whisper.

"Who knows?" Tobi whispered back.

He pulled up his left sleeve and glanced down at the digital watch he'd bought at a thrift store. Apparently, it was 4:59 in the afternoon. Tobi was in eighth grade, but he wasn't in a club and didn't attend cram school. The institute's curfew was set at five thirty.

"'Bout time for you to head on home, eh? You're running down the clock," Baku commented with a mocking chuckle.

Shut up, Tobi thought as he hopped off the slide. He cut a strikingly elongated silhouette as he sailed through the air, thanks in part to the backpack slung over his shoulder.

Just then, a familiar tune began to play over the town's PA system. It was an old children's song, used as a signal to let the local youth know it was time to start home. It was a tune Tobi knew well—one he'd grown used to a long, long time ago.

Tobi looked up at the dusky expanse of the evening sky, still lit by lingering sunlight.

"…I was up on his shoulders."

"Huh? Whuzzat?"

Tobi ignored Baku's question and simply muttered the same words to himself once more.

"On his shoulders…"

That's right. My brother brought me to this park. He was carrying me on his shoulders. I remember him humming some sort of tune.

"Hey, what're you humming, Big Brother?" Tobi asked.

His brother just chuckled, dodging the question.

"Hey, what song is that?" Tobi asked again. "Tell me, please!"

Once again, his brother didn't respond.

This time, Tobi leaned forward to lightly tug on his brother's ears. "C'mon, tell me! What song is it?"

"I made it up," said his brother.

"You did? Really?"

"Yeah. It came to me just a moment ago."

The memories flooded back, vivid and distinct. They seemed so perfectly clear.

That slide—Tobi had played on it countless times before. His brother would settle on the nearby bench, watching over him. He'd sit cross-legged, slouching forward, a smile on his lips. They'd played on the swings, as well. Both of them, together, his brother swinging alongside him.

"…Oh, right," Tobi muttered. He'd just remembered that his brother hadn't carried him *to* the playground—he'd carried him *back*. Tobi played around until he exhausted himself, and his brother let him ride home on his shoulders. They made their way back, the town's PA system playing that familiar evening tune while his brother hummed another, different song.

"Tobi," Baku called. "Hey! Tobi!"

Tobi didn't respond. He left the playground, walking until he found himself standing before a two-story building.

Did we take a right here? Or was it a left? Which way did he carry me that day? It's not coming back to me. I just don't remember.

For the time being, Tobi decided to turn right. He walked along a narrow road, just barely wide enough for a single car to pass through. None of the buildings lining the path looked like they'd been built in recent memory. Every one of them was conspicuously run-down.

Soon, Tobi passed by a barbershop, complete with a pole in red, blue, and white. The shop itself was painted a deep shade of green, and the sign read HATSUSHIMA BARBERS. It looked familiar to Tobi—

but in the sort of way that could have easily been his imagination playing tricks on him.

"This it?" asked Baku.

Tobi shook his head without so much as slowing down. He was searching for an apartment building. He had no idea what its address was, but it had to be somewhere in this vicinity. He remembered it being two stories tall and painted a whitish beige, with an external staircase leading up to its second floor. Tobi had lived in one of those second-floor rooms once, along with his brother.

What number apartment did we stay in? Tobi remembered it being one of the corner units, and he could pretty much picture the layout. There was a black rail outside the windows, which his brother had helped him sit on from time to time. The image of his brother smoking a cigarette as he leaned against that railing was burned indelibly into his mind's eye.

Tobi soon reached a T-junction, where he came to a stop. There was a manhole in the ground in front of him. It didn't look familiar, and no matter which direction Tobi turned, none of the surrounding scenery rang any bells, either. About eight or nine years had passed since that day, and for all Tobi knew, any number of things might have changed in the intervening period.

"Whaddaya think, Tobi?" asked Baku.

Tobi snapped. "Just shut up already!"

He'd tried to hold back, but it was no use. He couldn't stop himself from shouting.

"…Didn't have to bite my head off about it. Sorry, okay?" Baku replied. He wasn't usually the type to apologize.

Tobi heaved a sigh and spun around to retrace his steps…and that's when he saw it. An old, blackened concrete wall happened to catch his eye. There was a curve in the road just beyond it. An old, blackened wall and a curve in the road.

For some reason, Tobi couldn't tear his eyes away from it. He walked over to take a closer look. Beyond the curve lay an even

narrower road, packed with a mixture of one-and two-story houses on either side. Potted plants lined the street, and the utility poles seemed unusually slender. The power lines suspended from them, on the other hand, were so dense they felt like a shroud covering the whole street.

Tobi could feel his heart begin to pound in his chest.

"This road—we went this way…"

On that fateful day, Tobi had run down that very same street. Not alone—his brother had been there, too, pulling him along by the hand.

We were rushing. Was something chasing us? That's right—we were being pursued. We were running away. But why?

Why had someone been chasing Tobi and his brother? Why didn't he know the reason? Did he just not have the time to consider it in the heat of the moment? He couldn't say for certain. His memory wasn't clear enough. Surely his brother had explained what was happening to him. Or maybe *he* hadn't understood why, either. Nothing was clear. The only thing Tobi really knew was that they'd been fleeing something desperately.

We were the only ones on the street. It was dark…but I don't think it was pitch-black. Had the sun just set? Or was it just starting to rise? One of the two, probably.

Before long, the narrow road came to an end when it intersected with a slightly larger one. Turning right, Tobi caught sight of a number of stores with cloth awnings shading their entrances—two on the right, one on the left. Tobi suspected *that* was most likely the direction he and his brother had run.

Back then, Tobi had been terribly out of breath. He wasn't running now, but he felt a pain in his chest anyway. He'd probably whined bitterly. *I can't go on, Big Brother. It's too much. I can't breathe. I can't run anymore. Just leave me behind.*

His brother would've spurred him on, though. *You can do it, Tobi*, he'd have said. *Just run. I know you can run a little farther.*

And so he had. He'd done his best. His brother told him he could run, and so he had.

When the new road came to an end, it spilled out into a street paved with cobblestones rather than asphalt. Tobi found himself in an old shopping district. A lot of the stores' shutters were lowered—most of them for good.

Tobi had no memory of this closed-down husk of a street. Had he taken a wrong turn? No—they'd continued into that alleyway. He and his brother had dashed right through this place, leaving it behind as quickly as they'd arrived.

"This has gotta be the place, right, Tobi?" Baku said. Tobi didn't reply.

This is *the place, isn't it? It has to be. Or is it?*

From what Tobi could tell, this was one of the city's older districts. Nothing about it really stood out to him. It was the sort of street you could find anywhere. Could this really be the place he'd been searching for?

This was where Tobi's brother had finally picked him up and carried him. Maybe Tobi had started bawling, or maybe he'd tripped and hadn't had the strength to stand up again.

Right—that was it. I tripped here. I fell, so he picked me up and went on.

Tobi's brother's words rose from the depths of his mind. *It's all right, Tobi!* he'd said. Then came the sound of cars—a traffic light off in the distance turned red, and his brother spit out a breathless *Dammit!* before spinning around, as if to retrace his steps.

Most likely, it hadn't been just one person chasing them, or even two. A whole group had been after them.

"Freeze!"

A voice rang out—a man's. Not now, though. This was back during Tobi's flight with his brother. But as the memory hit him, Tobi reflexively ground to a halt. There was something unsettling about this. Why could he remember everything in such vivid detail? Tobi

had been clinging to his brother at the time, and he'd clamped his eyes shut. But the moment the man shouted—his words both a command and a threat—Tobi's eyes snapped back open.

His gaze fell on the man. He was holding something—pointing it at Tobi and his brother. A moment later, a tremendously loud noise rang out. It was like an explosion. Like the sound of a solid object slamming into something with intense force. What *was* that sound? Tobi hadn't been able to tell at the time, but looking back, it was easy to imagine a gunshot.

That's it. That man had a gun. He shot at us.

Tobi's brother grunted and staggered forward. At the time, Tobi hadn't even considered the possibility that his brother had been shot, but something had clearly happened to him. That much, Tobi had understood.

Whatever it was hadn't been enough to stop his brother, though. He'd kept running, holding Tobi as tightly as ever. He now moved with a distinct limp—one of his legs was obviously hurt, and he seemed to be in terrible pain.

How long did he keep running? It was more than a few seconds, or even minutes. It must have been almost an hour. Maybe longer.

Eventually, Tobi's brother fled down an alleyway between two large buildings. He'd set Tobi down just before. That had been at Tobi's request—he remembered asking his brother to let him down. But even after, his brother had kept a firm grasp on his hand.

The alley they'd ended up in was damp, slightly pungent, and filthy. Air-conditioning units jutted out from the buildings overhead, forming a sort of half roof above them and filling the air with a mechanical clamor.

Suddenly, Tobi's brother threw open a nearby door and pushed Tobi inside. "Hide in here," he said.

"But Big Brother…," Tobi protested weakly.

"Just stay there until I tell you it's all right to come out. Do you understand, Tobi? I need you to promise me that. And don't say a word, no matter what happens."

Tobi's brother moved to close the door, leaving Tobi inside while he stayed out in the alley. A sense of anxious dread came over Tobi. If he stayed put and didn't make a sound, just like his brother said, he'd be left all alone. He couldn't take that. He didn't *want* to be alone. He wanted to stay with his brother. He couldn't stand the thought of being separated…but his brother was hurt. He looked like he was in terrible pain, just barely managing to push through it. Surely, he was at his limit. He couldn't go any farther.

Tobi was holding his brother back. He was only a burden. And so, however much he feared being alone, however much he hated the idea of being separated, he couldn't disobey. He had to stay.

"Okay," Tobi said with a nod.

"Shh!" his brother replied, pressing a finger to his lips.

Tobi couldn't see his brother's face that well—in fact, he could barely see it at all. Still, he got the sense his brother was smiling.

This time, Tobi didn't say a word. He nodded silently, and his brother shut the door, leaving him in pitch blackness.

Tobi remembered that blackness all too well. It wasn't ordinary darkness. It felt like Tobi could practically touch it. It had a presence—a weight. It was more than a lack of light. No, it was like the darkness itself had blindfolded him. It stifled his eyes, his nose, his ears, and even his mouth, leaving him almost unable to breathe. It penetrated him, eating its way into him.

Tobi felt like the darkness might drive him mad, and in desperation, he pressed his ear to the door and listened carefully to what little sound filtered in from outside. The rumbling of the air conditioners came as a relief. The blackness, it seemed, hadn't completely stolen away his hearing just yet.

Soon, Tobi managed to make out another sound—footsteps, most likely, followed by something loud and violent that he couldn't identify. Then there was a voice. Someone was shouting—maybe his brother, maybe someone else.

Tobi wanted to step outside. His hand was already wrapped around the doorknob. Over and over, he resolved to twist it, only to

abandon the idea the moment before he followed through. After all, his brother had ordered him to stay hidden. He'd told Tobi to promise him, and Tobi had nodded. Tobi would never break a promise he'd made to his brother. He couldn't.

Still—he was scared. Tobi was so frightened he could hardly bear it, but all he could do was stand there in the darkness, holding his breath as well as he could. Eventually, he squatted down on the ground. He just had to wait. To wait for his brother. He'd be back for sure. He'd tell Tobi that everything was all right. That it was all over now. Tobi had faith. Faith, in fact, was all he had.

That pitch-black space Tobi had been sealed into was most likely the top of a staircase. He found himself sitting on a set of steps leading downward—down, and down, and down, into the blackness. Maybe it kept going forever. Maybe it would carry him into the bowels of the earth, if he followed it.

From time to time, Tobi thought he could see something shifting deeper in the darkness. Each time a flicker of movement caught his eye, he had to stifle a scream. He wasn't supposed to make any noise, so instead he shouted internally, begging his brother to help him.

Big Brother.
Big Brother.
Big Brother.
Help me, Big Brother.
Come back to me, Big Brother.
Hurry up and find me, Big Brother.
Please, Big Brother, please.
Big Brother.
Big Brother.
Big Brother.
I'll wait here. I promised, so I'll wait. I'll do everything you said. Big Brother…

Just how long had Tobi waited for his brother to return? How many hours had he spent shivering in the dark, nodding off from

time to time only to jolt awake again moments later?

Had it been three hours?

Four?

Ten?

More than that?

Half a day?

A full day?

Two?

Even longer?

"Ah…"

Tobi gasped as, without warning, the doorknob turned with a *click*. Light streamed in as the door swung open, so blindingly bright it hurt Tobi's eyes…though he hardly even noticed.

"Big Brother!"

Tobi sprung to his feet and flew up the few stairs he'd descended. The door really was open, and he rushed outside, only to be greeted by a dull, gutter-like stench. The alleyway's cracked, pitted concrete had been stained red in Tobi's absence.

Blood, Tobi thought. *Whose is it? It couldn't be. It's not my big brother's, is it? No. Of course not.*

Tobi had been all alone in that pitch-black stairway, which meant that someone had opened the door from outside. Who?

"Big Brother?"

Of course. Tobi's brother had opened the door. Who else could it have been? It was obvious. His brother had returned—he'd come back for Tobi.

Tobi started searching for his brother right away. He had to be nearby. If he was the one who'd opened the door, then he was surely still somewhere in the vicinity.

"Big—" Tobi began…but then he saw him. A man was standing in the entrance to the alleyway—but something was wrong. A shiver ran down Tobi's spine. It wasn't him.

That is not *my big brother.*

The man turned to face Tobi. He was tall, and he wore a hat. A top hat, to be specific. But at the time, Tobi didn't have the foggiest idea what made one type of hat different from another, and the distinction eluded him. A scarf was wrapped around the man's neck, and he was wearing a long, black coat.

The problem was the man's face. To be precise, it was his *eye*. He had only one…or rather, one eye was all he had. That single eye comprised the man's entire face.

His head wasn't a giant eyeball or anything, of course. It was a regular eye—but it was his only feature. A single, staring eye that seemed to blink at Tobi. Part of him wondered if he'd simply imagined it. But if he hadn't, that meant the man also had an eyelid, or at least something akin to one.

The one-eyed man was carrying what looked like a bag slung over his shoulder. That was *all* he was carrying, from what Tobi could tell. At the very least, he didn't have a gun, meaning he wasn't one of the people who'd been chasing Tobi and his brother. Tobi didn't get the sense the man was part of their group. His single eye said it all. Of course, there was also a chance that he was something far more dangerous and far more terrifying—something truly strange and unknowable. His single eye, once again, said it all.

Suddenly, the one-eyed man shrugged the bag off his shoulder and thrust it toward Tobi. He seemed to be telling Tobi to take it, but Tobi immediately shook his head. The one-eyed man was obviously a shady character, and Tobi had never seen that bag before in his life. He wasn't about to accept it without question.

After a few moments, the one-eyed man looked down. He leaned over and laid the bag on the ground. It *did* seem to be a bag…most likely anyway. It had a strap attached to it—the sort you'd sling around your shoulder to carry it on your back. It was also very large. For a moment, Tobi simply stared at it.

By the time he tore his gaze away from the bag, the one-eyed man was gone. Tobi hadn't noticed him leave. He'd simply vanished, almost as if there'd never been a one-eyed man in the alleyway to

begin with. That wasn’t the case, though. Tobi had proof: The bag was still lying there. The one-eyed man was gone, but he’d left a trace of his existence behind.





"It's all his fault…," Tobi muttered under his breath. Suddenly, he found himself on the verge of tears.

It was *his* fault—that one-eyed man's. If he hadn't opened the door, then Tobi wouldn't have been tempted to step outside. He was supposed to wait until his brother returned, but because of the one-eyed man, he'd broken that promise.

Tobi had always been a crybaby. He would burst into tears at the drop of a hat. And whenever he did, his brother would always hug him to calm him down. He never told him not to cry.

Go ahead and cry, Tobi. Cry as much as you want.

Strangely, as Tobi remembered his brother's words, the urge to cry left him…and from that day onward, he hadn't shed so much as a single tear.

After a long, long moment of hesitation, Tobi reached for the bag. He picked it up and found it was surprisingly light for its size. Although Tobi was only five years old at the time, he was able to sling the bag over his shoulder, just like how the one-eyed man had carried it. And oddly enough, the moment he did, he no longer felt like he was all alone.

The red stain on the ground led him out of the alleyway, onto the main street. "My big brother's hurt," Tobi said to himself. He was sure of it now—that stain was his brother's blood.

Maybe he'd tried to give their pursuers the slip. Surely he'd been planning on circling back around to find Tobi as soon as it was safe. Something went wrong, though, and he hadn't been able to return. But that just meant that Tobi had to go to him instead.

"I have to find him…"



#1 /
Pain Plummets Sideways
Horizontal Falling Down

Oh, the beetles and bugs! Night after night
I've killed so many, and now, a hawk will kill me
in turn. What a wretched fate this is! Oh, how
woeful and miserable! I ought to stop eating bugs
and let myself starve to death—but then again,
I'll be killed by the hawk before I have the chance.

—*The Nighthawk Star*, Kenji Miyazawa



#1-1_tobi_otogiri/ Why Do Flowers Bloom?

"Otogiriii…," muttered a teacher in black-rimmed glasses standing beside the school gate.

Tobi Otogiri, however, gave him only a brief glance before passing by.

"*Otogiriii…*," the teacher said once more, this time practically growling.

"That teacher never gives up, huh?" Tobi's backpack said with a scornful chuckle.

"It's his job," Tobi whispered in reply.

Ever since Tobi enrolled at his current school, the bespectacled teacher had tried again and again to discipline his behavior. He wasn't Tobi's homeroom teacher, nor did he teach any of his classes. Tobi didn't even know his name.

"First he gets on your case about your bag not being school-approved, then he throws a fit about your shoes being too flashy, then he starts whining about your bangs being too long… Is this what school's about? Turning people into mass-produced clones that all fit perfectly into the same little box?"

Tobi ignored Baku's grumbling and made his way into the school building, stopping at the shoe cubbies to change into his indoor footwear.

"Hey, Tobi, remember what happened, uhhh…must've been over a year ago now, I think. That teacher just wouldn't stop giving you crap about your hair every single morning, so you—"

"Nope. Must've forgot."

Tobi climbed up the stairs to the second-year wing and stepped into the room for Class 2-3. His spot was by the window—the third

one from the front. He dropped Baku onto his desk, then took a seat and flopped over onto the bag, face-first.

"Taking a nap right after you get to school, eh? Guess not talking to anyone leaves you with a lotta free time! You oughtta try making a friend or two one of these days."

"Shut up already, Baku…"

"Oooh, better watch out, Tobi! People're gonna think you're talking to yourself! They'll have you pegged as a real freak in no time!"

Tobi clicked his tongue, then lowered his voice as far as it would go. "I wasn't talking loudly enough for them to hear me in the first place," he whispered.

"On second thought, why not? Let 'em hear! Maybe that'll give someone an excuse to try talking to you."

"…That's the last thing I want."

"Suuure. I see how it is. You think being a friendless lone wolf makes you look like a real badass, don't you?"

"…No, I don't."

"Oh, c'mon, you totally do. Y'know what that means, right, Tobi? That's a sure sign you're a budding narcissist, right there. Better try being a little less self-absorbed before it's too late!"

"…Keep running your mouth, why don't you?"

"Oh? Well, if you insist! Gets pretty boring sitting around all quiet-like!"

"……"

"Just so you know, if you're thinking you can clam up and I'll get bored and shut my mouth, you couldn't be more wrong," Baku said with a mocking cackle. "I ain't shutting up till the day you die, Tobi! Don't go forgetting—you and I share a destiny. We're linked together, body and soul!"

No, I haven't forgotten, Tobi muttered internally. *How could I?*

"…Right. But what if I burned you to ashes, or something?" Tobi whispered. "Every once in a while, I start wondering…"

"Hey. You know I heard that, right?"

"…Heard what? Your ears must be playing tricks on you."

"You see any ears on me, pal?"

"…Dunno."

"Actually, wait. How *do* I hear?"

"…Don't ask me."

"God, you're cold! Cold as ice, Tobi! Your heart's subzero! I'm freezin' solid over here!"

If only it were that easy, Tobi thought, praying that Baku's supposed chill would at least shut him up for a moment. He didn't say it out loud, though. That would just add fuel to the fire. The only way to deal with Baku's incessant banter was to ignore it. Tobi knew that very well, but he couldn't keep himself from reacting all the same. *Guess I need more practice.*

"…But how would I even practice that?" Tobi muttered, shutting down his own inner voice.

Tobi was a fast eater. He could power through his school lunch in seconds flat…well, figuratively anyway. "Seconds" might be an exaggeration, but watching him eat really did give the impression he was somehow teleporting everything except his bread roll directly into his stomach. Then he'd clean up his tray just as quickly, departing from the classroom holding his roll—or, on days when the school served rice or a noodle dish instead, leaving empty-handed.

At first, his homeroom teacher had tried to scold him. "Wh-whoa there, slow down, Otogiri." But Tobi flagrantly disregarded these attempts, and eventually, his teacher simply gave up.

Today was a bread day, and not just any bread: The school had served a very rich type of roll that had butter worked into its dough. It was called, appropriately, a butter roll.

Tobi sped down the hallway with Baku slung across his back.

"A butter roll, eh? Nice," Baku commented. "You like those, don't you, Tobi?"

"Huh?" Tobi grunted. "Not really, no."

"Liar. Look at you! You're practically skipping!"

"…I don't hate them, either. I'm not that picky."

The hallway was deserted. All the other middle schoolers were still in their classrooms, eating their meals like the well-mannered children they were. Even so, Tobi kept his voice down, just in case anyone happened to be listening.

"C'monnn, Tobi, don't give me that! I know you've always been more of a bread guy than a rice guy!"

"I'm a whatever guy."

"And you like fish more than meat, right?"

"I seriously don't care…"

"Okay, then which is better: sweets with soybean powder or sweets with red bean paste?"

"Bean paste."

"Easy answer, huh? Didn't take you a second!"

"…I just don't like powdery foods."

"I totally get that…*not*! How the hell would I know? I'm a goddamn backpack! I've never eaten either of 'em!"

"Not my problem…"

"It kinda is, though. Aren't we good pals? Actually… *Are* we good pals?"

"That's even *less* my problem…"

"Guess when all's said and done, we're just stuck with each other! Yup, yup!"

"Sure. Let's go with that."

"C'mon, 'stuck' with me? Really? You couldn't think of a nicer way to say it?"

"You're the one who said it in the first place, Baku."

"Yeah, but you were supposed to disagree! Tell me I've got it wrong! You're breakin' my heart, pal!"

"Am I, really…?"

"Li'l bit. Maybe."

Tobi stepped out into the courtyard. It was more or less what you'd expect from a school: a lawn, some benches, and a few flower beds. As lunch wore on, a crowd of students would filter outside to

make the most of the bright, sunny weather. For now, though, the whole place was empty. Tobi was the only one around.

"You're doing it again? Seriously?" Baku said with an exasperated sigh.

Tobi stepped over to a pipe that ran up the school's wall and grabbed on to it with his right hand. Specifically, he grabbed on to the metal fitting that secured the pipe to the wall, hooking his middle and ring fingers through it. He pulled himself upward, using the pipe, the grooves in the wall, and the other fittings as hand-and footholds, swiftly scaling his way to the roof.

"For cryin' out loud. Do you have a big ol' balloon in that head of yours instead of a brain? Is that why you're always hanging around high places…?"

Tobi didn't pay any mind to Baku's teasing. He climbed right up the building, reaching the rooftop in the blink of an eye. *Decent time today*, he thought. He'd gotten up in one go, without any hesitation. Maybe he'd just picked a good route.

There was, technically speaking, a much easier path to the roof: A staircase inside the school led to a door opening right onto it. Safety and security regulations, however, meant that door was kept locked at all times. If you didn't have the rooftop key, then climbing was the only way to get up or down from it. Not that Tobi knew anyone else who would go that far. He was the only one.

The school's rooftop was a flat, unfinished concrete surface with a rather short wall set up around its perimeter—a parapet, to use the technical term. Tobi set Baku on the ground, took a seat on the parapet, then opened up the plastic bag containing his butter roll. He closed his eyes and took a bite.

"So? Tasty?" asked Baku.

"…Eh. It's fine."

"Just say it's good, for cryin' out loud! Why do you always have to be such a sullen little brat?"

"Oh, wow, it's *so* good. Delicious. Amazing. Scrumptious. Wow."

"Shoulda stopped after the first one. You're such a liar…"

"I told you it was fine, didn't I?"

"Okay, so which do you like better: normal rolls or butter rolls?"

"Butter rolls."

"See?"

"…See *what*?"

"As if you don't know."

Tobi polished off his butter roll in three big bites, then gazed up at the wisps of cloud drifting through the pale blue sky. That got boring in a hurry, so he looked down at the school instead. Tobi's middle school was a three-story, U-shaped building, with the courtyard located in between its long, parallel sections. The wing below Tobi held the special-use classrooms, while the other wing held the regular ones. The latter's first floor housed the third-year students' rooms, with the second-years on the second floor and the first-years on the third.

Before long, the school bell rang to signal the end of lunch and the beginning of the afternoon break. Tobi watched through the classroom windows as students started flooding out into the hallways. A small number of them—one in ten, or even less—had what could only be described as strange entities riding on their heads or shoulders. Tobi, however, wasn't particularly surprised by this.

Take, for instance, a group of three girls walking through the second-floor hallway. Tobi didn't know their names, but he was dimly aware that they were all in Class 2-3, just like him. One of them—the girl in the middle of the group—had what looked like a bat, or maybe some sort of flying squirrel, clinging to her back.

Perhaps she happened to own a very unusual pet and loved it so much that she couldn't bear to leave it at home. Tobi couldn't completely rule out that possibility. But on the other hand, this wasn't the first time he'd caught sight of that particular creature. He'd seen it in the classroom as well. It was attached to the girl at all times, in fact, but none of the teachers or other students ever

made a fuss about it. As far as Tobi could tell, not even the girl herself noticed its existence.

"Sure is weird," Tobi muttered to himself.

"Huh?" Baku grunted. "What's weird?"

"Nothing."

"Yeah, sure. I heard you! You said something was weird, plain as day! You're not talking your way outta this one! Spill it! What's weird?"

"…If I had to pick, then you are."

"*Huh?* How am I weird?"

"You really need to ask?"

"Hey, you!"

"Ugh…"

Tobi dropped his gaze down toward the courtyard. That last shout hadn't come from Baku, but from a man in work clothes, who was looking up at Tobi. It was the school janitor.

"…Me?" Tobi replied, pointing to himself.

"*Yes*, you!" shouted the janitor. "Who else would I be talking to?! You're the only one up there!"

"Right… Fair enough, I guess."

"'Fair enough,' my rear…"

Judging by appearances, the janitor was a bit younger than the rest of the school's staff. He always seemed to be wearing a big, friendly smile, though it was hard to tell if he was actually upbeat, or if that was just how his face looked. One way or another, he'd always say hi to Tobi whenever they passed each other around school, much to Tobi's irritation. Tobi made it a policy to ignore him at all costs, but the janitor never took the hint and kept stubbornly talking to him anyway.

"Look, Otogiri. You know the roof's off-limits, don't you?! And this isn't the first time you've been up there, either! How do you keep doing it?! I *know* that door's locked! In fact, I keep a pretty close eye on it! Did you get your hands on a copy of the key, or something?!"

"I don't have a key, no."

"Yeah, figures! You'd be in huge trouble if you copied it without permission! But that's not important. You need to get down from there right this instant!"

"You mean I should jump?"

"No! Why would I mean that?! Absolutely do *not* do that! Ugh, why do I even bother? Just stay right there! I've got a lot more questions, so I'll come up to you!"

The janitor headed back inside. Most likely, he'd go to the staff room, grab the rooftop key, then make his way up the stairs to Tobi.

"Sooo, what's the plan?" Baku asked, amused.

"Isn't it obvious?" Tobi replied, slinging Baku onto his shoulder. "Of course we're not waiting around. Sounds like a pain."

"I know, right?"

"Sucks, though. I was starting to like this place…"

Tobi sighed, then stepped over the parapet. Descending the wall back into the courtyard took him no more than ten seconds. By the time the janitor reached the roof, Tobi was long gone.

When school let out for the day, Tobi's homeroom teacher, Mr. Harimoto, called him straight to the staff room and sat him down for a lecture. Tobi couldn't remember what he said. It was probably about him being up on the rooftop, but most of the teacher's words went in one ear and out the other. Not *all* of them, to be clear—just most of them.

"Are you listening to me, Otogiri? What do you have to say about that?" asked Harimoto. Every few minutes, he would check to make sure Tobi was still listening. Those were the only points in the lecture when Tobi would reply with a "yes" or an "understood."

Harimoto was around forty years old and virtually always wore a red sweatsuit to school, only changing into more formal clothing on the most special of occasions. The way he kept his short hair brushed back and styled with product made it look like he had a

head full of spikes, which led some students to call him "Mr. Hedgehog" behind his back. Others—the ones who were fonder of him—just called him Harry, as a play on his name.

"Look, Otogiri, I don't like these lectures any more than you do," said Harimoto. "The thing is, there's only so much misbehavior I can overlook. I'm not asking for perfection. All I need from you is the bare minimum, okay? Society has rules, and some of them are important enough that you can't just blow them off. Not to mention…"

By the time Harimoto's speech finally came to an end, and Tobi was allowed to leave the staff room, it was already past four thirty PM.

"Peh!" Baku spat. "Harry just can't cut to the goddamn chase, can he? You know how hard it was to keep quiet that whole time?"

"Don't call him Harry…"

Tobi headed out at a rapid clip. He wasn't in a hurry, but strolling at a leisurely pace just wasn't his style. In general, he either took big, slow strides, or else he walked so quickly that he was practically jogging—one of the two.

"Just look at you go! Is this a race or something?" jabbed Baku.

Without even thinking about it, Tobi slowed his pace as he got up to the school gate. "Shut up," he replied.

"You're always in such a hurry, y'know? Ever think about taking it slow and easy?"

"Didn't I tell you to shut up…?"

Tobi glanced down at his watch. The institute was about fifteen minutes away on foot at his usual pace, and it was less than an hour before curfew. Thanks to Harimoto's lecture, Tobi only had forty minutes of free time left. Meanwhile, his old neighborhood was twenty minutes away by bus.

"…Guess it's not happening today," Tobi muttered irritably as he stepped up to the school gate.

It was a little less than two meters tall—short enough for him to climb over easily if he felt like it. But that wouldn't be enough to

cheer him up. Instead, he kicked off the tiled gate, propelling himself to the top in a single bound.

"*Yes!*" Tobi hissed with a pump of his fist. His goal had been to make it up onto the gate without using his hands, and he'd pulled it off without a hitch.

"C'monnn, Tobi. Really? Society has rules, and some of them are important enough that you can't just blow them off, y'know?" Baku said, quoting Harimoto's lecture with a scornful laugh.

Tobi almost fired back, but before he had the chance, his mind went blank. There was a girl—another student from his school—standing on the far side of the gate, and she was looking up at him.

"Ah…"

The girl's long hair was done up in a pair of buns, and she had rather sharp facial features Tobi recognized from somewhere. No, not just somewhere—she was in the same class as him, and for once, he actually remembered her name. It was rather unusual, so seeing it written out once was all it had taken for him to memorize it. Her first name was Ryuuko, written with characters that meant "dragon's child," and her surname, Shiratama, had an equally idiosyncratic meaning—literally, "white gem."

Ryuuko Shiratama blinked rapidly, seemingly surprised by Tobi's sudden appearance. Tobi, to be fair, was just as shocked. Why would she be *there*, of all places? Nobody else was lingering near the school gate. Tobi had assumed, in fact, that nobody was there at all. The fact that he'd been wrong—and that the person present just happened to be a girl from his class—caught him off guard.

Tobi took a deep breath and pursed his lips tightly. *What now?* he thought. Irritatingly, Baku wasn't chiming in with any advice. This was the one sort of situation where Tobi deeply wished he *would* pipe up with some words of wisdom. Or, for that matter, any words at all. Even his usual jabbering mockery and stupid jokes would be better than total silence. Not that anyone other than Tobi would be able to hear him, of course. Shiratama, incidentally, was also dead

silent for some reason, which just made the whole thing even more awkward.

Tobi took the opportunity to get a long, close look at her—something he'd never bothered doing before. In the past, he'd gotten the impression that she had bold, distinctive features, but on a more careful inspection, her eyes, nose, and mouth didn't seem especially large or small. Her features didn't have any defining curves or slants to them, either. Tobi didn't quite know how to put it into words, but, more than anything else, her face struck him as *balanced*. It was like every aspect of her appearance was just as it should be, nothing standing out or seeming out of place. Essentially, she was easy on the eyes. It was the sort of face you could gaze at for hours on end without finding any flaws or wanting to look away.

That wasn't *why* Tobi ended up with his eyes trained on Shiratama, though it might have been one factor. Rather, it felt like he'd ended up in an impromptu staring contest with her. He couldn't tear his gaze from her, and, frankly, he was starting to feel a little embarrassed. You'd think that would motivate him to look away, but for no clear reason, he couldn't.

What is this, exactly? What's happening right now?

"Hey, you!" a voice rang out in the distance—the school janitor again. "Get off the gate this instant! Wait— Is that you, Otogiri?! Are you at it again already…?!"

Whatever spell had been keeping Tobi in place was undone by the janitor's shout. He glanced over his shoulder and found the man standing in front of the school's entrance, brandishing a broom.

"My bad," Tobi called out with a quick bow.

The janitor looked hopping mad. "Didn't Mr. Harimoto just finish telling you to shape up?! You're not even pretending to take his advice!"

"I said I was sorry…"

Tobi jumped from the gate. The janitor looked ready to chase him down, so Tobi set off at a sprint, only slowing his pace after rounding two corners and making sure nobody was following him.

"That janitor's such a pain…," Tobi grumbled.

"Guy's got his eye on you, and that's a fact," Baku commented with an amused chuckle.

Tobi scowled. "Wish he'd just leave me alone."

"Well, no point whining to me. You're gonna have to tell him that to his face."

"What would I say, though?"

"Yeah, that's the hard part. How 'bout you spin yourself as a sad, pitiable little orphan who's just doing his best to make it through the eighth grade without causing any trouble, and ask him to turn a blind eye to your little slipups?"

"I don't think I'm sad or pitiable, though."

"Like I said, it's all about the spin! Not having a family's already enough to score you major pity points, y'know?"

"That's not even true. I *do* have a family."

"Oh yeah?"

"I have my brother."

When Tobi brought up his brother, Baku tended to shut his mouth. Baku had never met the other Otogiri sibling. After all, the two of them had been separated before Tobi and Baku first met.

Tobi checked his watch. It was four forty, and although the institute's curfew was at half past five, as long as he got back before the cutoff—even if it was only by a few seconds—he wouldn't get in trouble. Since he had time, he decided to make a detour.

Tobi's detours weren't all that purposeful. He mostly just walked around aimlessly. He made a point of not spending money when he didn't have to, and he didn't have much money to waste in the first place. The institute where he lived provided its middle school occupants with an allowance of three thousand yen a month. Tobi didn't have a solid grasp on whether that was a large or small sum, as far as allowances went. But he did know that his occasional bus rides cost 220 yen each way, making a round trip 440 yen.

That was expensive enough to eat through his allowance in no time at all, and Tobi had no intention of winding up broke and

unable to pay when he needed to. That was why he did his best to avoid spending money whenever he could. He'd never stopped by a hamburger or donut shop on the way back from school, and he did his best to avoid convenience stores, too, since they always had a way of tempting him to waste money.

Tobi never minded walking. He always had someone to talk to thanks to Baku, though only when no one was around to hear him. At the very least, he was never bored during his strolls.

"Well, *I* get bored, y'know?" Baku commented, almost as if he'd read Tobi's mind. "I'm just getting carried around the whole time."

"Would you rather I throw you?"

"Oh, don't even *think* about it, pal!"

"Are you sure? Flying might be more fun than you think."

"Okay. Look. Flying and getting thrown are two *very* different things! C'mon, Tobi, your name *means* 'to fly'! How do you not even know the word's definition? Let's look it up in the dictionary sometime soon, 'kay? Actually, let's look it up today! Trust me, you're not gonna find anything about throwing people in the definition for 'flying'!"

Tobi veered off into an alleyway, then immediately turned again onto the first street it crossed. He usually made a point of taking turns he couldn't remember having taken before, but in this case, he was mistaken—the road he found himself on was familiar. That wasn't too surprising, considering he'd been walking in the vicinity of his school for over a year now. There were probably very few streets left that he hadn't already been down.

Tobi's middle school was located in a district called Ourai, while the institute he lived in was one district over in a place called Asakawa. The name Asakawa meant "shallow river," which was appropriate, seeing as a shallow river really did run through the town. It was wide, but aside from the odd occasion when rainfall raised the water level, it was low enough to easily cross on foot if you felt like it.

"Okay, but seriously, Tobi—isn't that name a little basic? You've got a shallow river, so you name the place shallow river? Come *on*,

right?”

“What’s wrong with having a name that’s easy to understand?”

“It’s an aesthetic thing, y’know? It needs more *feeling*!”

Tobi’s backpack kept chattering away as he walked along the path by the riverbank. Nearby was another feature of Asakawa: a tent city that sat in the floodplain between the river and its bank. Although it was called a tent city, very few of the structures were the sort of tents used for camping. Most of the dwellings were small, makeshift shacks constructed from plastic sheets and salvaged materials.

The locals called this the Asakawa Den, and children were regularly cautioned to keep their distance from it. Tobi had been told to stay away repeatedly by the adults at his elementary school, his middle school, and the institute alike. They’d told him that it was dangerous there.

Tobi had never ventured into the Den itself, but every once in a while, he stood up on the river’s embankment and looked down into it. It had never struck him as a particularly scary place. Its inhabitants certainly weren’t well-off, and a few of them seemed somewhat out of sorts, but others appeared perfectly respectable.

Once, when Tobi broke curfew to walk around at night, he’d ended up in the Den’s vicinity and had witnessed some of its residents gathered around a fire they’d lit in an old oil drum. Tobi didn’t know the first thing about their lifestyle, but he could hear them chatting and laughing with one another. They’d seemed to be cooking something, and were eating, drinking, and making merry.

Tobi wasn’t very comfortable around people having a good time. Sitting at a distance and watching them suited him just fine, but he never felt the urge to approach them.

“Y’know, Tobi, you’re terrible at talking to people. You really gotta work on your social skills.”

“It’s not that I’m bad at it, really.”

“You can’t possibly be serious, right?”

“Being around people just sort of tires me out, that’s all.”

"Well, tiring or not, humans are social animals! You can't get by all alone forever. You just gotta learn to be more patient with folks."

"You actually sound reasonable for once…"

"Hey, even I can be reasonable when I feel like it! I'm one hell of an all-purpose backpack!"

"Well, you've sure got one hell of a mouth…"

The Asakawa River ran from north to south, and as Tobi turned his back to the setting sun, his gaze fell on a bridge that stretched across its waters. The road across the bridge was packed with cars, but the footpath that ran next to it was abandoned. Tobi stepped onto the bridge and immediately hopped up on the railing.

"Oh, for the— Again? Really…?" Baku sighed.

Tobi ignored him, of course. He could feel the breeze more clearly up there than he could on the footpath. Every once in a while, a particularly strong gust would make him sway, and each time, Baku would let out an exaggerated "whoooa!" in response.

"I'm not going to fall," Tobi commented.

"I dunno about that," Baku replied. "Don'cha know the meaning of 'complacency'?"

"Of course I do. I'm not being complacent, though."

"Come on—you're so used to stuff like this, you totally underestimate how dangerous it really is! There's nothing scarier than getting used to stuff, y'know? The people who get into accidents are always the ones who assume it'll never happen to them!"

"Why is a backpack like you so worried about being cautious…?"

"I dunno if I'd call myself *cautious*. I've just been a prudent sorta guy since the day I was born!"

"The day you were *born*…?"

"Got a problem with that?"

"Not really. I was just wondering how backpacks are born, that's all."

"Huh? Well, that one guy— Hmm…," Baku began before pausing and sinking into thought.

Tobi remembered "that one guy" very well—the tall, one-eyed man in the top hat who had set Baku down on the ground in front of him. But Baku himself didn't seem to remember much of anything that had happened before he started speaking.

Tobi came to a stop and turned to face the river. Then he sat on the railing, dangling his legs over the edge. It felt like gravity might pull his shoes right off his feet, sending them plunging into the river below.

"Hey, Tobi?" said Baku. "You know doing that here's gonna make people think you're about to jump off the bridge, right?"

"I'm not going to jump," said Tobi. "And even if I fell, there's a river down there, and I can swim."

"A *shallow* river, yeah. That's kinda right in the name, remember?"

"I'll be fine."

"Just be careful, okay?"

"Uh-huh." Toby nodded. Then, a moment later, he started rocking his body forward and backward.

"Oh, come *on*!" Baku yelped. "I literally *just* told you to be careful, didn't I?!"

"This isn't enough to make me fall."

"You listening to yourself, kid?! This is straight-up, textbook complacency right here!"

"I'm not being complacent about anything. I'm doing this on purpose."

"Oh! Great! It's on purpose! You're doing this 'cause you *feel* like it! Well, friggin' *stop*! Cut it the hell out!"

"I dunno. You're not making a very strong case…"

"I'm not kidding about this! You get that, right?! Enough! Quit messing around and let's just go home already!"

"Ugh…"

"Your curfew's coming up anyway, isn't it?"

"I guess, yeah."

"So what? Don't wanna go home?"

Tobi pretended he hadn't heard Baku's question, and Baku cackled.

"Just can't bring yourself to like that institute, can you?"

"It's whatever… I don't like or dislike it."

"Y'know, the other folks there might not take the biggest shine to it, either, but at least they all still call it home in the end. Not you, though. You just can't see it that way, no matter what. Right?"

Tobi kicked his legs in the air. He'd leaned quite far forward at some point without realizing it and found himself looking down at the water's surface. He didn't feel like sitting up straight. Or facing forward, or looking up, for that matter.

"…It's not that I have a problem with the institute. It's just—"

"Just?"

"I'm just not a good match."

"Oh? With what?"

"Other people."

"So basically, you're a misanthrope."

"It's not that I hate other people. I'm just not a good match with them. That's all I'm saying."

"What you are is a picky pain in the rear."

"Oh, shut up…"

"By the way, Tobi."

"Yeah?"

"Have you noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

"Her."

"Huh? Who?"

"Right over there!"

"Over *where*?"

Tobi looked up again, glancing around to either side of him. His gaze quickly fell on a girl standing barely a meter away—though she, of course, was behind the railing rather than on it, her feet firmly planted on the Asakawa bridge. She was wearing the uniform from

Tobi's middle school and had rather sharp facial features and long hair done up in a pair of buns.

"…Whaaat?" Tobi muttered. *What a weird coincidence.*

This wasn't the first time Tobi had found himself in this situation. In fact, it had happened earlier that very same day—a matter of minutes ago, even. Once again, he found himself being stared at by Ryuuko Shiratama. It wasn't a wide-eyed stare of astonishment but a very pointed, focused look that felt intended to bind its target in place. That target, of course, was Tobi.

A long time ago, when Tobi was younger, one of the institute's teachers had scolded him for not looking people in the eye when he spoke to them. Tobi had tried to obey, looking his teacher in the eye, but for some reason, the teacher had started avoiding *his* gaze, focusing instead on his nose or his mouth.

There was something about looking people directly in the eye that had always felt a little uncomfortable to Tobi. He'd read a book in the institute's collection once that said that cats hated it when humans made direct eye contact with them. Apparently, that sort of unreserved stare was generally taken as an expression of hostility.

Ryuuko Shiratama, however, didn't project hostility so much as curiosity. She seemed to be observing Tobi in the way you'd observe a strange, unidentifiable creature you happened to stumble across. It was like she wanted to conduct a detailed study of his behavior. That was the kind of stare she was giving him.

What's her deal? The first time was one thing, but how did she run into me again?

Was it just a coincidence? That wasn't too difficult to believe, but it was certainly odd. There was something peculiar about this girl—in fact, she was kind of scary.

Tobi felt the sudden urge to run away. If he hadn't been sitting on the bridge's railing, he very well might've bolted without sparing her a second look. *Actually*, he thought, *why not?* He could just run away. He could stand and sprint along the rail or jump back down to the bridge's walkway first, if he liked. If he wanted to get away, he

could be gone in the blink of an eye. But he stayed put. For some reason even Tobi didn't understand, he didn't move an inch. It was just like what he'd experienced back at the school gate. When he locked eyes with Shiratama, he found himself inexplicably unable to look away.

"Umm, so," Tobi began.

"Otogiri?" Shiratama said at the exact same instant.

"Yeah?" he replied reflexively. "…Wait, huh? What?"

"Do you know who I am?" Shiratama asked, still looking him straight in the eye. She hadn't blinked at all since the moment Tobi noticed her. He found himself incredibly curious about how she kept her eyes from drying out.

"I do, uh…basically," said Tobi. "You're Shiratama. From my class. Ryuuko Shiratama."

"Oh, so you noticed me after all?" she replied. At long last, she blinked—two, then three times in a row—before tilting her chin a touch upward, narrowing her eyes, and putting on a faint smile. "I'm glad. I was a little worried you weren't interested in other people at all."

"…I'm not, usually."

"Oh, really?" Shiratama asked, her eyes now widening with surprise as she pursed her lips. Her expressions changed so dramatically, it almost felt like Tobi was looking at a new Shiratama each time—and yet she remained herself throughout. "Then why do you know my name?"

"Well… I mean, it's kind of weird, right?" Tobi admitted.

"People say that to me all the time! Ryuuko and Shiratama are a strange combination, after all. I think Tobi Otogiri is just as rare, though. Maybe even rarer!"

"I…guess so. Anyway—"

"Heeey, Tobi!" Baku chimed in with a snicker. "Speaking of rarities, when was the last time you chatted with a friend from school? Now *that's* an unusual sight!"

She's not my friend, Tobi almost replied. But he knew that Baku was going out of his way to rile him up, and he couldn't exactly tell his backpack to shut up in front of Shiratama.

"I guess my name isn't super common either, when you…," Tobi began, but before he could finish the thought, he noticed something strange and trailed off. Shiratama wasn't looking at him. She was looking *toward* him, but he could tell he wasn't the subject of her interest.

Instead, her gaze was fixed on the backpack slung over his shoulder. Shiratama was looking straight at Baku.

"…What's wrong, Tobi?" Baku asked. He sounded a little puzzled.

Tobi didn't reply; he just pulled on Baku's strap, drawing him closer to his body. "It's…not that common, when you think about it… I mean… Huh? What? What're you…looking at…?"

Shiratama didn't reply. She just stood there, staring straight at Baku.

"Wha—?!" Baku yelped. He'd finally started losing his composure, too. "Wh-what's with this girl? Sh-she couldn't know about me, right…?"

"To be honest," Shiratama piped up. Her gaze never strayed from Baku for a moment. "I wanted to talk with you, Otogiri. That's why I decided to ambush you."





"To…*ambush* me?" Tobi repeated. He didn't understand what she was talking about for a moment, but it didn't take him long to put the pieces together. "Oh… You mean back at the school gate?"

"That's right," Shiratama confirmed without even glancing at Tobi. "But then Mr. Haizaki got mad and you ran off, so I had to chase you."

"…Mr. Haizaki?"

"Our school's janitor."

"Oh. So that's his name. Haizaki…"

"Mr. Haizaki's a very friendly man. He never fails to greet anyone he passes, and he's easy to chat with."

"Huh…"

Frankly, Tobi didn't care. He wasn't interested in the janitor's name or his personality at all. He was, however, very curious about why Shiratama had decided to wait around and ambush him, and why she'd bothered chasing after him when she failed. What could she want to discuss with him? And why was she still staring at Baku? That made Tobi more curious than anything else.

"So, uh…Shiratama…did you, um…need something from me?" Tobi asked.

"Well, I wouldn't have tried to ambush you and then chased you all the way out here if I didn't, now, would I?" said Shiratama. At long last, she looked at Tobi instead of Baku and flashed a smile.

Tobi looked down. He'd hung his head reflexively, despite having no reason to. He looked up slightly and stole a glance at Shiratama.

"I wanted to talk to you about *that*," she said, lifting a hand to point in his direction. "Your backpack."

"…Huh? Baku—" Tobi grunted, then cut himself off.

"'Baku'?" Shiratama repeated, cocking her head. "It *is* a backpack, isn't it? Though I suppose you might call it a duffel bag, technically."

"Uh… I—I mean, I wouldn't know," Tobi stammered.

Tobi had chosen Baku's name purely because it sounded like the "back" in "backpack" to him. That conversation had happened a long

time ago, and he didn't remember the details very clearly, but he vaguely recalled asking Baku "What are you supposed to be?" and receiving "I'm a backpack" in response. It might've been "I'm the best backpack you've ever seen," actually. The point was, Tobi had found "backpack" to be a little long and hard to say when he was little, and he'd shortened it to "Baku" as a matter of convenience.

"…Anyway," said Tobi, "what about Ba—about my…my backpack? My, uhhh, duffel…duffel bag…? What about my bag…?"

"You talk to it all the time, don't you?"

"I wha—?!" Tobi yelped, very nearly falling right off the bridge. "T-to my bag? Me? Y-you think I talk to it? Wh-why would I do that? It's not like bags, umm…t-talk back, or anything…"

"Are you good at ventriloquism, Otogiri?" Shiratama asked, slamming him with a question straight out of left field.

"'Ventriloquism'…?" Tobi repeated. For a moment, he considered just saying yes and attempting to put on a show for her.

Wait. No. That wouldn't work. I'd have to be stupid. I've never tried ventriloquism before, so how do I expect that to help? There's no way I could pull it off, and no good reason for me to try either.

"…No, I'm not," Tobi admitted. "I've never even done it before."

"Okay—so in that case, who is making the other voice you're always speaking with?"

"The other…voice…?"

"Hey, Tobiii…?" Baku whispered into Tobi's ear. "It's kiiinda looking like she can hear me…? We're busted—she knows!"

"Yes, that's the voice," Shiratama said with a nod. "And that's right, I do know."

Seriously? Tobi thought.

"…Seriously?" he muttered out loud a moment later.

Shiratama stood tall and proud. A smile brighter and lovelier than the most beautiful flower bloomed on her remarkably pretty face.

"Quite seriously," she said.

Tobi lay on his bed, flipping through a pocket-size paperback. The book was a science fiction novel called *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* translated into Japanese. Tobi wasn't totally sure where it was from originally. Probably America or someplace like that.

He'd found the book on a three-tiered metal shelf set up in the institute's rec room. The shelf was filled with books donated by former residents, and current occupants were allowed to borrow them freely. The sort of books that would interest middle schoolers were always fought over, though, so Tobi usually spent his time reading the unpopular ones.

He *was* reading the book, just like he'd read all the others. He even stopped from time to time to look up words he wasn't familiar with, and his vocabulary had expanded quite a bit as a result. But for some reason, none of the books' stories ever seemed to stick with him. Not long after finishing them, he'd forget most of what had happened.

Tobi checked his watch. It was 9:56 PM, and since the institute expected its middle schoolers to have their lights off by ten, he only had four minutes before he was supposed to turn in. It wasn't hard to get permission to stay up later; all you had to do was claim you wanted some extra time to study. A lot of the institute's kids did so on a regular basis, but Tobi never bothered.

"You all tuckered out, Tobi?" Baku asked with a snicker. He was lying on the ground near the bed.

"What do you mean, 'tuckered out'? I'm not a kid," Tobi replied as he set his book down by his bedside.

Tobi's room was intended to be shared and had been furnished with a bunk bed. At the moment, however, Tobi was its only inhabitant. He hadn't asked for a room of his own, and he'd shared a room with other residents in the past. Each time, however, his roommate eventually got fed up and asked to be moved. Apparently, sharing a room with Tobi Otogiri was just too much for them.

"You think? 'Cause the way I see it, eighth graders are about as kiddie as kids can get!"

Tobi slid off his bed and lightly stepped on Baku.

"Ow! Cut it out, jerkwad!"

"You're younger than me, aren't you?" said Tobi. "That means you're more of a kid than I am."

"I'm an exception! A real special case, y'know? Totally different league. Exceptional, even! Wha—? Hey, get offa me, Tobi! You're gonna smush me all outta shape! What's the big idea?! Hey, c'mon!"

Eventually, Tobi had his fill of bullying his bag and took his foot off Baku. He shut off his room's light, then climbed back into bed and laid down.

The high schoolers at the institute were allowed to stay up until eleven, and some residents were up until midnight in the name of finishing homework or furthering their studies. That, added to the thin walls and doors, meant nighttime there was far from quiet.

Tobi wrapped himself up in his blanket and rolled over onto his side as he tried to fall asleep.

"You thinking about that girl, Tobi?" asked Baku.

"Nope," Tobi replied, resisting the urge to click his tongue. "She hadn't crossed my mind at all until you mentioned her just now."

"Oh, reeeally? Not sure I buy that!"

"Quite seriously," Tobi replied.

The fact that those were the first words to spring into his mind was pure coincidence. It was definitely *not* because he'd been thinking about his conversation with the girl.

"…I really wasn't," Tobi said, a little too late.

Baku snickered. "She was one weird chick, huh?"

"Don't call her a 'chick.'"

"What? That's what she is, right?"

"I guess, but still…"

"Yeah, you were totally thinking about her. And I mean, after everything that happened? 'Course you were! Who wouldn't be curious?"

"Me. It didn't bother me at all."

"You've *gotta* quit holding back about this stuff, Tobi. And besides, even if you're not curious about her, *she* sure as hell—"

"I'm trying to sleep. Think I could get some peace and quiet?"

"Yeah, you got it. I just hope you're able to get some rest, despite all the excitement."

Tobi closed his eyes and slowed his breathing, feigning a faint snore. Baku laughed again. *Mind your own business*, Tobi thought. He'd never had trouble sleeping before. The moment his head touched his pillow, he would be out like a light. He would most certainly *not* be kept up by thoughts of that girl. He had no interest in her whatsoever…which was why it was so frustrating that he couldn't stop thinking about her.

"To be perfectly frank, Otogiri, I'd like to use this chance to ask you for a favor." Ryuuko Shiratama had raised her chin slightly, speaking in an oddly formal tone. "I'd like to be friends. Would you be interested in starting a relationship with me?"

"…Huh?"

For a moment, Tobi hadn't even understood her question. In fact, he wasn't sure if it *was* a question at all. It hadn't sounded like one. In any case, Shiratama was waiting for an answer. That, at least, was obvious.

Tobi, however, had no clue how to reply. He was so confused that all he could do was hem and haw. In the end, he didn't manage to spit out a single coherent word.

"Ah!" Shiratama exclaimed after a moment, raising a hand to her mouth. "I'm so sorry! It must be bewildering, hearing a question like that out of nowhere. I don't mind at all if you need some time to give me an answer."

"Right…," said Tobi. "Okay, then."

"Though of course, an immediate answer would be just fine as well!"

"Y-yeah, uh… I dunno about that…"

"Sometime later, then?"

"…I guess?"

"Understood," said Shiratama. She closed her eyes and sighed. "I'm glad I managed to ask you. I was so nervous."

Tobi's heart was pounding as well. You'd think Shiratama had just given him the third degree, judging by the irrational anxiety he felt.

"Okay, then—I'll see you tomorrow, Otogiri," she concluded. It seemed she'd said everything she'd wanted to, and she politely excused herself and went on her way.

What on earth is her deal? Tobi wondered.

At the same moment, Baku muttered, "What the hell was that about…?"

In the end, Tobi barely slept at all that night. Needless to say, Ryuuko Shiratama was to blame. She'd approached him out of the blue, and her proposal had been even more bewildering.

I'd like to be friends. Would you be interested in starting a relationship with me?

The question had caught Tobi so off guard, it had left him in a state of baffled inaction. That was the only reason he hadn't managed to give her a response on the spot—or at least, that was how he saw it. It was like if a complete stranger asked to dance with you out of nowhere: Obviously, the answer was no. A firm, clear refusal was the only option.

I should've turned her down. I should've said "no thanks" and left it at that.

Tobi had simply been too confused to refuse her request in the moment. Her peculiar word choice hadn't helped, either.

The start of her question—*I'd like to be friends*—was normal enough. The problem was what had come after it: *Would you be interested in starting a relationship with me?*

Wasn't there something strange about that phrasing? Or maybe Tobi was strange for *thinking* it was strange. Maybe he was just overthinking it. If she'd only said the second half of her request—*Would you be interested in starting a relationship with me?*—then it would've been clear that she meant "a relationship" in a very special, particular sort of way. He couldn't just disregard the first half of what she'd said, though. Shiratama had very clearly opened with "I'd like to be friends." Didn't it make far more sense to take her word for it and interpret the whole question in that light?

In short: Shiratama had meant, very simply, that she wanted to be friends with Tobi. She just spoke in a strangely formal and roundabout manner, even with her classmates, and had an odd way with words. Tobi made a mental note not to let himself get led offtrack by that again. She just wanted to be friends—but that, of course, was a problem in its own right.

Friends? With me? Why?

And that was ignoring the other, much more important problem: Ryuuko Shiratama could hear Baku's voice.

In the end, Tobi was forced to head to school in a state of sleep deprivation. When he arrived, the teacher in the black-rimmed glasses was waiting by the gate, scowling openly at him. The man's suit was always perfectly pressed.

On that particular morning, Tobi wasn't feeling up to the bespectacled teacher's usual callout, so he decided to take the initiative and give him a nod as he passed by, throwing in a "good morning," for good measure.

"…Y-yes, good morning," the man replied. He was clearly a little let down about not getting the fight he'd been preparing himself for.

That teacher and Tobi had quarreled almost every morning since Tobi started middle school, but all it took was a simple greeting to make the problem go away. It couldn't have been easier. Maybe this would've been the right choice from the start.

"Okay, where'd *that* come from?" Baku asked as Tobi changed into his indoor shoes.

"Who knows?" Tobi replied. "Probably nowhere in particular."

"Guess this is what people call a change of heart! Gotta wonder what brought it about, huh?"

"You're blowing things out of proportion…"

Tobi's indoor shoes felt a little tight. His feet had probably grown since he bought them. The more his body grew, the less well his clothes fit, but buying new ones to replace them would be expensive.

The thought of his diminishing budget weighed on Tobi as he started toward his classroom. But just then, a long-haired girl poked her head out from behind the shoe cubbies, startling Tobi so much he staggered back a step.

"…Sh-Shiratama," he managed.

"Good morning, Otogiri!" the girl replied. She was giving him that look again—the same perfectly straightforward, focused stare.

"…Wh-what?" Tobi asked, hanging his head and raising an arm to partially cover his face. "Do you need something? It's still so early…"

"Actually, I was waiting here to ambush you," said Shiratama.

"Huh…? Wh-why?"

"Don't you remember what I said yesterday?"

"…Oh."

"So I wanted to hear your response!"

"That…"

"That?"

"That's, well…"

The phrase "bug-eyed astonishment" suddenly sprang into Tobi's head. He'd looked it up once and had learned that the phrase was meant to evoke an image of eyes bulging in surprise, rather than the compound eyes of an actual insect. Tobi thought his eyes were probably bulging now more than they'd ever bulged before. He found himself glancing around the school's entryway so quickly, he almost made himself dizzy.

A few other students from Tobi's class had arrived at the shoe cubbies and were whispering to one another as they changed footwear. They seemed to be watching Shiratama and Tobi—appraising their interaction. Tobi figured they were saying something along the lines of *What's going on with them? What're they doing?* and he had to agree. He, too, would like to know what on earth he and Shiratama were up to.

"Oh, hey," the school's janitor called out as he happened to pass by, further complicating the situation. Things were rapidly approaching a state of full-blown chaos. "Morning, Otogiri. And what're you doing over there, Shiratama?"

"Mr. Haizaki!" Shiratama turned around to look at him, then offered him a polite bow. "Good morning! I see you're hard at work bright and early again today."

"Sure am, thanks," Haizaki said with a bashful chuckle. He was carrying a cardboard box. Tobi didn't know what was in it, and he didn't care, either—unlike Shiratama, apparently.

"That looks heavy!" she said. "Would you like some help with it?"

"What? Oh, nah, I couldn't!" Haizaki replied with a shake of his head, his usual squint vanishing as his eyes widened. "Seriously, don't worry about it. This is my job, after all. I'm here to work, and you're here to study! That's how it goes."

"Are you sure? You should know I'm quite the heavy lifter!"

Shiratama raised an arm and flexed it at Haizaki. It was slender—shockingly so. Could someone with arms like that really be much help? Tobi certainly didn't think so, and to him, this conversation was making less and less sense. Even if Shiratama *did* have superhuman

strength, it didn't really matter. Carrying stuff was part of Haizaki's job, and a middle schooler like her had no obligation to help him with his work. Haizaki had just said so himself. Even Tobi—someone who, as Baku regularly pointed out, had a lot of work to do on his social skills—could tell that much.

It was becoming clearer and clearer that Ryuuko Shiratama was, potentially, a bit of a freak. Tobi had already begun to suspect as much the night before. After all, what sane middle schooler would go out of their way to try and make friends with someone like *him*? Tobi knew perfectly well that he wasn't an immediately likable person. He was gloomy, blunt, unenthusiastic, and had a background that was rather difficult to explain. Not to mention he was always hanging out with Baku, whose voice no one else could hear.

Then there was the fact that Tobi could see things that other people couldn't. How would he feel if someone else made that claim to him? He'd probably think they were a lunatic—and most likely, Tobi looked like a lunatic to everyone else.

The fact that Shiratama was interested in making friends with a freak like him was proof that she was quite the freak herself.

The urge to make a break for it was starting to well up in Tobi. He wanted to flee—badly. Wasn't now, while Shiratama and Haizaki were talking, his best chance at a clean escape?

Yeah. It is. I should run while I can.

Tobi turned around and did his best to sneak away, trying to muffle the sound of his footsteps. But Shiratama caught him instantly.

"Ah!" She reached out and grabbed him around the wrist. "No, wait! Don't go, Otogiri! At least give me an answer first."

"…Hmm?" Haizaki grunted, his face twitching awkwardly. "Did I, y'know, interrupt something? My bad! I'll be going now. Wouldn't wanna get kicked by a horse, and all that…"

A horse? What? What does a horse have to do with this? Tobi wondered. Thinking back, he remembered reading something to that effect in a book once—an old poem that went something like

"Anyone who meddles in another's love affairs should get bitten by a dog and die." The book had explained that some people misquoted the poem, turning the part about being bitten by a dog into getting kicked by a horse.

Haizaki had clearly misunderstood what was going on. Tobi knew he ought to correct the janitor, but he also didn't care. He had bigger problems to deal with—specifically Shiratama, who was still holding him by the arm.

Maybe let me go, thanks? Tobi thought, giving her a pleading glance that didn't seem to get through. Shiratama just cocked her head, looking a little confused. That struck Tobi as ironic, considering she was far and away the most confusing part of this scenario. *I guess I don't have a choice.*

Tobi gently shook his hand free of Shiratama's, taking care not to be too rough about it. "So, umm… Can we, uhhh, talk about all that while we walk or something…?" he muttered timidly.

Shiratama nodded.

I bet I could lose her if I sprinted away right now, Tobi thought, but he gave up on the idea just as quickly and simply started walking. Shiratama followed along, strolling just to his left.

"So I'd like your answer now," she said.

"…Already?" Tobi replied. "Wasn't that kind of quick?"

"Are you still thinking it through?"

"Hmm… I mean, I guess you could say that, sorta…"

"Seriously, are you allergic to saying things straight-out or something?" Baku sighed.

"So is he always like this?" asked Shiratama.

"He just never got into the habit of putting his thoughts and feelings into words is all," Baku replied. "I mean, he barely talks to anyone in the first place."

"But what about you?"

"Me? Oh, I don't count. But he does it to me, too, sometimes. Expects me to read his mind or something."

"So he expects you to be on the same page as him, all the time?"

"Yeah, that's about the size of it."

"…Look," Tobi said as he tapped his fist against his forehead. He was starting to feel a headache coming on. "Could you stop just… *talking* to him like that? If anyone sees this, it's going to look like you muttering randomly to yourself, you know…?"

"Oh! I'm sorry—I wasn't thinking," Shiratama quickly apologized. "But then again, won't they just assume I'm speaking with you? Or maybe speaking *at* you, considering."

"That's weird, too…"

"In that case, please try talking to me! That would solve everything."

"…What's it look like I'm doing right now?"

"By the way, are you ready to give me your answer yet?"

"I said you were asking too soon…"

Tobi could feel himself losing the mental battle. The other students in the hall seemed to be focusing their gazes on him.

"Anyway…"

No—they were *definitely* focused on him. He was the center of attention, and it was all Shiratama's fault. Obviously.

"Why?" Tobi finally asked.

Shiratama blinked. "Why what?"

"…Why do you want to be friends with me? What possible reason could you have? What's your motive?"

"Well, I want to make friends with you because you're you, Otogiri."

"Huh? What does *that* mean…?"

"Are you genuinely asking for an explanation?"

"That'd be nice. Try to explain it in a way that actually makes sense…"

"A way that makes sense? All right," Shiratama said with a nod. She stopped walking and furrowed her brow as she thought through her task.

At that point, the two of them were halfway up a staircase. Tobi had stopped one step above her, and now he found her staring up at

him. She was giving him that look again—the one that seemed to bind him in place and refuse to let go.

"May I have a moment of your time later today?" she asked. "Maybe during lunch break, if you don't mind. I'm afraid I can't explain myself fully unless we're somewhere other people won't be around to hear."

Tobi didn't like that look. He hated how he couldn't ignore it, how it made it impossible to turn away from her.

"…Fine. Works for me," he said. It was the only reply he could come up with.

Seriously, what do I do about this?

Lunch had just ended, and the special-use classroom wing of the school was abandoned. Tobi had arranged to meet Shiratama there, on the stairs of the emergency fire escape. He was sitting on the handrail of the landing between the second and third floors when Shiratama stepped out of the building and started climbing up toward him.

Something about her struck Tobi as odd: She was carrying a bag slung over her shoulder. It wasn't one of the school's designated bags, either. It was more of a fashionable pouch—quite a bit smaller than the school ones.

"Good day to you!" Shiratama said, politely greeting Tobi as she reached the landing.

"Hey," Tobi grunted in reply. He was still a little bewildered by her consistent formality. "So, right. What's your, uh…what was it…? Your motive," asked Tobi. "Why do you want to be friends with me, Shiratama?"

"Well," she began, "you know what they say: The proof of the pudding is in the eating!"

"…Uh, I guess? Think I've heard that somewhere."

"So I decided to bring her with me!"

"'Her'…?" Tobi repeated, furrowing his brow. As far as he could tell, Shiratama was alone. He didn't see anyone with her.

She lifted up her pouch and opened the zipper. "Come on out, Chinurasha!"

Is she talking to her pouch? Tobi wondered. If so, then calling her behavior odd would be putting it lightly. Tobi already thought she was a weirdo, but this was on another level. He was actually starting to worry about her. She seemed troubled, in more ways than one.

Of course, it was possible Shiratama was carrying some sort of small animal around with her. But that would be pretty ridiculous on its own—you didn't just bring animals to school with you. Even Tobi knew that much. That was why he was so surprised when it turned out he was right—some sort of creature was crawling out of Shiratama's pouch.

"Wha…?" Baku quietly gasped.

Well, I guess I called it. A tiny animal.

Considering its size, the creature couldn't possibly have been comfortable in Shiratama's pouch. It would've had to really squeeze itself to get in there at all. On the other hand, it looked awfully fluffy—maybe it was one of those animals that could fit into surprisingly tight spaces.

What is that, a cat? Or a kitten, maybe? No, probably not. In fact, definitely *not.*

Whatever it was, it had horns. Cats did not have horns, obviously.

A small animal with a pair of horns…? What would that be? Are those even a thing?

Tobi had once looked through an animal encyclopedia in the institute's collection, and he couldn't remember seeing any creature like this. He'd also gone on trips to the local zoo for institute events a number of times and had never seen anything with horns that was also so small. Then again, the world was vast, and Tobi had only seen the tiniest fraction of it. For all he knew, such animals could very well exist somewhere out there. Or maybe it was a perfectly normal horned beast and was only small because it was young.

The creature crawled out of Shiratama's pouch and climbed up her side. It wasn't exactly nimble, but it didn't look unsteady either—it seemed used to the motion. It stopped once it reached her shoulder, then turned toward Tobi. Looking closer, Tobi couldn't tell if it had eyes or not—if it did, they were buried beneath a thick layer of fluff—but one way or another, he felt like it was staring at him.

"Say hello, Chinu," said Shiratama.

The creature tilted its head to the side in response; perhaps it was an attempt at a nod that ended up more diagonal than vertical. A moment later, it let out a series of small, chirping squeaks from somewhere within its mass of fluff. The cry sounded something like *Yuu! Uyuu! Kuchuu!* to Tobi.

"…Hello," Tobi replied, bowing reflexively.

Shiratama reached up to scratch the creature—Chinu, or Chinurasha, or whatever it was called—under its chin with her finger. "Good girl!" she said.

"Hey, Tobi," Baku whispered. "Don't tell me you haven't noticed."

"…Huh? Noticed what?"

"That thing's not normal, that's what!"

"Well… It's probably a rare species, yeah. I mean, look at those horns."

"Not like *that*!" Baku snapped. He seemed weirdly on edge.

Aside from the fact that he could talk with Tobi, Baku was, on the whole, just a large backpack. When he got worked up, he sometimes opened on his own, though. He didn't undo his own zipper, precisely. It was more like his zipper portion opened up like a mouth—though, of course, Tobi was the only one able to see it. He was seeing it right then, in fact.

"Don't you get it, Tobi?! God*damn*, you're as dense as lead sometimes!" Baku shouted, his mouth flapping with every word. Tobi had thought he was mad at first, but now, he seemed more shaken.

"This is Chinu," Shiratama said, tilting her head to rub her cheek against the creature's side. "Only I can see her."

"…But wait…"

I see her, too, Tobi thought. There she was in front of him, as clear as day.

Chinu seemed very attached to Shiratama. She rubbed her head against the girl's cheek in turn and seemed to be enjoying the affection. Tobi could hear a low, whistling sort of purring noise coming from her. Her horns were bumping up against Shiratama, but it didn't seem to be hurting her—or at least, if it was, Shiratama was doing a good job of not letting it show. Then again, it didn't seem like Chinu's horns were rigid or sharp enough to seriously injure anyone.

"It's like *me*!" Baku practically spat. He seemed almost reluctant—like he was having trouble coming to grips with what he'd realized. "You're the only one who could ever hear my voice, Tobi—and *she's* the only one who could ever see Chinurasha. I'm not saying we're exactly the same, but you've gotta see the similarity, right?!"

"…And Shiratama can hear you, and I can see Chinu."

"Ayup. You got it."

"Hmm." Tobi grunted, furrowing his brow. He tapped his forehead with his fist again. "So then…what does that mean? Huh…? What should I take from all this?"

"To be frank? I haven't the foggiest idea," Shiratama casually replied. "I noticed you speaking with your friend, cute little Baku, quite some time ago. I could hear him, too, which made it quite easy! It seems I'm the only one able to, though—or rather, the two of us are the only ones who can hear his voice. I firmly believe that's something very special!"

"…'Special'?" Tobi muttered before listlessly shaking his head. "I'd say it's more abnormal than anything…"

"You mean to say that the two of us are abnormal?"

"I mean…it's a lot harder to believe that we're the only sane ones out there, right…?"

"Oh no you don't— Hold up a second, Ryuuko Shiratama!" Baku cut in indignantly. "What the hell did you just call me?! Stop it!"

Shiratama stared at Baku blankly. "You mean 'cute little Baku'?"

"Yeah, that! Creeps me the hell out. It's just *wrong*! Not to mention gross!"

"I'm so sorry," Shiratama said, her brow furrowed with regret. She gave Baku an apologetic bow, which Chinu mimicked from up on her shoulder.

Well, that was cute, Tobi thought, only to freeze a second later, aghast that such a notion would ever cross his mind. As a side note, the only one he'd found cute—even for a split second—was Chinu. Specifically, the fact that Chinu had made the same gesture as Shiratama. It was the action that was cute, and nothing else.

"Would you prefer Mr. Baku, then?" Shiratama asked.

"*Ahem!*" Baku cleared his throat. "Nah, I'm not into all that 'mister' crap, either. I'll tell you what—I wouldn't do this for just anyone, but you have my special permission to call me Baku, okay?"

"Why are you acting so stuck-up…?" Tobi grumbled, resisting the urge to throw Baku as far as he could.

"Whaddaya mean, 'stuck-up'? I'm literally giving her permission to be on a first-name basis with me! It's downright humble, is what it is! Right, Ryuuko Shiratama?"

Shiratama nodded, as did Chinu. "I'll happily call you Baku, then!" she said.

"Great! That's the ticket. Seriously, I can't stand all that stuffy formality junk."

"You can feel free to call me Ryuuko, too, if you'd like," Shiratama added.

"I mean, yeah, that just follows! Then again, a nickname might suit you well. Like, I dunno— How 'bout Oryuu? Actually, that's not bad at all! Whaddaya think?"

"I wouldn't mind! You can call me whatever you'd like."

"That settles it! Oryuu it is! You cool with that, Oryuu?"

"Of course!"

"…You're really hitting it off with her, huh?" Tobi muttered. *Maybe instead of throwing him away, I should just give him to her.*

"Oooh? What's this? Is widdle Tobi *jealous*?" Baku asked with a cackle. "No worries there. Just 'cause Oryuu's around now doesn't mean anything's gonna change between the two of us!"

"You mean…how we're stuck with each other?"

"Hey, I said to find a nicer way to phrase that!"

"Well, how would *you* put it…?"

"I wouldn't! What we've got is too special to put into words. If I really had to try, though, I guess 'partners' would do the trick?"

"Oh! Chinurasha and I are more or less partners, too! Aren't we?" Shiratama chimed in with a smile, glancing over at Chinu as she spoke. "She can't talk like you, Baku, but she's always there for me. We've been together for as long as I've known her!"

"…I have to ask," said Tobi. "What if it had turned out I couldn't see Chinu? What were you planning to do then?"

"Oh! Well…," Shiratama began, pursing her lips into a slightly awkward frown. "I'm sure it would have been extremely uncomfortable for both of us. I would have looked like a pitiful, delusional middle school girl pretending to hold an animal that didn't exist…"

"Good thing I can see her, then," Tobi replied.

"If I may be frank, this really was a gamble on my part. Still, I had the distinct feeling that you would be able to see her."

"So it turned out all right in the end, eh?" Baku commented. He seemed quite carefree about the whole situation. Tobi, in contrast, knew that if he'd been in Shiratama's position, he almost certainly wouldn't have taken that bet.

Tobi had lost count of how many times he'd considered the possibility that he was simply insane. Being able to talk to your backpack wasn't normal, no matter how far you strained the definition of the word. He heard things that other people couldn't—saw things that weren't there. Was he delusional? Was something wrong with his brain? Or did he have some sort of psychological illness? Maybe he should've taken all this to a doctor a long time

ago. He'd genuinely considered it. That was how much he'd brooded over the situation.

A sense of exhaustion washed over Tobi. He felt like he might fall right off the railing he was sitting on. Where was this sudden lethargy coming from? The truth was he had a pretty good idea: It was because he finally knew that it wasn't just him. It *hadn't* all been delusions. That had come as a huge relief.

Baku was real. He wasn't something Tobi dreamed up—he genuinely existed.

"…You can hear Baku, just like I can, and I can see Chinu, just like you can," said Tobi. "We both perceive things that other people can't."

So then—what about the others?

Tobi paused, then resolved himself to ask.

"Does that mean…you see the rest of them, too? The weird *things* that seem to follow some people around…?"

Shiratama looked Tobi in the eye, taking care to firmly match his gaze. Then she slowly nodded.

Tobi's desk was on the window side of the classroom, three seats back from the front, while Chiami Kon, a girl in his class, sat two seats in front and one to the right of him. That put her in the front row, and she made the most of that position, listening attentively to all the teachers and taking scrupulous notes on their lessons.

Tobi didn't know much about Kon, but he had the vague impression she was a serious, studious girl. She never seemed to be alone, either—whenever she did anything, a few other students always joined her. What's more, she had a creature that resembled a mix between a bat and a flying squirrel clinging to her back at all times.

"…We noticed those ages ago, though," said Baku, who Tobi had hung somewhat precariously from his desk. Baku was speaking in a whisper for some reason. Maybe he was trying to be more careful. "They're not like Chinu, though, are they? They just stick to people, and that's it. Never tried to do anything to us, either. Just a buncha weird little *things* that normal people can't see."

Baku was right, and while he'd described them as weird, he didn't mean that they were rare. They weren't all over the place, but neither were they scarce. They could be found at school, out in the city, and even at the institute where Tobi lived. That was why seeing some weird *thing* out and about didn't surprise him anymore. He'd probably be startled if he ran into a particularly big one, or a swarm of them. But otherwise, his usual reaction was a simple *Oh, look, another one.*

Tobi wasn't any more surprised by the *thing* he'd noticed behind and to his right than he was about Kon's—but he *was* a little curious.

He turned his head just enough to see it out of the corner of his eye, trying not to be too obvious.

A boy from Tobi's class was sitting back there, gesturing enthusiastically as he chatted with another boy beside him. His name was Shuuji Masaki, though Tobi vaguely recalled him going by "Masamune" instead—a nickname taken from the reading of the first characters of his surname and given name put together.

Masamune was loud, hyperactive, and always seemed to be cracking jokes and making people laugh. Tobi remembered him getting up in front of the blackboard with another student at one point and putting on a full-blown comedy skit, which had thrown the rest of the class into hysterics. The fact that Tobi remembered it at all was proof of how much of an impression it had made. All things considered, Masamune stood out more than most of their classmates.

He kept his hair cut short and carefully styled at all times. He even groomed his eyebrows, which gave Tobi the impression that he was very fussy about his appearance. And that perfectly set hairstyle was host to a small, monkey-like creature that was always sitting on Masamune's head.

It looked like a smaller, nocturnal species of primate, and was about the same size as a tarsier. It was actually something quite different, of course. Tarsiers, after all, were covered in fur. This creature had none—but it didn't have humanlike skin, either. Instead, it had what appeared to be reptilian scales, or maybe tree bark. It was segmented into long, slender vertical strips, like on a cedar tree.

The creature's arms and legs were very monkey-like, and it was currently covering its mouth with its hands. Tobi wondered if that was just a momentary pose, or if it stayed that way all the time. Regardless, it brought to mind one of the three wise monkey carvings at the Toshogu shrine in Nikko—specifically, the speak-no-evil monkey.

From what Tobi had observed so far, those two—Chiami Kon and Shuuji Masaki, aka Masamune—were the only students in Class 2-3 with weird *things* attached to them. And that seemed to be a fairly representative ratio. So far, he'd found about one or two people in each class with them. Of course, when you added Ryuuko Shiratama into the equation, things seemed a little less balanced. Plus, as Shiratama had informed him earlier during their discussion on the fire escape, there was apparently another member of Tobi's class with a *thing* whom he hadn't yet noticed.

He glanced farther back, his gaze falling on the middle seat of the very last row. That seat was unoccupied today, which was typical. It was always empty. In fact, Tobi hadn't ever seen anyone sit there.

According to Shiratama, the back middle desk was assigned to a girl whose surname was Shizukudani. Shizukudani, however, had stopped coming to school partway through her first year. She'd eventually returned, only to become a permanent resident of the school's infirmary. She stayed there even after moving up to the eighth grade, and to date, she hadn't shown her face in the classroom once.

Shiratama had been in the same class as Shizukudani during their first year—hence why she knew all this. And according to Shiratama, Shizukudani had one of the weird *things* attached to her as well.

"That makes four, huh?" Baku muttered.

Tobi glanced over at the third desk from the front on the hallway side of the classroom, where Shiratama was sitting. She was looking right at him. The teacher was writing on the blackboard, and the classroom was quiet, so she'd probably heard Baku's voice just as well as Tobi had.

"That's a hell of a lot of 'em, for sure. And wait—if you count you and me, too, that makes *five*! There's thirty-six people in all, and five out of thirty-six is, what, 'bout a seventh or so? Yup. That's a lot, all right…"

Tobi seriously considered giving Baku a kick. The fact that nobody else could hear him didn't mean that Tobi was fine with him

blathering on and on all the time.

Oh— And I guess that's not even true. Shiratama can hear him, too. That's right.

This wasn't the first time Baku had spoken during class. Tobi had to ignore him no matter what he said, and Baku liked to use the opportunity to play stupid pranks on him. Childish mischief seemed to be his way of passing the time. And, as it turned out, Tobi hadn't been his only victim. Shiratama had heard all of Baku's nonsense as well. *All* of it.

Just then, Shiratama gave Tobi a little wave. It almost felt like she was telling him *That's right! I heard it all!* Tobi very nearly waved back, just barely stopping himself at the last second. Instead, he turned to face the front of the classroom and rested his chin in his hand.

Waving at her? No way. That'd be totally embarrassing.

Tobi couldn't believe he'd almost gone through with it and was deeply thankful that he'd been able to stop before it was too late.

The moment Tobi's last class ended, he quickly shouldered Baku and cleaned up his desk. He always made a point of leaving as quickly as he could and was about to do just that. But this time, Shiratama stopped him before he could make it out of the classroom.

"Ah, Otogiri!" she called out.

"…What?" Tobi reluctantly replied.

"There are still a few more things I'd like to speak with you about. Do you have plans after school?"

"No… I guess not. I mean, not really…"

"In that case, I'm sorry to impose, but would you mind waiting for me for just a moment? I have cleaning duty today."

"…I'll wait at the entrance."

"Understood! I'll be as quick as possible."

Some of Tobi's classmates were giving him and Shiratama odd looks, Chiami Kon and Shuuji Masaki among them. She and Tobi

were just talking, though. Was it really all that odd?

Yeah, it is. It's odd, all right.

Even Tobi himself found it strange—or maybe "out of place" would be the better phrase. Somehow, in some way, something about it just felt off, *really* off. He felt awkward, and if he had the choice, he'd rather be just about anywhere else.

"…Later, then," Tobi said quickly, before fleeing the classroom.

He raced through the hallways, walking with as broad a stride as he could manage, then leaped down the stairs at a reckless clip and changed into his outdoor shoes at much the same pace. Finally, he stepped outside, where he found Haizaki standing by the entrance with a green watering can, tending to the school's flower beds.

"Oh, hey there, Otogiri," he said. "You're even earlier than usual today. Heading home, or…?"

"Not yet," Tobi replied, more brusquely than he'd intended.

Haizaki looked taken aback. "Wait, really? You're not?"

"…Wh-what do you care?"

"Oh, of course. Didn't mean to pry! My bad."

"Why would you apologize for that? You—" Tobi began, then paused, clicked his tongue, and pressed a fist into his forehead. Even he could tell he was being unnecessarily rude. "…You didn't do anything wrong," he finally managed.

"Sorry," Haizaki repeated. You'd think he'd just made a terrible mistake, judging by the look on his face. "Guess I did it again. An old coworker of mine—sort of a mentor, y'know—always used to get on my case about this. She kept telling me to stop apologizing for every little thing. Bad habit, I guess. Man, though, this takes me back! She was awfully strict with me. Can't count how many times she ended up chewing me out. I was terrified of her, honestly. Nice lady, though, all things considered."

"…Guy doesn't know when to shut up, does he?" Baku grumbled under his breath.

Tobi was in complete agreement, but there was something about Haizaki's voice—his unassertive tone and fluid speech—that made it

oddly hard to tune him out. Tobi didn't care, though. He had no interest in Haizaki, or the man's old coworker.

He's the school janitor, so I guess that would make this mentor of his an old janitor who taught him the ropes. I really couldn't care less.

"Whoa!" Haizaki suddenly yelped, frantically raising his watering can's spout. He'd been so focused on his story that he'd started watering the pavement at some point without realizing it.

"What are you even doing?" Tobi sighed.

"My bad, my bad! Oh crap! There I go, apologizing again. I guess that was the right moment for it, though. Or maybe not. I mean, who cares if the ground gets a bit wet, right? It'll dry out in no time. By the way, aren't you going home, Otogiri? Oh wait, right—you already said you were sticking around a while longer. What for? Not to pry, or anything! You can just ignore me if you don't want to answer. But it sort of feels polite to ask at times like these, you know? Sorry! Ah, rats, I did it again. I'm telling you, my coworker would be rolling her eyes at me for sure right about now if she was here. I haven't made any progress at all…"

"What kinda inane monologue is this?" Baku chuckled derisively.

Tobi, too, had wound up shooting Haizaki a cold stare in spite of himself. The janitor finally seemed to notice and awkwardly scratched the side of his neck.

"Yeah, I know. I've always been too talkative for my own good. Some things are just hopeless, you know? I try to watch out for it—I really do—but I always end up forgetting, and the next thing I know, I'm jabbering away again."

"Maybe you're just stupid. Ever think of that?" Baku jabbed, taking advantage of the fact that Haizaki couldn't hear him anyway.

"Ha-ha… Right?" Haizaki said. He glanced around for a moment, then pulled the towel around his neck down and wiped his face. It almost seemed like he was trying to avoid talking about something uncomfortable.

Toby got a weird feeling, but he couldn't put his finger on what, exactly, was off. Regardless, Haizaki was supposed to be on the clock at the moment.

"…Don't you have work you should be doing?" Tobi commented.

"Can't argue with that!" Haizaki replied with a firm nod before getting back to watering the flowers. "I know everyone talks about chrysanthemums as the big fall flower, but I've always been a fan of cosmos. Some roses bloom in the fall, too! Oh, and dahlias are pretty when they rebloom as well. Dahlias. Man…*dahlias*. Hey, how about you, Otogiri? What's your favorite flower?"

Maybe this was his fault, Tobi reflected. Maybe he should have walked away when he had the chance. Haizaki was talkative to an extreme, it seemed. If someone was nearby, he just couldn't stop himself from speaking to them.

"…I'm not really interested in flowers," said Tobi. "I don't even know any."

"Oh? That makes sense. I was like that when I was a kid, too. Actually, I was like that right up until I changed jobs! If you'd asked me about flowers before, I'd have probably just said *They bloom, I guess?* There's something kinda therapeutic about taking care of ones you planted yourself, though! It makes you all philosophical—like, *How many more times will I get to see the cherry blossoms bloom in the spring before the end?* and stuff."

"You can't possibly be that old yet, can you…?"

"Compared to you kids, I'm way over the hill! Part of me still can't believe I've turned into an old fogy who puts this much care into his flowers. When I think about it like that, though, it kinda hits me that getting old isn't so bad after all. You start appreciating the more refined things in life, right? Then again, maybe that's just a sign that I'm aging."

Whenever a student passed by on their way home, Haizaki would pause to flash them a smile and say goodbye to them. He didn't just say "goodbye," either—it was always "Later, Takada," or "See you around, Ueyama!" Apparently, he'd gone out of his way to memorize

the names of every student at the school. Tobi, on the other hand, hadn't even bothered to memorize the names of his classmates.

"…I don't really get flowers, or refined stuff, or whatever. I'm not following this at all," said Tobi.

"Honestly? Same. I totally don't get it, either! That's kinda how it is, if you can believe it. Ah! When did I run out of water? Sheesh—just how long have I been holding an empty can?" Haizaki winced and glanced up at the sky, lifting his unoccupied hand in a resigned shrug. "I sure look ridiculous now, huh? God, I'm a mess. Anyway, I'm gonna go get more water. Got a bunch of other work I still have to do, too! Talk to you later, Otogiri. Stay safe! Oh, but I guess you're not going home yet, are you? My bad. Ah, crap! Did it again…"

Tobi felt like he could relate to that old coworker who used to chew Haizaki out all the time. He watched the janitor make his way back into the school building, then heaved a sigh. "Just what is that guy's deal…?"

"Yeah, he's a weird one. Kinda rare to hear you talk to someone for that long, though, eh? Actually, wait—guess you've been chatting it up with Oryuu lately, too. Come to think of it, you're talking to people other than me a hell of a lot lately! You! Tobi! Talking! *Imagine*!"

Tobi shrugged Baku off his shoulder, then started spinning him in circles by his strap.

"Wha—? Hey! C-c-cut it out! You're gonna make me sick! I can feel my eyes spinning! Stop it, jerkwad!"

I don't think backpacks can get sick, thought Tobi. *And does Baku even have eyes to begin with? He can definitely see stuff, so I guess he must.*

"If anyone's weird, it's you, Baku," Tobi muttered under his breath as he slung Baku onto his back once more.

"Oh yeah? Well, *you're* weird for swinging your backpack around like a crazy person where everyone can see you."

"Want me to do it again?"

"No. Seriously, don't."

"Is this one of those reverse psychology things?"

"No, it friggin' *isn't*! Do *not* swing me around. Don't. Like, really, *don't*. Absolutely do not! It's not allowed! It's one hundred percent banned!"

Before long, Shiratama stepped out from the school's entrance. She spotted Tobi immediately and jogged over to him. She had her schoolbag with her, as well as the pouch Chinurasha was hiding in.

"Thank you for waiting!" she said.

"…Meh. You didn't take that long," Tobi replied.

"That's because I cleaned as quickly as I possibly could! I worked up a bit of a sweat, actually."

Looking closer, Tobi could tell. Shiratama's complexion was quite fair, which made it easy to see that her cheeks were slightly flushed. She really was sweating a little, too, and Tobi felt like he'd caught sight of something he shouldn't have. He quickly glanced away.

"…So should we head out? Not that I know where we're going," Tobi mumbled.

"Would you prefer if we had a specific destination in mind?" Shiratama asked.

"Better than not having one, right?"

"Hmm…"

"If there's somewhere you want to go, I'm fine with whatever."

"What about you? Is there some place you'd like to visit?"

"I mean, not really…"

"*God*, you're boring," Baku chimed in with an abrasive cackle.

Tobi almost elbowed him in the midsection but decided against it. There were quite a few students passing by, after all. He'd somehow managed to forget that he was still in public for a moment, but now it all came back to him.

Something must be wrong with me.

"Oh, I know!" Shiratama said, her eyes widening with realization. "There *is* a place I'd like to visit!"

Yeah. Something's definitely wrong with me, all right.

Tobi couldn’t bring himself to look directly at Shiratama’s face. All he had to do was turn toward her, which *should* have been doable, but he just couldn’t. Instead, he ended up tilting his head to glance at her out of the corner of his eye from a strange, oblique angle. It must have been unpleasant to be the subject of that sort of stare, but Shiratama, at least, didn’t seem especially bothered by it.

“I would like to go to a convenience store. Would that be all right with you?”

Tobi quickly decided that they should choose a location somewhat far from school. School regulations prohibited students from stopping to buy snacks on their way home, and while plenty of people flouted the rules, there was always a chance that they’d get snitched on and chewed out by their teachers if someone happened to see them. Tobi wouldn’t have a problem with that, but he figured it might bother Shiratama.

That raised a question, though: Why did Shiratama want to go to a convenience store to begin with? It was only after they reached one, about twelve minutes later, that Tobi started to wonder about that.

He’d opened the door and was about to walk in when he looked over his shoulder and found Shiratama standing stock-still several paces behind him. She seemed hesitant to go inside, or even to step on the mat at the threshold.

“…Not coming in?” Tobi asked.

Tobi usually forbid himself from going into convenience stores, but that was just to avoid wasting money. If he really needed something, he’d simply go inside and buy it, whether he was on his way home from school or not. He didn’t see any reason to hesitate. After all, it was just a convenience store.

“…I, um… I…w-will, I think,” Shiratama stammered. Tobi could practically see the panic in her eyes. She was obviously nervous, and Tobi shut the door again and turned around to face her.

"I know we're not supposed to buy food," he said. "School rules and all. We could just leave, if it bothers you."

"No," Shiratama declared firmly, glaring at Tobi.

Maybe it wasn't a glare exactly, but her expression had a lot of force behind it. It was a look of resolve, you might say, and it was starting to scare Tobi a little. You'd think her life was hanging in the balance. She was taking this *way* too seriously.

"All right, then," Tobi said, opening the door once more.

This time, he stepped inside, and Shiratama followed, her steps slow and stiff. She was all tensed up from head to toe, and her expression was as grim as could be.

"…You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

Such a short reply from Shiratama made it obvious that she was anything but fine, even discounting all the other signs. The woman behind the store's counter was immediately suspicious of her.

"You totally look like a wannabe shoplifter trying to snatch her first score," Baku commented.

Shiratama shook her head frantically. "What?! No, I couldn't! I'd never shoplift anything!"

"…Shiratama." Tobi sighed.

She let out a bizarre yelp that sounded something like "hwaugh," then looked over at the employee behind the counter. The woman, who'd already been watching Shiratama out of the corner of her eye, cleared her throat. She obviously intended to keep an eye on the girl, and Tobi really couldn't blame her for it. He hunched over and tried his best to shrink out of view.

"Are you buying something?" he asked.

"…A drink," Shiratama squeaked. Tobi could barely hear her. Her dejection was palpable.

Tobi held a hand out to her, then jerked it back just as quickly.

What was that? What was I trying to do just now? he asked himself. *Was I going to lead her by the hand to the drink section or*

something? Why would I need to do that? Ridiculous. She's not a toddler.

Shiratama peered through the coolers' glass door and chose a drink from one of the shelves. She instantly settled on a grape soda, while Tobi picked out the cheapest bottle of barley tea he could find. It was a waste of money, sure, but he knew how awkward it would be if he didn't buy anything, and a part of him didn't want Shiratama to think he was cheap.

The two of them bought their drinks and stepped outside. Shiratama clutched her bottle of soda and squeezed her eyes shut. "…I bought it," she said. "A grape one. I did it."

"Huh? Is that, uh…a rare flavor or something? Is this a brand thing…?"

"I buy these from time to time. Only very rarely, though, and always in absolute secrecy. I suspect this brand sells well, since they always seem to have it."

"Huh. That so?"

"Just stepping into a convenience store makes me so nervous, for some reason. If my grandfather or grandmother found out about this, they'd most certainly scold me for it."

"…Your grandparents are pretty strict, huh?"

"For my own good, yes. I'm well aware they do it out of love," Shiratama said. She was smiling faintly, but her eyes were closed. A shadow seemed to loom over her expression.

Her grandparents—not *her parents. I bet there's a story there.*

Tobi was curious, but only a little. He knew how much of a hassle it was to tell people about yourself and didn't really feel like interrogating her.

"Wanna find somewhere else to drink these?" asked Tobi. "This probably isn't the best spot."

Shiratama looked him straight in the eye and nodded. "Certainly!"

The two of them headed up a hill. A stone wall stood to one side of the road; a staircase to their left—also made of stone—led to an empty plot of land. The ground there was covered in gravel, and there wasn't much to see other than three old, rusted sets of horizontal vaulting bars of varying heights. In fact, aside from the playground equipment, the plot was totally empty—hence why the locals called it the Vaulting Bar Park.

Tobi pulled himself up onto the tallest of the rusted bars, sat down, and took a swig of barley tea. Shiratama stayed down below and leaned against one of the structure's pillars. She seemed to be pondering whether or not to open her soda and stayed that way for quite some time.

She should just open it. What's the problem? Why hesitate over something so simple? She can't drink it if she never opens it. Isn't that why she bought it?

Just as Tobi was starting to lose patience with her, Shiratama finally worked up the resolve to twist off the cap. She raised the bottle to her lips, closed her eyes, and took the tiniest sip of soda. Then she paused to shiver.

Tobi felt Baku start to say something, then think better of it. Tobi had been about to speak as well but decided to stay quiet and simply watch over Shiratama.

She carefully returned the cap to her bottle. Her shoulders rose as she took a long breath, then fell as she slowly let it out again.

"Delicious," she said at last.

"…What, that's it?" Baku whispered.

Shiratama opened her eyes once more, then held the bottle up in front of her. She seemed captivated by it. "It really is good. It never ceases to amaze me, no matter how many times I try it."

"…Good for you," said Tobi. That was all he could come up with.

Shiratama smiled at him. "This should be just enough to keep me fighting for another month."

"…Fighting?" Tobi repeated.

"Yes," she said, only to pause and shake her head a moment later, sending her hair fluttering in the wind. "I mean, no! I only meant it as a figure of speech!"

"You really love it that much…?"

"Love?" Shiratama repeated, cocking her head quizzically.

Tobi fell into a low-key panic. "I mean, I said *it*. Like, the soda. I mean…you do love it, right?"

"My grandmother is of the opinion that soft drinks—especially carbonated ones—are the devil's beverage. The only acceptable ones are those made from one hundred percent fruit juice. She has very firmly forbidden me from ever drinking them…"

"'The *devil's* beverage'? That's one dramatic granny," Baku commented. He sounded a little aghast.

Shiratama's gaze dropped to the ground. "It's because they're so bad for your health. My grandmother detests anything and everything unhealthy. Of course, that's precisely why I've grown into the mature young lady you see before you!"

Baku snickered maliciously. "Yeah, a mature young lady who's been sneaking sips of the devil's drink on the sly!"

"Hmph," Shiratama grunted with an exaggerated scowl. "I suppose I can't defend myself…"

Tobi took another sip of barley tea, then stowed the bottle away in Baku. He grabbed onto the metal bar below him with both hands and leaned back, letting gravity pull him down, then carrying that momentum into a full spin.

Shiratama's eyes widened with shock. "That was incredible!" she exclaimed. "I've heard of that technique before! They call it the 'hell spin,' don't they?!"

"…I guess. I might've heard someone call it that."

"Can you spin forward, as well?"

"Oh. Forward? I mean, sure…"

Tobi leaned in this time, spinning in a forward circle around the bar.

Shiratama literally jumped with joy. "A heaven spin!" she exclaimed.

"…I can do a few of them in a row, too."

"I want to see!"

"Sure, I guess…"

Tobi did three backward spins around the bar, followed by three forward ones in a row right after. Shiratama looked on in open-mouthed astonishment.

"I—I…had no idea such a thing was even possible. I can hardly believe it…"

"…It's not really that impressive," Tobi muttered. "Anyone could manage it."

"*Ohhh?*" Baku chimed in with a particularly nasty snicker. "Guess even a cocky little brat like you gets embarrassed sometimes, eh, Tobiii?"

"What? I'm not embarrassed at all," Tobi shot back.

"D-don't tell me you can do even more incredible tricks." Shiratama's eyes were sparkling with excitement. Tobi was half convinced he could see her pupils dilating as her expectations grew.

"…I mean, I know a few. Wasn't there a bunch of stuff we were supposed to talk about, though?"

"That can wait!" Shiratama declared without a second's hesitation.

In the end, she kept Tobi spinning away on the bar until he'd run through every trick in his book—up to and including a particularly impressive one that involved him letting go partway through and only grabbing on again to break his fall at the last second.

For the first time in recent memory, Tobi's brother appeared in one of his dreams.

Tobi didn't know where he was. At first, that was all he felt—a sense of unfamiliarity. The walls and ceiling around him were a blinding shade of white, but there were no windows to be seen.

Is this a room? Or a hallway?

He was running. Sometimes he'd stumble and fall, but he'd get right back up and start running again. He had to keep moving. Had to escape. Something was pursuing him.

Something. Who? What?

He couldn't turn around. No time for that. He just had to run. As fast as he could, with all his strength. Otherwise, he'd be caught.

"Gotcha!"

Suddenly, something snatched Tobi off the ground, lifting him into the air.

Something.

Who?

What?

Tobi tried to escape. He flailed frantically to shake his brother off, but it was hopeless.

"I gotcha!"

"Caught you!"

"Tobi!"

"I caught you, Tobi!"

That's right—his brother was the one who'd caught him. He grinned as he held Tobi in a firm embrace. He was much, much bigger than Tobi—or, really, Tobi was much, much smaller than him.

Still a child. No matter how hard he struggled, his brother's grip on his upper body was just too firm, and he couldn't move his arms at all. But still, he had to escape. One way or another, he *had* to. That was the one thing he was certain of. If his arms were pinned, he just had to twist his body instead. He kicked his legs wildly and thrashed his head, butting his brother in the chin.

"Ow! Hey, that hurts! Ouch, geez!"

For all his brother complained, he was still smiling. He was incredibly strong. Stronger than Tobi had ever realized. Or was Tobi just weak? Was he simply that powerless?

Tobi's brother was dressed in white.

"Let go of me."

Pure, snow-white clothes, stained a vivid shade of red.

"Nope."

Bloodred.

"I said let go!"

Whose blood?

"Nooope!"

Was it Tobi's?

"Let go of me, please!"

Or his brother's?

"Too bad! I caught you, and that's that," his brother said, smiling. "It's not happening, Tobi. I'm not letting go."

When had Tobi started crying? He had to run away, so why was his brother stopping him? Why wouldn't he understand? It didn't make sense. It was wrong. *Big Brother…*

Why?

"Shh!"

Why did you catch me? Why won't you let go?

You're hurting me.

"Be quiet."

Let go.

Big Brother, please.

"Just sit still, okay?"

This isn't right. This isn't my big brother.

"Come on, quiet down."

He'd never do this to me.

"It's all right."

He wouldn't. Would he?

"I'm telling you, everything's fine…"

Tobi was bawling.

"It's okay, really."

He cried and flailed, exhausting himself.

"It's okay."

Again and again, his brother whispered into his ear.

"Everything's okay now."

His grip never loosened. He stroked Tobi's back, trying to soothe him.

"It's okay…"

Tobi stopped struggling. Again, his brother repeated himself. *It's all right. It's okay. Everything's okay*—over and over and over.

Tobi dreamed of his brother. He dreamed of a place he didn't know—or perhaps he knew it well and he'd just forgotten. He was there, and so was his brother.

And then he woke up to find himself in the institute. In the bed where he always slept. A still-dark sky peeked in through a gap in the curtains, and a distinct pain lingered in Tobi's forehead—the aftermath of the headbutt he'd given his brother.

"No…"

That wasn't real. It was part of the dream. Tobi reached up and gingerly prodded his forehead. It didn't hurt at all.

"…Big Brother."

Tobi had never known his father or mother. He knew they'd existed—someone had given birth to him, after all—but he had no memory of them. His brother was all he knew. The brother who'd left him and vanished, so long ago.

No. That's not how it happened.

They'd run together. Run from someone or something pursuing them. His brother had been shot—wounded. Tobi had been so young. He couldn't run any farther. His brother had had no choice. He must have been heartbroken. He'd hidden Tobi away, then used himself as bait. Yes, that was it. He'd gone off on his own to draw away their terrifying, gun-brandishing pursuer, all to ensure that whoever it was wouldn't discover Tobi's hiding place. He did it for Tobi. That was how much he meant to him.

Hide in here, his brother had said to him. *Stay there until I tell you it's all right to come out. Do you understand, Tobi? I need you to promise me that. And don't say a word, no matter what happens.*

He made his brother a promise—and then he broke it. He left his hiding place before his brother returned. He knew he had to wait, and he didn't make good on his word.

He'd betrayed his brother.

Tobi stowed his outdoor shoes in his cubby at the school's entrance, then headed for his classroom. As he climbed the staircase, he felt something prod his back.

"Wha—?!"

Tobi yelped in surprise, then spun around to find Shiratama standing behind him. The pouch she carried Chinurasha in hung from her shoulder and she had a broad smile on her face.

"Good morning, Otogiri!" she said.

"…Morning," Tobi replied. "Wait, huh? What was that…?"

"What was what?"

"Didn't you poke me? Like, just now?"

"Like this?" Shiratama said, making a poking gesture in midair. "Yes, I did! Oh, have you instated a poking prohibition?"

"…I mean, I'm not saying it's *prohibited*."

"But it was unpleasant for you?"

"Nah, not exactly…"

"Would you prefer it if I never did it again?"

Tobi didn't particularly like the idea of getting surprised by another unexpected poke. That said, something about the idea of telling her to never do it again didn't sit right with him, either.

"I mean…maybe just don't do it out of nowhere. Especially on a staircase, or whatever. Feels kinda dangerous and stuff…"

"I'm certain something like that would never hurt you, Otogiri," Shiratama declared with an inexplicable air of confidence.

"…Huh? Why?"

"Because of all the incredible things you did on that vaulting bar! You are an exceptionally athletic individual, and I couldn't imagine something like a poke causing you to lose your footing on a staircase. I neglected to ask you yesterday, but do you play some sort of sport, perhaps?"

"A sport…? Not really, no."

"Not at all?"

"Not outside of gym class."

"Not even once?"

"…I said no."

"I wanted to join the track club when I was in elementary school. Oh, and I always wanted to take dance lessons, too! But I've never been terribly athletic and…"

Tobi's mind began to wander. Why was he being forced to listen to this monologue first thing in the morning, halfway up a flight of stairs? He wasn't opposed to talking with Shiratama, but he'd prefer to do so where other people couldn't see them. They were being watched at that very moment, by students who looked just as confused by their mid-stairway discussion as Tobi was, and it made him extremely uncomfortable.

Couldn't we do this somewhere else? Somewhere more private?

If it were just him and Shiratama, he'd have no complaints—though of course, Baku and Chinurasha's presence meant that they'd never *really* be alone.

Suddenly, a thought sprang into Tobi's mind.

So what? Are you just going to give up on searching for your brother?

A sudden pain shot through his chest, and cold sweat began to bead on his back. Of course he was still searching for his brother. He'd been going out to look for him whenever he had the chance. He just hadn't found him yet. He had next to no leads. Plus, he was at school. How was he supposed to search for him *here*?

"Otogiri?" Shiratama cocked her head. She leaned in, looking up at Tobi's face. "Is something wrong?"

Tobi shook his head. "Not really."

"Oh?"

"…It's nothing."

Tobi started climbing the stairs again. His body, or rather his heart, felt numb. It had been a long time since he'd felt like this—years, even. But long ago, the condition beset him regularly.

I just have to look for him. As long as I keep that mindset, I won't have to feel like this.

The larger his anxieties grew, the worse the feeling became. Was his brother all right? Was he safe? Maybe there was no point in searching for him. Maybe he was nowhere to be found—or at least, nowhere on the surface of the earth. Then no amount of searching would lead Tobi to him…and all because he hadn't kept his promise.

Tobi and Shiratama were now on conversational terms—a major shift in Tobi's lifestyle. But that wasn't the only thing that had changed of late.

Before, for instance, Tobi had never bothered looking around the classroom during his lessons. He simply hadn't cared what the other students were up to. As far as he was concerned, all that mattered were himself, Baku, and his brother's whereabouts. These other people just happened to go to the same school as him and just happened to be in his class. They were his classmates, sure, but that was *all* they were.

They might be eighth graders like he was, but they lived in a completely different world—or at least, that's how Tobi felt about them. He could barely think of anything he had in common with them. Barely anything wasn't *nothing*, of course, but it was hardly enough to make him care.

On impulse, Tobi glanced at Shiratama. She was very studious and spent most of her lessons either looking at the teacher and the blackboard or down at the notes on her desk. She'd listen to whatever the teacher said with great enthusiasm and sometimes sink into thought or nod along.

Shiratama's pouch was hanging from her desk. Tobi wondered what Chinurasha—aka Chinu—did during their lessons. Baku always made it pretty clear he was bored out of his mind while class was in session, but was that true of Chinu as well?

Tobi and Baku were always together. It felt so natural for him to be around all the time that Tobi took his presence for granted. Meeting Chinu had raised some questions, however. Unlike Baku, Chinu didn't talk—in fact, she was unlike Baku in several ways. Baku, for instance, looked like a perfectly normal backpack to most other people, while Chinu seemed to be totally invisible to them.

Tobi had always thought he was the only one who could hear Baku's voice, until Shiratama appeared. She and Tobi seemed to be the only ones who could hear Chinu's animallike cheeps, as well.

Baku and Chinu weren't the same, but they did have some similarities. Tobi and Shiratama, meanwhile, couldn't have been more different—but was that just on a surface level? Maybe their superficial differences concealed a deeper layer of similarities. Was there some point of commonality between them after all?

Tobi glanced behind him and to the side. Shuuji Masaki—aka Masamune—had styled his hair as carefully as ever that day. Tobi wondered what the creature in the speak-no-evil pose atop his head could be—that strange, bark-skinned, tarsier-like being. He and Shiratama were the only ones who could see it, and Masamune

himself seemed unaware of its presence. But maybe he was just feigning ignorance.

Imagine if some weird *thing* was always sitting on your head, and yet nobody ever commented on it, or even seemed able to see it. It'd be so easy to pretend you couldn't see it, either. Much easier than trying to convince someone else that there was a weird, invisible *thing* right in front of them. Who would ever believe a story like that? It seemed possible that Masamune had reached that conclusion, making him no different from Tobi and Shiratama.

Could Masamune hear Baku's voice, too? Tobi couldn't rule out the possibility. Nobody seemed to react when Baku spoke up during class, but Masamune could have just been pretending not to hear him. Shiratama had already pulled that off—she'd noticed Baku's voice a long time ago and had simply feigned ignorance until recently. Maybe Masamune was doing the same.

Tobi stared up at the ceiling, then dropped his gaze toward the girl sitting two seats ahead and one to the right: Chiami Kon. The creature clinging to her back looked like a perfectly normal animal at first glance, if you ignored the fact that it wasn't supposed to be there. A bat, maybe, or a flying squirrel. Needless to say, it was neither. It was another weird *thing*. Only Tobi and Shiratama could see it, unless Masamune was pretending, of course. And what about Kon?

Tobi's head seemed to grow heavier. He'd always assumed he was somehow unique. That he could see and hear things nobody else could. That the boy named Tobi Otogiri was simply not normal.

Shiratama seemed to have been the same. She thought she was unlike the rest of humanity—that the girl named Ryuuko Shiratama was simply not normal.

But they'd been wrong. It wasn't just Tobi, and it wasn't just Shiratama. They weren't unique. There were two of them. And were they the only ones? Was this phenomenon confined to Tobi and Shiratama alone? Now that a second person had entered the picture,

it no longer seemed strange to think there could be a third, or a fourth.

What about Masamune, or Kon? What about Shizukudani, the girl who spent her days in the nurse's office? What about all the other students in the other second-year classes who had weird *things* accompanying them? Tobi had never bothered counting them, and didn't have a precise number on hand, but he suspected there were over ten in his middle school alone. Could any of them see and hear the weird *things* that nobody else could, just like Tobi and Shiratama? Could *all* of them see and hear them? Were they all just averting their gazes, plugging their ears, and feigning ignorance?

Tobi rubbed the nape of his neck and sighed. Racking his brain like this wouldn't clear up anything. The only option was to ask them directly.

Who should he ask, though? Masamune? Kon? Tobi had never talked to either of them. Had Shiratama? She was polite and friendly, and Tobi had the vague impression that she got along well with the rest of their classmates. He could have her ask the two of them. But then again, asking her was a hurdle in its own right. Just thinking about it lowered his spirits.

Tobi was starting to feel tired. At times like these, he just wanted to doze off. He was about to slump forward onto his desk to do just that, when Chiami Kon's weird *thing* turned to look at him.

Tobi almost muttered "Ugh, gross" under his breath. It wasn't a bat or a flying squirrel after all. Its face didn't look like either. It bore a much closer resemblance to a completely different sort of mammal. Its eyes were big and round with black pupils, and its nose was small and squat. It was a baby's face. The creature's body might resemble a bat or a flying squirrel, but its face alone looked exactly like that of a human infant.

"Tobi…" Baku seemed to have more to add, but just as he spoke up, Tobi heard a clatter from the back of the classroom. He turned to look and saw that someone had stood up—a girl sitting in the back row, right by the windows.

"Hmm?" The teacher looked over at her. "What is it, Takatomo?" That must have been the girl's surname.

Takatomo was hanging her head. She looked ill, and she was breathing so hard you'd think she'd just been sprinting. Her body was trembling.

"Takatomo…?" the teacher repeated.

Takatomo attempted to respond, but whatever she wanted to say wouldn't come out. It seemed she couldn't speak properly.

"Excuse me, Takatomo," Shiratama said as she stood up from her desk. She looked concerned as she started to walk over to the other girl.

"No—" Takatomo gasped, whipping around to gaze at Shiratama. She was deathly pale, with deep, dark rings under her eyes. "No! Stay away…!"

"…Oh shit," one of the boys in class whispered.

A few others blurted out similar exclamations, and the whole classroom descended into chaos. As if the noise was too much for her, Takatomo hunched over and clasped her head in her hands.

"Quiet down, everyone!" the teacher roared. It wasn't enough, though, and the noise continued.

"I can't take it anymore…!" Takatomo shrieked.

She shot up from her chair, knocking it over in the process, then sprinted to the door and violently wrenched it open. Before anyone knew what was happening, she was gone. The teacher ran after her, and a few of the other students tried to follow, only to quickly return when their teacher told them off.

The rest of the class started gossiping immediately.

"Seriously, what *was* that? What's her problem?"

"Freaky as hell."

"Did you hear what she said? 'I can't take it,' or something."

"That should be *our* line…"

Despite saying they were freaked out or scared, a lot of them were smiling and laughing about it.

Tobi looked over at Shiratama, who returned his gaze. Her brow was furrowed, and her lips pursed. She looked very bothered by what had happened—worried about Takatomo, maybe. The girl who sat beside her was talking to her, but Tobi couldn't tell what their conversation was about. He assumed that she and Shiratama were friends. Shiratama, unlike Tobi, was close with a number of her classmates. It only made sense; it would've been strange for her to have no friends. *Tobi* was the weird one.

The teacher eventually returned and brushed the incident off, vaguely explaining that Takatomo wasn't feeling well before returning to the lesson. Class 2-3, however, remained in a state of uneasy excitement throughout the rest of the period, and the moment it was over, they resumed gossiping.

Before long, Harry—the class's homeroom teacher, more properly known as Mr. Harimoto—arrived on the scene. His slicked-back hair was as spiky and hedgehog-like as ever, but his expression looked unusually grim. The problem, it seemed, had yet to be resolved.

Harimoto was immediately surrounded by students badgering him with questions. Shiratama and Kon were among them. Eventually, he moved to stand at the head of the class and gave an update on the situation.

"Takatomo should be just fine," he said. "Sit tight, focus on your lessons, and tell a teacher if anything else happens."

Tobi didn't think anyone in the room really believed Takatomo was "just fine." That said, aside from Shiratama, Kon, and a few other girls, no one else seemed genuinely worried about her. Most of them were more amused by what had happened—that, or they'd lost interest almost immediately.

Lunchtime arrived, and Takatomo was still missing. Her notebook and textbook were lying on her desk, exactly where she'd left them. Tobi couldn't stop thinking about it. He didn't even know her given name, and yet he was preoccupied by her.

He devoured every bit of his lunch—except for the bread roll—in the blink of an eye. Then he grabbed his bread with one hand, lifted Baku with the other, and left the classroom without wasting a moment. Just as he was planning out his route from the courtyard to the roof, however, Haizaki happened to pass by.

"Ah, Otogiri!" he exclaimed. "What're you up to? Actually, wait. Shouldn't you still be eating lunch?"

Tobi clicked his tongue. "You again…"

"What do you mean *again*? I'm pretty much always wandering around school, you know? Well, not *wandering*, really. You'd be surprised how much I have on my plate. This is work for me, after all!"

Haizaki glanced at Tobi, then the roof, then back down to Tobi again.

"Wait, you weren't about to climb up there, were you? Really…? You just scale the wall? Is that what you've been doing this whole time? That'd explain how you got up there after I locked the door, but…seriously…? Are you one of those people who's, y'know, really good at free-climbing, or something? Or y'know, bouldering, or whatever they call it?"

"…Not really, no," said Tobi.

"Okay, but you didn't deny the part about climbing the wall, did you? So that bit was true? You've been zipping up to the roof from the outside? I was already kinda suspicious you were up to something like that. So I was right? Isn't that, like…I dunno…kinda incredible?"

"I really don't think it's *incredible*, or anything…"

"Hey, look, I'm sorry to interrupt you when you're trying to be humble and all, but that wasn't exactly a compliment. Like, I can't lie, I'm pretty impressed. But you definitely shouldn't be pulling stunts like that! Do you know how dangerous that is? What if you fell? You'd be lucky to survive. This school is three stories tall! That's really high!"

"Meh. I haven't fallen so far."

"Uh, stop me if I'm wrong, but it kinda sounds like you're pulling dangerous stunts all the time. And I mean, look, I get it! I grew up in the snow-swept northern countryside, so I used to jump off rooftops and stuff on the regular. The piled-up snow cushioned the fall, see."

"Sounds kinda fun."

"Right? It really was. It was fun! A lot of fun. Gives you a real thrill. But the thing is, all it would've taken was the tiniest slipup and *bam*! Disaster. I get chills just remembering it." Haizaki snapped his fingers, a look of realization coming across his face. "Oh, right! Hey, Otogiri, question for you: Have you ever seen anyone else up on the roof?"

"On the roof?" Tobi repeated, then shook his head. "No. Never. I only go up there during afternoon breaks, though."

"Gotcha. Thought so. I have to check it once a week, and I've never seen any signs of people going up there. 'Course, I guess you were going up there and all…"

"Guy's asking some weird questions today, huh?" Baku muttered dubiously.

"Yeah, see, the thing is—" Haizaki began before letting out a quick "Ah!" and clamming up, eyes as wide as saucers.

Tobi yelped a quiet "ah" of his own.

"…Did he respond to me just now?" asked Baku.

Haizaki wasn't looking at Tobi at all—Baku was the center of his attention. A moment later, Haizaki seemed to realize this and very pointedly looked away. But it was too little, too late.

"You…hear him, don't you, Haizaki?" asked Tobi. "You can hear Baku's voice."

"Uhhh," Haizaki said, gazing off into the middle distance. "Hmm…? Who? What's that? I what who's what, now? Hmm…? Sorry, didn't catch that…"

"I said, you can hear Baku's voice."

"'Baku'? You mean, like…one of those animals, right? Y'know, like a tapir."

"No," Tobi said, shaking his head. "That's not what I meant."

"Oh? It's not, huh…?" Haizaki grabbed the towel around his neck and anxiously wiped his face with it. "Well, y'know, the thing is, uh… What was it? Right, the roof! So there's a key, right? They keep it on the wall in the staff room, but basically anyone could just walk in and take it, if they wanted to."

"What are you talking—?"

"A key! *The* key. To the roof, you know? And the thing is, it went missing. It's the darndest thing. It was definitely there yesterday, then all of a sudden, it's gone. I've been checking with students and looking around for it since this morning and not finding it. But the thing is… Ah, right! You know that one girl from your class? Takatomo. She's gone, too. Nowhere to be found. We're pretty sure she's still at school, though. Hmm. What's going on, here? It's weird, right…?"

"If you're tryin' to change the subject, you're wasting your time, pal," Baku said sarcastically.

Tobi, too, was convinced: Haizaki could hear Baku's voice. It wasn't just Shiratama after all. Even Haizaki could hear him. What could that mean?

Tobi began to feel dizzy. He looked up; it was a beautiful day. The sky was a distinct shade of blue no paint could replicate.

What's more, there was a humanlike figure standing on top of the special-use classroom wing. Tobi gasped as he realized what he was seeing.

It wasn't just humanlike—it was an actual person.

"…What's that up there?" Baku muttered.

"Wha—?" Haizaki yelped as he looked up toward the roof. That settled it beyond a shadow of a doubt: He'd plainly reacted to Baku's voice, though this was no longer the right time to think about that.

Someone was standing on the roof of the special-use classroom wing. One of the school's students, judging by the uniform. A girl. Her skirt fluttered in the breeze.

She was standing right at the edge of the roof, atop the short parapet running around it. Tobi could just make out her deathly pale face. She seemed to see him as well. She didn't make much of his presence—just registered that he was there. Her gaze was cold and unfeeling.

Tobi couldn't tell what she was thinking. Their eyes only met for a second, and then she leaned forward. She was already standing on the parapet, so there was nothing ahead of her to stop her descent. Nothing to break her fall. And fall she did.

Tobi just watched. It was all he could do. A flash of urgency may have passed through his mind—the thought that he had to help, somehow—but everything happened so quickly that he couldn't be certain.

The girl was falling through the air.

"Wha—?!" Haizaki yelped, his voice oddly strangled.

Tobi was silent. Baku shuddered.

And down she went. She tumbled midair, rotating until she was plummeting headfirst. And she stayed that way until the moment she crashed into the courtyard ground.

#2 / The Old Days

Oh, Dahlia

And when your sorrow is comforted (time soothes all sorrows) you will be content that you have known me. You will always be my friend.

—*The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry



Otter preferred to operate his car's gas pedal with a light touch. The same went for the brakes—he applied them slowly and smoothly, never stomping down. To put it in rather grandiose terms, he drove with the force of a feather and the precision of a seamstress threading a needle, whether slowing down or speeding up.

Was that just how he'd been taught? Maybe, but Otter had earned his driver's license the moment he turned eighteen, and as he recalled it, his driving instructor had been very impressed. "Is this really your first time behind the wheel? You're a natural, Haizaki," the instructor had said. Haizaki, incidentally, was Otter's real name.

The way Otter saw it, however, he wasn't skilled so much as he was cautious. He made a point of never pushing the limits. The nature of his work meant that he didn't have to worry about speeding tickets while on the job, and when he was in a rush, he went as fast as he could. Still, he was always careful to not to go beyond what he could handle. He kept his driving smooth and efficient at all times. It was a point of policy for him.

A crosswalk loomed ahead, and Otter brought his black sedan to a stop exactly where he was supposed to. The action was so by the book, it was almost perfect. For a brief moment, he felt a sense of accomplishment wash over him—but then, a certain someone yanked on the back door's handle like her life depended on it. A horrible clacking resounded as she pulled on the handle again, and again, and again.

Otter wasn't surprised. This was business as usual for her.

"Uh, miss? It's locked…" Otter sighed. He disengaged the back seat's lock, and she flung the door open instantly.

A wolflike creature, bigger than any dog, nimbly climbed into the car. Otter wasn't surprised by that, either. Strictly speaking, of course, it wasn't a *creature* at all.

This being, which was called Garmr, clambered over the back seat and came to rest on the side opposite the open door. It was big enough that it barely fit in the car at all. A moment later, a remarkably well-proportioned woman climbed in behind it and yanked the door shut, slamming it as hard as she could. Otter knew that she was about to tell him to hurry up and drive, so he stepped on the gas before she had the chance.

The woman—Otter's coworker and mentor—brushed her long hair back from her face and chuckled. "Finally getting the hang of it, eh, Otter?" she said.

"You taught me well," he replied.

"Not well enough. You still haven't—" Otter's mentor began. She was almost certainly about to give him another helping of candid and unsolicited advice, but before she could follow through, her cell phone rang and she pivoted to a conversation with someone on the other end.

"Dahlia Four. Right. I've just made contact with Otter. Yes. Right. Yes. Got it. Right. Understood. Huh? Oh. Ugh…"

Otter figured she was talking with their superior. Dahlia Four was a code name—the name of a squad. Or a team, really. Actually, they were more of a pair. The members of Dahlia Four, after all, were Otter and his mentor. Garmr and the weasel-like being named Olver, who was currently riding shotgun, weren't counted among their personnel—which was only fair, since neither of them were people.

Dahlia Four, then, was a two-man team. They were the fourth team to be granted the name Dahlia—hence the "Four." Otter was a code name, too, of course. Haizaki wasn't an otter who happened to have a Japanese name. He was a real, flesh-and-blood human being.

Otter glanced at the back seat in his rearview mirror. He happened to catch his mentor just as she was lowering her phone from her ear.

Her call seemed to be over, and her face, which was usually shockingly pretty, was now distorted by a fearsome scowl. Not even an expression like that could ruin her good looks, of course.

The first time Otter met his mentor, he'd immediately assumed she'd had a *lot* of work done to achieve those looks. He could tell she hadn't simply slathered on makeup, which meant that the only reasonable explanation was an incredible amount of plastic surgery. Her features were just *too* perfect, too clearly defined. There was something almost catlike about them—ironic, considering her companion looked so much like a wolf. That was "catlike" in the best sense of the phrase, of course. Her figure was just as remarkable, with the sort of proportions Otter had only ever seen on foreign fashion models. It was hard to believe she was the same species as he was. Surely one of them was something else. An alien, maybe?

In short, Otter's mentor was so overwhelmingly attractive, he'd found it hard to even look directly at her. For a time, at least. You'd think he'd have gotten used to it by now, and to some extent he had, but when he let his guard down, he still found himself thinking *Whoa*, from time to time. *Who is this lady? It's like they came up with the word "beauty" just to describe her. She makes all the celebrities that those magazines and TV programs call the "sexiest whatever alive" look like downright frauds.* Otter had seen the real thing, and as far as he knew, she was the only one who could ever fill that role.

"What did the chief say?" he asked.

"Nothing important."

His mentor jabbed her phone with her thumb, scratching at the corner of her eye with her other hand's pinkie. She did wear makeup, apparently, but not very much. She'd mentioned that she didn't draw on her eyebrows, for instance. That made the final result all the more remarkable, if "final result" was the right phrase for a product of nature. Otter didn't know how she felt about her appearance, but the way he saw it, she was so good-looking, it was almost monstrous.

"What're you gawping at?" Otter's mentor said brusquely. She'd noticed him staring at her through the rearview mirror and arched a menacing eyebrow at him.

"…You know, you act like a real delinquent sometimes, Miss Dhole," Otter replied.

Dhole was his mentor's code name. It was easy to mishear it as "Doll," but it actually referred to an animal—a doglike mammal, specifically, known by the scientific name *Cuon alpinus*.

Dhole chuckled derisively. "Well, that's what I am at heart."

"Oh, really?"

"Obviously not. Learn to take a joke."

"Are you sure it's that obvious? Dahlia's ace being a former delinquent checks out in a surprising number of ways. It feels credible, you know?"

"The hell it does. What part of me looks like a delinquent? No part, that's what. Keep spouting crap like that, and I'll tear you a new asshole."

"…Well, that's a scary image."

"Huh? How so? Can you imagine *actually* tearing someone a new asshole? It's just unrealistic. It's supposed to be funny, not scary. Don't you have a sense of humor?"

"I'd call having a new hole torn in your ass more horror than humor. Sounds like something out of a slasher film…"

Otter steered his black sedan along a bridge that passed below the highway, crossing over to an island-like area made up of reclaimed land. The place was full of publicly managed housing units, apartment buildings, and schools. There were even parks and athletic fields. On the side facing the ocean there was a pier and a row of warehouses.

The area just across from this reclaimed land was full of towering high-rise apartments, but a waterway drew a clear line between it and those glimmering monuments to modern civilization. Both sides of the waterway were technically part of the same district, but

crossing over it was like passing from night into day. They seemed like entirely different worlds.

Otter rolled up to an intersection, then turned right. The building on his left was number 22, and the one just across the street was number 24. A large group of people were gathered in front of the latter, and several police cars and an ambulance were stopped nearby.

"Looks like a pretty big crowd," Otter commented as he gently depressed the brake pedal and pulled to a stop by the curb. He switched on his car's emergency blinkers and turned around to ask Dhole what they'd be doing next, but before he could even open his mouth, *she'd* opened the back door. That was business as usual for her—she always took action without warning. By the time Otter had shut his blinkers off and undone his seat belt, she and Garmr were long gone.

"Well, shall we?" Otter said to Olver. He stepped out of the car as well, and Olver quickly climbed up his back, coming to perch on his left shoulder as usual. Olver was only about as big as a half-liter plastic bottle, discounting his tail, and he barely weighed anything at all.

Dhole, who Otter now saw was wearing a black pantsuit, plunged straight into the crowd accompanied by Garmr. She used the length of her legs to full effect, walking at a rapid clip. Her usual footwear—a pair of white sneakers—probably helped. Otter had never seen her wearing pumps or loafers, let alone high heels. They probably would've suited her quite well, though, given her figure.

"Okay, clear a path, people!" Dhole shouted as she pushed her way through the crowd—a hodgepodge of all ages Otter assumed was composed of local residents.

Some of them looked a little put off by Dhole's attitude, but none panicked at the sight of Garmr. They couldn't see it to begin with. The same was true of Olver—nobody could tell he was clinging to Otter's shoulder. Neither could be perceived by normal humans.

As Otter chased after Dhole, he realized he'd forgotten his necktie. He was wearing a gray suit with a pink dress shirt underneath. Without a tie, he'd look like a slob, and given how his mentor tended to behave, he felt it was important to give as formal and proper an impression as possible when on-site with her. He really did try, but the truth was that he forgot to wear his tie more often than not.

That was Otter all over. He could shift from self-admonishment to shrugging his shoulders and moving on in the blink of an eye. He rather liked that about himself.

On the other side of the crowd stood a police officer holding a light stick used to direct bystanders. Dhole flashed her ID and stepped right through, but when Otter tried to follow, the officer stopped him.

"Ah, hold on, you! Stand back. Authorized personnel only," he said.

"…Sorry. I *am* authorized, for what it's worth." Otter sighed. In the end, he had to show his identification as well, and the moment he caught up with Dhole, he got an earful for it.

"What are you doing? You're an embarrassment," she grumbled.

"Right. Sorry…"

Before they stepped into the building, Otter turned around to give the crowd a once-over. A majority of those gathered seemed to be in their sixties. That made sense, considering that most of the area's residents were elderly. There were two or three who looked to be in their thirties or forties and a smattering of younger people. The latter were mostly dressed in rough street fashions, their hair dyed in bright, flashy colors. At a glance, they didn't look like very pleasant types—then again, maybe Otter was the unpleasant one for judging them by appearances alone.

"Not even one," Otter muttered before following Dhole into the building. He looked over his shoulder one last time, just to be extra sure. As expected, he didn't see any of the signs he was looking for. None of the entities that Otter and his fellows dealt with—entities that normal humans couldn't see—were present in the crowd. "Of

course, if there *were* any here, Dhole would have caught sight of them ages ago," he muttered.

Otter stepped inside. The apartment they were after was on the third floor: room 305. He found it quickly enough and entered without bothering to take his shoes off. A musty, acrid scent greeted him—just one of those unfamiliar aromas you noticed when walking into a stranger's home. Dhole was already inside, and she wasn't alone. Several uniformed police officers were present, as well as a few detectives dressed in suits or nylon police jackets.

The apartment itself wasn't unclean, exactly, but it *was* cluttered. There was a *lot* of stuff inside, all in dire need of sorting. Then again, considering the amount, maybe it was a lost cause. A *kotatsu*—a small table with a built-in space heater and covered with a warm blanket—was sitting dead center in the middle of the room, despite the fact that it was very much not the season for that sort of thing. Otter imagined the room's resident kept it there year-round.

A TV was set up on the far side of the *kotatsu*, with a chair seated directly in front of it. The resident, an old woman, apparently needed to sit right next to the TV to see it properly. He could just make out her white hair beneath the knit hat she was wearing. She was sitting at the *kotatsu*, almost slumped over onto its surface. Her back had a very significant hunch to it, and she was quite small in stature.

A detective wearing a navy-blue jacket glared at Otter. He was so perfectly overbearing, he almost came across as a caricature.

"Afternoon," Otter said to him with a polite nod.

He had met this particular detective at crime scenes in the past. He knew his name was Kogure, though he couldn't remember what characters it was written with.

Dhole was kneeling by the old woman, her eyes closed and her hands pressed together. Garmr stood right behind her. Though it looked like a wolf, that resemblance only went so far. Its shoulders were unusually bulky, for one thing, and it could walk upright on its hind legs when it chose to. It seemed more like a werewolf, in fact—

one partway through changing back into its human form. You could describe it as a wolflike human, or perhaps a wolf with distinctly human traits. Or, considering most of the people in the room couldn't see it, maybe it was more of a werewolf spirit. A phantom, but not an illusion. No, Garmr was very much real.

Otter leaned down to inspect the woman as well. She was obviously deceased—a corpse. From what he'd heard, one of her friends from the neighborhood realized they hadn't seen her in a while, got worried, and decided to pay her a visit. She hadn't answered her door, and after various trials and tribulations, the friend had managed to get inside, only to find her long since passed away.

"So what do you think?" Kogure asked Dhole, scratching idly at his hairline. "Is it one of yours or not?"

Dhole didn't answer. Her gaze was fixed on the woman's corpse.

Kogure crossed his arms and sighed. It was a very calculated gesture—practically a performance. Or perhaps that was just how the man acted, thought Otter.

"Hey… Who *are* those two?" one of the other detectives—a young man wearing a suit—whispered to an older, more seasoned coworker.

"The florists," he spat in reply.

The younger detective scowled openly. "Oh. *Those* people…"

You don't have to be so hostile, you know? Otter thought. As a part of Dahlia Four, he couldn't help himself. But at the same time, he understood where their disdain was coming from. Whenever the authorities suspected a crime or incident might involve *special* affairs, Otter and his fellow outsiders—the florists, as they called them—came barging in to muck up the investigation.

The police were required to provide any and all relevant information regarding a case to the florists, but the florists were under no obligation to reciprocate. Most police didn't even know what "special affairs" referred to. All they knew was that the florists were a subset of the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office. That

office was responsible for collecting, analyzing, and investigating information related to important policy decisions made by the Cabinet of Japan. The Cabinet was the country's top-level administrative apparatus and included Japan's prime minister and cabinet ministers.

The Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office was, in short, an intelligence agency reporting directly to the government's highest levels, and the florists were part of it. That meant they were, for all intents and purposes, at the top of the nation's hierarchy. "The florists" wasn't their formal designation, of course. They were officially known as the Special Affairs Response Office—a name that some considered illustrious, and others were less eager to praise.

The Special Affairs Response Office's second-highest-ranking official was a liaison from the National Police Agency, so the office's ties with the police were quite substantial. Even so, lower-ranking members of the force tended to have a rather poor opinion of the florists. The way Otter saw it, that couldn't be helped. If he was a police officer, he probably wouldn't be too happy about some group of weirdos showing up from time to time to tear through his crime scene without explanation.

"Otter." Dhole beckoned him over to the old woman's corpse, which she was still investigating.

"Right here," Otter said as he knelt down beside her.

He took a second, closer look at the woman and heard Olver sniffing at the air from his shoulder as he leaned in.

The woman's face was inclined toward the table, and she looked to be in her seventies, or maybe even her eighties. Most women from that generation kept their hair cut short, and she was no exception. The back of her hairline was well-groomed, and the nape of her neck was visible, allowing Otter to spot the wound there. It wasn't so much a cut as a hole—a very small, black puncture wound, about two or three millimeters in diameter.

"…Same as last time," Otter said.

Dhole nodded, eyes still fixed on the old woman. “Yeah. Looks like it.”

#2-2_otter/ I Didn't Know the First Thing About You

Otter was woken up by the blaring ring of his cell phone's alarm. He groaned as he picked the phone up, thinking how obnoxious its stupid, jaunty little tune was before he finally managed to shut it off. That wouldn't be an issue for him—his alarm would ring a few more times, regardless. He'd set it up that way. Reassuring himself with this excuse, he folded his covers and hugged them like an extra-large body pillow.

Hmm? Wait. Was that how my alarm sounded? Eh, whatever. Nighty night…

No sooner had the thought crossed Otter's mind than his phone started ringing again, blaring that same insufferable tune.

"…Ugh, come *on*," Otter muttered blearily. *Maybe I'll just ignore it*, he thought, only for his moment of irresponsible temptation to be punctuated by a sharp pain in his left ear. "Ow! Dammit, Olver…"

He didn't even have to look to know that Olver was to blame. Otter lived alone in a one-bedroom apartment. Olver was the only one around to break his solitude by nibbling on his ear.

"…All right, all right! I get it, okay…" Otter picked up his phone again. He forced his eyelids open and looked at the screen, which displayed the name *Dhole*. "Agh, crap! It *wasn't* my alarm! Sh-sh-she's calling me? Ohhhh no…"

Otter leaped out of bed and answered the call.

"Y-yes? H-hi, hi, good morning, Otter speaking…"

"Why the second 'hi'?"

"S-s-sorry! I j-j-j-just got up, so…"

"Whatever. It's fine. And while we're at it, stop apologizing for every little thing. You do it way too much."

"S-sorry— Ah, whoops. Did it again…"

"Do I have to pull your tongue outta your mouth and tie it in a knot to make my point here?"

"*Yiiikes!* Are you listening to yourself? Do you realize how terrifying an image that is?!"

"I'm obviously not gonna do it for real."

"It's terrifying exactly because I can imagine you would…"

"Who do you think I am?"

"Why, the mentor I respect and admire, of course! I hold you in the highest esteem. You're the GOAT, for real. I might as well bow down and worship you…"

"I don't deserve anyone's worship, and I wouldn't bust out torture that amusing so casually, okay?"

"See, the fact that you think torture can be *amusing* is pretty terrifying in its own right…"

"Okay, we're done wasting time now. They found another victim."

"Huuuh?! Again?!"

"Yup. Again."

"U-u-understood. I'll get ready right away! Be there ASAP!"

Otter jumped into action, getting dressed at the speed of light. Or maybe more like the speed of sound. Well, as fast as he could manage anyway. Haizaki, incidentally—Otter's real surname—was written with the character for "gray." That wasn't the reason so many of his suits were that color, but it was a funny coincidence. He picked one out for the day, along with a navy-blue shirt, and finished the outfit off with a subdued necktie that he tied while watching himself in his mirror.

"Okay, looking sharp! Ah, right—socks! Got some bedhead, too…"

When Otter finally stepped out into the parking lot with Olver on his shoulder, he realized it was still dark out. He'd seen what time it was when he answered his phone, but he hadn't registered the information on a conscious level until now.

"It's times like these, I swear…" He sighed.

Otter pulled his car out onto the road, swung by Dhole's place to pick her and Garmr up, then made for the crime scene. Dhole was wearing her usual pantsuit and white sneakers. Her hair was a little damp, as well—maybe she'd just gotten out of the shower. Otter couldn't stop that thought from flashing through his mind, and it made him weirdly uncomfortable.

Come to think of it, I wonder if she's seeing someone? Knowing her, Otter felt pretty sure she'd kick him if he asked. He could never. Of course, it would be just as in character for her to answer it without a second thought. Maybe she'd give him a casual *Yeah. So?* and that would be the end of it.

Would she have a boyfriend, though? It's not hard to imagine. In fact, she could easily have a couple of them.

On the other hand, her being single seemed just as natural. Otter would've hesitated to describe Dhole as rough-tempered, but she *was* very intense. Then there was the nature of her work, and Garmr's presence. Her doglike companion wouldn't be an issue if she ended up with someone who couldn't see it, though.

Otter had dated ordinary girls who couldn't see Olver in the past. Despite appearances, he'd gone through his fair share of love affairs when he was younger. Plenty of people would still describe him as young now, but the field he worked in made romance a rather dicey prospect. He just couldn't afford to let it impact his decision-making. Who could possibly have the mental capacity for love, with a job like his?

That, more so than anything, made Otter suspect that Dhole was single as well. She was a cut-and-dried workaholic—how could she be dating anyone? And considering what a free spirit she was, it didn't make sense for her to let herself get tied down. It was *right* for her to be single.

Yeah, that's gotta be it. She's single, all right. She's her*, so of course she is.*

If, hypothetically speaking, it came out that Dhole *did* have someone—maybe was even living with them—Otter would probably

be a little dejected. No, he definitely would be. He couldn't exactly explain why, though. Maybe it was like when fans fell into despair at the announcement of their favorite idol's marriage. Was Dhole Otter's idol? Was he her fan?

Dhole fiddled with her phone in the back seat, not saying a word. For all Otter knew, she could have been texting her boyfriend. He immediately shook his head and dismissed the thought. He just couldn't imagine her doing such a thing. But was that notion based in reality, or simply wishful thinking?

Otter only knew Dhole as part of Dahlia Four. He'd only ever seen her on the job, and they never discussed their private lives. He didn't know where she was from, or even what kind of family she had. He'd casually asked her when her birthday was once, and she'd snapped back, *Like hell I'd tell you that.* Back then, he'd had no idea why that had set her off.

Otter had all sorts of questions about his mentor, and now that his curiosity had begun to burn, it was only a matter of time before it worked itself up into an irrepressible inferno. That distraction was all it took to make his impeccable driving a little sloppier than usual, but Dhole didn't comment on his carelessness. He felt a little let down. Part of him wished she'd chew him out for it.

The crime scene this time was only two kilometers away as the crow flew from the last one. It was located beneath an overpass, and the police had already cordoned off the vicinity. Otter stopped his car just in front of the police line.

The area beneath the overpass was used for a variety of purposes —there was a parking lot for cars and one for bicycles, and even a green area. The victim had been found between the car and bicycle lots, on a path reserved for pedestrian and bike traffic. A man who happened to pass by found the victim on the ground, leaning against one of the concrete pillars that supported the road overhead. He'd realized something was wrong and immediately called in to report his discovery.

As Otter made his way onto the scene, he once again found himself facing down Detective Kogure. The man was still wearing the same blue jacket and looking as stern as ever.

"We found it. Same wound as last time," Kogure explained, scratching his hairline as he spoke.

"Ah." Otter let out a short exclamation when he saw the gesture.

"…Yeah? What?" Kogure grunted.

"Oh, nothing at all," Otter hurriedly replied. Thankfully, his excuse seemed to land, and Kogure didn't pry any deeper.

The victim was still sitting in the same position the pedestrian had discovered him in. His head was shaved, and he was wearing a loose-fitting hoodie and a pair of cargo pants with some rugged sneakers. He looked to be in his early twenties. His hands, dangling limply by his sides, were covered in tattoos that extended all the way down to his fingers. He was sitting in a hunch, his back rounded and his head tilted slightly to the left. A puncture mark about two or three millimeters in diameter could be seen on the right side of his neck.

Dhole and Garmr both crouched down to inspect the corpse. It reeked of alcohol, and upon closer inspection, Otter noticed a liquor can lying on the ground a short distance from the corpse's right thigh. What was left of its contents had spilled, staining the road beneath. The young man, it seemed, had been drinking it just moments before he died.

"What was that?" Dhole asked, eyes still fixed on the young man's corpse. "A moment ago, I mean."

"Huh? Wait, what happened a moment—?"

"You were about to say something to Kogure, weren't you?"

"Oh. I mean, not really. Something just occurred to me, that's all."

"Lay it on me."

"Okay, but it's really stupid. I mean, honestly, it's not important at all…"

"Say it. I'm curious now."

"…I've always thought that detective resembled someone, but I could never quite put my finger on who until it hit me just a second ago. The guy looks just like Columbo."

"Columbo?"

"You know what I'm talking about, right? It's this kinda old TV show…or maybe it was a movie. Anyway, yeah, Columbo. It's about a detective—that's his name. I think it's from America."

"Does Kogure look like an American to you?"

"Nah, not at all. It's just his, you know…his, uh, aura. Yeah, his aura. He's got the same *feel* as Columbo. Not that I've actually seen the show."

"Then how the hell do you know about his *feel*?"

"See, this is exactly why I wanted to keep this to myself. If he was like the guy's doppelgänger, I would've said something. What am I supposed to do, ask *Hey, has anyone ever told you that you look a lot like Columbo?* Actually, wait, maybe I should."

"This is so much stupider than I imagined. Never talk to me about Columbo again."

"My bad…"

And just like that, Otter fell back into his old habit of apologizing. Would a day ever come when he ran out of things to apologize to his mentor for? Otter certainly didn't think so. He had a sinking feeling he'd be bowing and scraping to her for the rest of his life. She'd get mad, and he'd apologize, and that would repeat ad nauseam, for years—decades, even. Until the day Otter died. So, from his perspective, forever.

The young man's corpse didn't have any visible injuries aside from the distinctive puncture wound. Apparently, he'd just sat there right up until the moment his heart stopped beating. They didn't see any signs he'd put up a fight—maybe there weren't any to find. Both the old woman in the apartment building and the young man beneath the overpass had died calmly and quietly.

On a related note, just six days before and less than a kilometer away, the corpse of a forty-six-year-old office worker had been found

leaning against a vending machine. Fifteen days earlier, a thirty-two-year-old woman was discovered dead in an apartment building not far from that. She was found crouched on her apartment's balcony by a man she'd been seeing who was now the prime suspect. All four victims had holes in their necks two or three millimeters in diameter, and all four had died from unknown causes. The holes showed signs of vital reactions, meaning they'd been made while the victims were still alive, and yet they hadn't bled much at all, considering.

As best as Otter could surmise, someone had used some sort of slender implement to puncture the victims' necks. Then, shortly afterward, their hearts were stopped through some unknown means. When their hearts stopped beating, the flow of blood through their bodies ceased, and once they were dead, the perpetrator removed the implement from their necks.

The police had yet to reach any conclusion about whether the incidents were accidents or murders. The holes in the victims' necks hadn't been publicized, so media coverage had been subdued—so far anyway. Who knew how long that would last if the incidents continued.

After finishing her inspection of the corpse, Dhole moved on to questioning Detective Kogure, asking about the witness's testimony, the victim's background, potential clues, and the like. Very little was known at that point, and Kogure promised to gather up all the relevant information in a report for her later on.

"I guess this really is your territory, huh?" Kogure asked Dhole, scratching at his hairline as he spoke.

Otter was starting to think that was a habit of his. It had to be, right? He didn't know whether *Columbo* was a film or a show, but he'd seen bits of it on TV a number of times, and he remembered its protagonist pressing a hand to or scratching his brow in a similar manner. Then there was Kogure's slightly ruffled, wispy hairstyle—that, too, felt somehow Columbo-esque.

"Let's hope not," Dhole curtly replied. Kogure shrugged and flashed her a bitter smile.

His face, too. There's a bit of a resemblance…or maybe not.

By the time Otter and Dhole left the scene and returned to the car, dawn had broken. Dhole had to call their superior, and in the meantime, Otter went to look for a convenience store where he could get some coffee. He found one about three minutes later.

You'd think a person like Dhole would only drink black coffee, but the truth was that she liked the sort of iced café au lait they sold in chilled paper cups, or the coffee-flavored milk that came in little cartons. She insisted she wasn't that particular, but Otter had his doubts. Otter, meanwhile, was a black coffee kind of guy. Now and then he liked something sweeter, but he still went for black, which he felt was the more mature option. Especially when he was with Dhole—he always drank his coffee black around her.

Once he had his coffee, Otter quickly picked out a few packaged pastries, some rice balls, and a bag of chocolates. He made his purchases, left the convenience store, and was about to turn right to head back to the car when he happened to look left on impulse.

If Otter hadn't looked left on a whim, he might never have noticed the suspect. He was out on a shopping trip, not actively investigating. The whole thing was nothing more than a freak coincidence.

A man was walking down the street about twenty meters in front of Otter. He had a medium build—hence why Otter assumed he was a man—and was wearing a military-style jacket and a pair of jeans. His hair was black, and he looked young. There wasn't anything unusual about a man like that walking around town, even now, at the crack of dawn. Otter would've just ignored him if it weren't for the long, threadlike strand dangling from his sleeve and dragging across the ground behind him.

What is *that?*

Otter glanced at his left shoulder. Olver's face was contorted into a snarl, his little fangs bared. That made one thing clear: Whatever

that threadlike strand was, it *wasn't* normal. Olver was reacting to it.

The man didn't turn around. He just kept walking away. It seemed he hadn't realized that Otter was staring at him. Otter quickly decided to tail him, and set off at a slow, casual pace, acting like he was simply walking home after a shopping trip. Meanwhile, he pulled out his phone and dialed Dhole's number. Her line was busy, unfortunately, so he sent her a text instead, then put his phone on silent and stowed it in his pocket. It didn't stay there for long—just a moment later, it vibrated, and Otter pulled it back out to answer the call.

"*You're tailing the suspect?*" Dhole asked, right off the bat.

"Yeah," Otter replied, covering his mouth and speaking in a whisper.

"*Understood,*" Dhole said, lowering her voice as well. *"I'll be right there."*

"Perfect."

"If he notices you, take him down. Don't let him slip away."

"Got it." Otter ended the call and slid his phone back into his pocket.

The man continued along a street that ran next to the overpass. Eventually he took a turn, making his way onto a road lined with small apartment buildings and houses. The road was long, straight, and offered way too much visibility for Otter's liking, so he hung back, letting a sizable gap open between him and the man before ducking into an alleyway and peering around the corner to keep an eye on him.

Eventually, the man paused. He looked like he was about to turn around, so Otter pulled back behind the corner and out of sight. *Did he spot me?* Otter wondered. He waited for a few more moments, then carefully peeked back around the corner. The man was gone.

Otter very nearly flew into a panic and dashed into the street, but he managed to calm himself down at the last moment. He took a long, deep breath, then strolled out from the alleyway, walking at a fairly rapid pace while taking care not to let his footsteps get too

loud as he made his way to the last point where he'd seen the man standing. There was a vacant plot of land to his left where a building had recently been torn down, with an apartment on the other side. There, just a short ways inside the plot, was the man, a phone pressed to his ear. He was looking directly at Otter.

Close up, the man seemed just as young as Otter had expected. He was probably in his twenties, or possibly a high schooler. Regardless, he took off at a run, and Otter immediately moved to pursue him.

Did I screw this up already? Dhole's going to give me hell again for sure!

The man sprinted across the empty lot and veered right, charging down the next street over. He still seemed to be speaking to someone on the phone, but Otter couldn't make out what he was saying. By the time Otter got to the street, the man had a fifteen-meter lead on him. He was fast, but Otter could tell he wasn't a dedicated sprinter—if Otter went all out, he could probably catch him. The threadlike strand trailing behind him was still on Otter's mind, however. What *was* it?

The man blew right through a crosswalk, paying no attention to the red light. It was a two-lane road, and the signal hadn't changed by the time Otter reached it. A truck was approaching the intersection, and although he knew the timing would be tough, he kept running anyway, dashing right into the road. A chill ran down his spine as the truck's horn blared, but he just kept running.

Past the intersection, the man turned onto a narrow street. Otter rounded the corner as well, just in time to see the man disappear into an alleyway on the right. If Otter had waited for the truck to pass, the man would've shaken him, no question.

"Nice one," Otter said to himself. Self-praise always helped him get his head in the game.

The alleyway ran between a local factory and an apartment complex. It was cramped to begin with, and the steel drums and metal dumpsters lining it made it feel even narrower. The man

glanced back, saw Otter still on his tail, and knocked over a stack of steel drums. They scattered to the ground with a shrill, grating clatter, blocking the path.

Oh, so that's how we're gonna play it?

Otter opened his eyes as wide as he could. "Olver!"

In an instant, Olver dashed from Otter's shoulder down his back, coming to rest on his right foot, which the weasel-like being enveloped. If you couldn't see Olver, it would seem like nothing had happened, but anyone who could would realize that the little creature had fused with Otter's foot.

Otter kicked off the ground with his Olver-infused right leg—or perhaps you could say Olver leaped with the leg he'd taken over from Otter. The resulting phenomenon was simple enough, but what it accomplished was extraordinary: Otter *flew*. To be clear, he didn't soar into the air like a bird, but his leap would've put every high jump world record to shame. He got about as high as a pole-vaulter, and even more astonishingly, he did it with comical ease.

"Wha…?" the man gasped, so stunned that for a moment he forgot he was supposed to be running away.

Otter sailed through the air between the apartment building and the factory, and the man just gaped at him in pure disbelief. Otter ended up leaping right over him, touching down directly in his path. His right leg now resembled Olver's front half, with Olver's face right around where his toes should be. His left leg, on the other hand, was unchanged. If he'd landed on it instead, absorbing the impact of his jump with his flesh-and-blood body, it would *not* have ended well for him.

The man was now right behind Otter, and he spun around, pivoting on his right foot to face him. "You're not getting away from me…!" he growled, reaching out to grab the man by the collar of his jacket.

The man let out a strangled gasp and flinched backward…and that's when Otter felt it.

"Wha…?"

Something had just touched the nape of his neck—and he had a pretty good idea what it was. His left hand shot upward.

There it is! Got it!

It was the strand that had been dangling from the man's sleeve. Otter clenched his fist around it and yanked, but it slipped out of his grasp with ease, then wrapped around his wrist, constricting it.

"Better give up…" Otter drove his knee into the man's exposed left flank. The man let out a painful moan, but the grasp his strand had on Otter's wrist didn't lessen. "…while I'm still playing nice!" This time he slammed the leg he'd merged with Olver into the man's right side.

"Augh!" the man yelped.

Otter had felt a rib or two give way beneath his—or his and Olver's—kick, and this time, the strand withdrew from his wrist. He could move freely again, and wasted no time grabbing onto the man's hair, forcing him up against the apartment building's wall and pinning his right arm behind his back where he could see it. Nothing was dangling from his sleeve anymore, though. The mysterious strand was gone.

Ah hell, Otter thought.

By the time he'd registered that he was in trouble, Otter had already released his hold on the man and leaped upward. Thanks to his Olver-enhanced leg, he could jump three meters straight up in the air without any running start. The strand was now hovering midair beneath him, coiled up in an untidy mess. It had separated itself from the man to attack Otter, but he had managed to dodge just in time, and now it was flailing.

What is *that thing?*

It looked less like a snake and more like a distressingly long earthworm. A tapeworm, maybe. Of course, neither earthworms nor tapeworms could fly, and this one's movements were disturbingly energetic. It had way too much vigor, and the result was revolting.

More than anything, though, it was *dangerous*. Otter's gut was telling him that the recent murder spree was *its* doing. Four people

had died over the span of two weeks, and each of them had a puncture wound on their necks—a wound that the squirming, lengthy, wormlike entity could easily have caused. Maybe those wounds were where it had bored into its victims' bodies before traveling to, and disabling, their hearts.

Gravity took hold, and Otter began to plummet toward the ground. He tried to land on the wormlike entity with his Olver-enhanced leg, but it dodged out of the way.

The second Otter touched down, he leaped again—but this time he sprang not upward, but forward. Much as he hated to admit it, Otter knew that this was the right moment to retreat and reevaluate the situation. He was convinced that the tapeworm-like creature could kill. It was a lethal predator, and he wasn't interested in dying, not to mention that a lot of people were counting on him to stay alive.

Otter jumped out of the alleyway and emerged onto a small road with no sidewalks. Inconveniently, a car was barreling down it. It was a white minivan, and it was very, *very* close.

"Oh shi—"

Otter's lower half exploded. Or at least, the impact was strong enough that it *felt* like his legs had burst. He did his best to dodge the minivan, but he just couldn't react in time, and it struck him partway through his jump. He spun around in midair, then slammed straight into the ground, and everything went black. For a moment, Otter thought he'd died, but it soon became painfully clear that he was, in fact, still among the living.

"Ugggh," a voice groaned. In fact, the voice belonged to Otter, though that came as something of a surprise to him.

He was lying face down, and his vision was hazy and distorted. He didn't feel much pain, though, which was rather alarming. In fact, he didn't feel much of anything. He hadn't lost *all* sense of touch, but he certainly wasn't feeling as much as he should have been.

"He's down," someone said. Otter couldn't tell who, but it sounded like a man's voice. "C'mon, we're carrying him."

"What, seriously? He's still alive, right? What's our move here?"

Another voice. The man wasn't alone.

Dammit. This is hopeless. Wait… What's hopeless?

Otter didn't know anymore. He felt like he was falling—like his consciousness was plummeting into a deep, all-consuming darkness.

Dhole…

…Why?

The first thing that came to Otter's mind was a question. Well, not the *very* first thing—he'd had plenty of thoughts before falling unconscious, after all—but he awoke to a single, pressing question: *Why?*

Didn't I die? I was so sure I was doomed, so why am I here? Why did I die? Wait, I guess if I'm here, I didn't. That's right. I didn't die after all. I just got into a really big pinch. It would've made sense if it killed me. What exactly happened again, though? What was it…?

Otter wasn't certain of much, but he did know one thing for sure: There was a light somewhere nearby. It wasn't very bright, but it was there, down by his feet.

Am I sitting? It looks like it. Someone put me in a chair. Can't move, though. Must've tied me to it. Why a chair?

Oh, right. I remember now. That car. Ran right into me. Not just any car—a minivan. A white one. While I was tailing someone. A guy. Pretty young. He spotted me and ran. I tried to catch him, and he attacked me with a long, wormlike…

"…Zin…gai…"

The entity Otter had seen wasn't just a strand, or an extra-long earthworm, or a mutated tapeworm. It was an illusion with physical substance. Some called such entities "shadows." Others called them "zingai," a term derived from a word simply meaning "inhuman."

That man had a zingai with him. It was his*. And speaking of zingai…*

Otter looked at his right leg…and saw nothing. Or rather, he didn't see the creature he'd expected. Last he remembered, Olver had

been fused to his leg, but now he was gone.

"Okay. It's cool. Everything's gucci," Otter muttered, nodding. *Okay, but why the Italian? Wait—that* is *Italian, right? Pretty sure gucci's Italian. What else would it be? Gotta be Italian, yeah.*

In any case, Otter was alive—he just had no clue where he was. It was dark, despite the light, which seemed to be electric. Thanks to that, he could make out the cracks streaking the concrete floor. Another easy conclusion: He was indoors. Also, he was tied to a chair. Was he shut up in a factory, maybe? Somewhere abandoned? A storehouse?

Otter heard footsteps. He looked up, closed his eyes tightly, blinked rapidly, then took a few deep breaths. Eventually, his eyes began to adjust to the darkness, and he managed to make out a figure in the distance, drawing gradually closer. By the time it stopped in front of him, he'd concluded that it was a woman with short hair, or maybe a man. The oversize hoodie and track pants they were wearing made it hard to tell much about their figure aside from the fact they were rather slender.

"…You awake?" the figure asked. Now Otter was certain it was a woman. She leaned forward slightly, peering at his face. "Hey. I asked you a question. You're awake, aren't you?"

Otter nodded, and the woman turned around and shouted behind her.

"Hey! The guy's awake!"

Clearly, there were others present besides Otter and the woman. She had allies and was calling them over.

Otter took stock of his surroundings once more. Some sort of old, decrepit machine was toppled over nearby, and there was exposed rebar in the pillars and beams. The roof was made of corrugated sheet metal, pieces of which were missing here and there. It really did seem like an abandoned factory. A small, electric lantern—the sort you'd take on a camping trip—was placed on the ground nearby and was the only source of light. What he could see of the outside was dark.

If it was nighttime, then more than half a day had passed since Otter was hit by the minivan. Thinking back, he realized he'd been dreaming right until he woke up—assuming, of course, that what he'd seen had really been a dream. At the moment, he wasn't quite sure. It felt like he'd woken up several times, but his mind had been addled and he'd fallen right back asleep, or rather, he'd passed out again.

Otter soon noticed a white minivan parked nearby, at the edge of the lantern's light. It was most likely the same one that had run him down. The sliding door leading to its back seats was open, and a man stepped out from it. He was wearing a military-style jacket and jeans, and he had a long, tapeworm-like creature—a zingai—dangling from his sleeve. It was the young man from before, and his zingai dragged along the ground behind him as he walked toward Otter.

"Ibe," the woman said to him.

Is that his name? Ibe? Sounds like a last name to me.

"Where's Hideyoshi?" she asked. Ibe shook his head in response.

Hideyoshi, Otter repeated internally. He didn't think that was the woman's name, or Ibe's given name, either. That meant there was someone else here. Was Hideyoshi still in the car? Was it just the three of them, or were there more?

So the man with the tapeworm-like zingai was called Ibe. Perhaps the woman and Hideyoshi had been in the white minivan. They'd run into Otter when he leaped out into the street. Was that just a coincidence? Otter wasn't convinced, but he could barely remember the moment he'd been hit and wasn't in any condition to start drawing conclusions. He could, however, safely say that they'd loaded him into the van and driven him to the abandoned factory. He didn't know how badly he was hurt, but it had to be more than a few scrapes and bruises. An ordinary bystander would've taken him to the hospital, but here he was, tied to a chair instead.

Ibe came up beside the woman. "You're one of those 'florists,' aren't you?" he asked.

Otter didn't reply. Ibe's tapeworm zingai slowly inched along the ground, making its way toward his feet.

"Yeah, we know about you. Any time a zingai's involved in some incident, you people crawl out of the woodwork to go sniffing around the scene like a bunch of starving stray dogs."

This was the closest look that Otter had gotten at the tapeworm zingai so far. Its long, narrow body was about a centimeter in diameter, and it tapered to a single rounded, fingerlike point that reminded him a little of a snail's tentacle. He thought about stepping on it for a moment, but his legs were bound firmly to the chair. Wiggling his toes was the most he could manage.

"You're one of their grunts, right?" Ibe pressed, leaning in closer. Otter didn't look him in the eye—he was too focused on his zingai to bother. "Right? We already know you are—all of you. You're the stooges of an organization that's got its fingers in every government, company, and mass media outlet around the world."

"…As far as conspiracy theories go, that's pretty basic," Otter said, failing to hold back a chuckle.

Ibe grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Aaaagh," Otter groaned. The pain was intense enough that he almost passed out again.

"Give it up, dumbass," Ibe said, sneering. "We know the truth. *Sullivan* told us everything. How much do you know, though? Maybe they don't tell their pawns all the details. Us, though? *We're* already wide-awake."

Otter took a deep breath, then slowly, quietly let it out again. As best as he could tell, he hadn't let how shaken he was show.

Sullivan. Ibe and the others had something to do with him.

Dhole and Otter's two-man team—Dahlia Four—wasn't the only unit operating in their organization. The group known by the police as the florists and by the government as the Special Affairs Response Office was made up of a number of teams operating concurrently, and the bulk of those units were dedicated both to

investigating abnormal incidents and to keeping an eye out for the individual known as Sullivan.

Otter felt something crawling on his left leg. It was the tapeworm zingai, slithering its way up him like a snake climbing a tree.

"We know everything, including that you people are searching for Sullivan. We've seen right through you."

Otter tried to shake the tapeworm zingai off his leg, but he was bound too tightly. It was hopeless.

"I take it back. You're not stray dogs—that organization owns you, through and through. Bet they feed you some damn nice kibble, too. I'm surprised they haven't fattened you up, considering. "*Hey!*" Ibe suddenly shouted, reaching out to grab Otter's lower jaw. "Talk to me, florist! You people are part of the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office or whatever, right? Who gives you orders? What's their name? How many of you are there? How much do you know about Sullivan?"

"Ibe, please." The woman sighed.

Ibe glanced over his shoulder and barked, "What?"

"One question at a time. It'll be easier if he answers them one by one, don't you think?"

"…Who cares? We'll drag all the answers we want outta him one way or another."

"Still. It's a matter of methodology."

"Well, if you've got such a great method then *you* talk to him, Yuki!"

"I'll pass. Sounds like a hassle."

"For god's sake, be serious…"

"I'm being perfectly serious, thanks."

"I'm a civil servant," Otter said. He felt the tapeworm zingai drawing closer and closer to the nape of his neck.

Ibe tightened his grip on Otter's jaw. "What was that?" he asked.

"I'm just your average government grunt. Technically, my position is considered special, but that's all. I have no idea what organization

you're talking about. Do you mean the government? Like, the nation of Japan?"

"Don't get smart with me," Ibe snarled. He licked his lips and bared his teeth as his tapeworm zingai prodded at Otter's nape. It didn't feel like it'd broken through his skin yet.

Otter's mind flashed back to the old woman in the apartment complex and the young man beneath the overpass. The tapeworm zingai was trying to puncture a hole in the nape of his neck with its tentacle-like head. And once it did, it would make its way into his body, traveling through his veins directly to his heart.

"Listen carefully. If you try sassing me again, you'll be dead in a second," Ibe said, finally releasing Otter's chin. He seemed awfully worked up, clenching his fists and cracking his knuckles. Apparently, he was barely keeping himself in check. "Don't you know? The government's been under the organization's thumb for ages. The government reports to *them*. You think being a civil servant means you're not part of it? That just proves you're one of the organization's pawns, pal."

"…The organization, huh?" Otter muttered.

He was trying as hard as he could to look calm, but the truth was, he was anything but. Frankly, he was terrified—so scared that he barely even noticed how much pain he was in. He knew it wasn't a good idea to carelessly anger Ibe—or maybe he just didn't like the idea of making him mad. Maybe his fear of death was overriding his rational judgment. At the moment, he couldn't be sure.

"Sorry, but I really don't know anything about the organization you're talking about," said Otter. "Maybe I *am* part of it. I'm just a grunt, so they might be keeping me in the dark."

"Get real. You're a zingai-user, aren't you?"

"…Haven't heard that term before."

"A zingai's master. You call people who can see them zingai-aware, right? And people like you can make their zingai do whatever they want. That makes you a zingai-user. Same as us."

Ibe's tapeworm zingai was still pressing into Otter's neck, as if to let him know that it could burrow into his flesh any time it wanted to.

Otter looked over at the woman Ibe had called Yuki. *Same as* us, he'd said. Did that mean Yuki had a zingai as well? Where was hers, then?

"…It does look that way, huh? Zingai-users," Otter murmured. "Yeah. I think we *are* the same."

"And?" said Ibe.

"…Huh?"

"Where's your zingai?"

"My…?"

Suddenly, Otter's words caught in his throat. He tried to gulp, but his throat wouldn't work—his mouth was way too dry.

"…Zingai? Where's my—? Oh…" Otter glanced all around him, acting like he was searching for Olver. "Where *is* my zingai? It's… gone? Huh? That's weird… It should be right around here. I mean, we're always together… But it's gone. Where'd it go…?"

"Your zingai disappeared, and you're still fine? Is that even possible?" Ibe muttered.

Otter could have answered that question. There were always exceptions, of course, but the general rule was that an individual who lost their zingai would *not* be fine. Otter had no obligation to share that tidbit, though, nor was he interested in doing so. In fact, he wouldn't let it slip no matter what happened.

Just then, a noise rang out—the sound of a door crashing open. Someone had just burst into the factory. Ibe and Yuki spun to the left, looking in the direction of the sound.

"Wha—?" Ibe began.

Before he could finish the word, an enormous wolf charged out of the darkness and leaped onto him, fangs bared. It slammed him to the ground in an instant, pinning him before he could react.

Otter took in a sharp breath, then threw his weight to the side, knocking himself and his chair to the floor. He was making an all-or-

nothing wager, and knew that in the worst case, the tapeworm zingai might punch through his neck and kill him at his first false move. It was only thanks to his mentor that he managed to overcome his fear and follow through. The wolf that had attacked Ibe, after all, wasn't really a wolf at all.

Garmr. That's Garmr! She's here! She came for me!

The concrete floor was rock-hard—surprise, surprise—and Otter felt the impact travel through his whole body. Barely a moment after he slammed to the ground, Olver's weasel-like form silently bolted over to him. The little creature shoved his head in between the ground and Otter's neck, and while Otter couldn't see Olver, he knew exactly what he was doing: grabbing onto the tapeworm zingai that was trying to burrow into his body. Olver sank his teeth into the wormlike entity, tearing it away from Otter, and the two zingai rolled away, locked in a pitched struggle.

"Ibe!" Yuki shouted. She rushed over to throw a wild kick at Garmr, swinging her leg like she was trying to punt a soccer ball and striking only empty air. Garmr had released Ibe and jumped away before her kick had the chance to land.

While Yuki was busy helping Ibe, Otter felt something behind him start cutting through the bindings holding him to the chair. "…Miss Dhole," he said.

There she was, right beside him, still wearing her black pantsuit and white sneakers. She was crouched down with a knife in her hand, cutting through what Otter figured was most likely tape. She must have sent Garmr in ahead of her to draw Ibe and Yuki's attention while she slipped in to save Otter unnoticed.

Dhole finished slicing through the tape, then took off without sparing Otter so much as a glance. That seemed rather cold to him—she could have at least said a word or two—but then again, that curtness was classic her. She was the Special Affairs Response Office field team's ace, and everyone knew it. Of course she was intimidating.

While Dhole was freeing Otter, the tapeworm zingai had shaken Olver off, and was now making a break for it.

"Olver!" Otter shouted, opening his eyes as wide as they could go.

"Garmr!" At the same time, Dhole beckoned the werewolf-like zingai over to her.

Olver sped to Otter's side in an instant, fusing once more with his right leg. Garmr did the same, but in a grander sort of way. It leaped toward Dhole and wrapped its limbs around her.

Otter had seen that process play out a number of times before, and it always made him a little jealous of the zingai. He'd never admit it, though. It wasn't hard to imagine the look of contempt she'd give him if he dared bring it up—not to mention the verbal abuse.

Garmr wrapped itself around Dhole, fully embracing her—though "embracing" may have been too romantic a word, considering how gruesome the process looked. After all, when Garmr wrapped itself around her, it did so by splitting its midsection wide open, effectively sucking her into its body. In fact, Otter could think of a different word that seemed a lot more apt: Garmr *ate* her. It didn't open its jaws wide like the wolf that ate Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother. It opened its whole *body* up, splitting apart like a massive, vertical mouth to swallow her whole.

The bond between a zingai and its master was something very special. A single individual could only ever have one zingai. They were completely irreplaceable, and each combination of master and zingai was totally unique. As a natural consequence, a person's zingai tended to be incredibly dear to them. And when a person loved something a lot, they would sometimes say they could "just eat it right up." Had Garmr followed through on that emotion? Obviously not—and it hadn't really eaten her, either. She'd simply gone inside it.

I guess it's sort of like that one bit in the New Testament about wolves in sheep's clothing. Or maybe it's more the opposite. Not that Dhole is much of a sheep to begin with.

One way or another, Dhole was now clad in Garmr's wolflike skin. You could even say she'd become a werewolf herself.

"Ugh!" Otter grunted as he slammed his Olver-enhanced right leg into the ground, propelling himself into the air. He touched down on the same leg, letting it bear most of his weight. He still wasn't steady on his feet, but this was no time to let his injuries get the better of him. Dhole was watching, after all—though he wasn't sure if she was actually watching *him*.

"Death Worm…!" Ibe shouted.

Is that his zingai's name? Death Worm? Pretty accurate, all things considered.

The tapeworm zingai—Death Worm—tried to fulfill its master's expectations. It flashed across the room, then tried to wrap itself around Dhole's werewolf-like form. It was hopeless. When she wore Garmr's skin, Dhole was terrifying, to put it mildly. She was fast, precise, and brutally powerful, capable of truly savage and merciless acts of violence.

Dhole bent so far backward it almost seemed like she was about to do a backflip, dodging Death Worm as it shot through the air above her. Then, before it got away, she sprang back upward and sank her teeth into it. That first bite shaved off its front half, including the feeler-like protrusion on its head, and two more bites in quick succession were all it took for her to devour what remained.

"Aaah…"

Ibe let out a quick, airy moan, then collapsed on the spot. Just moments earlier, he'd asked if it was possible for a zingai's master to survive the loss of their zingai. And now, he had the chance to find out for himself.

When a zingai died, its master fell into a state of shock. The person's mental activity levels would decline suddenly and dramatically, or, in some cases, come to a total stop. Their senses numbed, and they went into a stupor. In the worst cases, the victim would fall into a coma-like state requiring a lengthy convalescence—assuming they recovered at all. It certainly wasn't guaranteed.

"Sh-she *ate* it…?" Yuki gasped in horrified disbelief. She stumbled and fell onto her backside, her gaze glued to Ibe. "Help me, Omen…!"

She sounds desperate. Did she mean to say "Amen"?

That, Otter quickly learned, was not the case. Something came tumbling down from above, though Otter had no clue where it'd been hiding: a white object, about twenty centimeters in length.

What is that, a doll? "Doll" without an "h," this time, Otter thought flippantly, though he knew it wouldn't be that simple. It was almost certainly a doll-like zingai. It must have been waiting in the rafters, and it hadn't been alone. Another white doll fell a moment later, and another, and another. There were dozens of them. *Omen, huh? I guess these are Yuki's zingai.*

"Pretty rare type, huh…?!" Otter grunted.

He launched into another jump, propelling himself away from the swarm. At that point, only his leg fused with Olver was capable of much of anything, so staying on the move and evading his enemies was the best he could manage. It was frustrating to be so unhelpful, but he didn't exactly have options. All he could hope for was to stay out of Dhole's way. The rest, he'd have to leave to her.

Dhole didn't react to Omen's appearance. She disregarded the dolls entirely, closing in on Yuki instead. At a glance, the zingai didn't look particularly dangerous, but the deadliest enemies were always the ones that seemed harmless at first. Plus, assuming all of them were one zingai, it was possible that Dhole would have to deal with every one of them in order to defeat it.

That would take time and energy that Dhole didn't feel like committing. Instead, she chose a faster option: ignore the zingai and take down its master instead. A zingai's demise would almost always deal a nasty blow to its master, and aside from a few extremely rare outliers, a zingai that lost its master would cease to exist. In other words, if you couldn't eliminate a zingai, you could just go for its master.

You couldn’t just knock the person out, however. Their zingai wouldn’t even blink at that. So what would it take, you ask? Simple: If the master died, the zingai would vanish. In other words, you had to kill its master, a human.

Otter was fortunate to have never been put in a position where he had to personally end another human’s life. He was prepared to take that step, of course, if the situation demanded it. He told himself he was anyway. But would he really be able to follow through? He knew, on some level, that he’d probably at least hesitate.

Dhole was different. She wasn’t inexperienced or idealistic like Otter. If she had to kill someone, she would. Acts that Otter would find difficult were easy for her—and Otter knew that from personal, firsthand experience. He’d seen her kill the master of a terrible, rampaging zingai that had to be eliminated before it caused further harm. She’d done it right in front of him, and she was about to do it again now. Dhole fully intended to kill Yuki on the spot.

“Wait…!” Otter cried.

He wasn’t trying to stop her. He knew Dhole didn’t kill because she wanted to. It was her job. If she had to kill to accomplish her mission, she’d do it. Otter wasn’t interested in changing her mind. All he wanted was to warn her.

It was the car—the white minivan. Someone had just stepped out from the driver’s side door. He was wearing a black cap, a black leather jacket, and a matching pair of slim, black pants. He sported a beard, too, and had a thin silhouette that reminded Otter of a spider. The man looked older than Ibe and Yuki—somewhere around thirty—and considering Yuki’s earlier comment about “Hideyoshi,” Otter had a pretty good hunch this was him.

Ibe and Yuki both had zingai. Did Hideyoshi? It wasn’t guaranteed, but there was a high chance he did.

Wait—there it is. A zingai. That must be Hideyoshi’s.

Another entity had left the minivan in Hideyoshi’s wake. It was vaguely humanoid, yet strangely spherical. It looked like a flabby,

misshapen mass of meat. It had been waiting in the minivan's back seat and now slopped its way out from the sliding door.

Not only was the zingai off-putting, but it was also huge. Not in terms of height—it was only about as tall as an average adult male—but rather, in terms of *width*. Otter had once watched a TV program about a man who'd grown so morbidly obese that he couldn't even get out of bed anymore, and the zingai before him was even larger than that.

Just as Dhole noticed Hideyoshi and his accompanying meat mass, the latter launched itself into the air. Otter wasn't sure which had happened first. Hideyoshi, meanwhile, was carrying a small, black object. As soon as he exited the car, he held it out in front of him. Looking closer, Otter could tell it was a handgun.

The gun captured both Dhole's and Otter's attention immediately. They were used to dealing with zingai. They'd scuffled with ones as large as lions or bears and just as dangerous. The thing about zingai, though, was that they didn't use guns. This was Japan, and firearms were very strictly regulated. None of the zingai-users they'd dealt with in the past had been packing heat. Otter had never even had a gun pointed at him before. He didn't know about Dhole, but at the very least, it hadn't happened even once since they'd teamed up. She might have nerves of steel, but that didn't guarantee she could stare down the barrel of a gun without flinching.

Hideyoshi held the gun with one hand and turned it sideways as he aimed. It was the sort of stance a person only took if they were trying to look the part. He wasn't a trained professional—that much was obvious. Otter wondered if the gun in his hand was even real. It could easily have been a model. That would explain a lot—this *was* Japan, after all. Getting your hands on a gun was possible, if you had a source and enough money to foot the bill, but you couldn't just go out and buy one on a whim. Maybe this was just a bluff.

No sooner had that thought crossed Otter's mind than Hideyoshi pulled the trigger.

"Bang!"

A shot…did *not* ring out. Hideyoshi had simply said the word "bang." Dhole had not been shot.

Why, you little…!

Otter was beside himself with fury. If Hideyoshi had been in punching range, he would have given him the beating of a lifetime. But at the same time, a doubt lingered in his mind: Had it really *just* been a tasteless practical joke?

Otter looked upward—and was struck dumb. The mass of flesh that had lobbed itself into the air was now descending directly toward Dhole. The part Otter found hardest to believe, however, was its size. In the handful of seconds it was in the air, it seemed to have swollen to a monstrous degree. It was unimaginably huge. An enormous blob of featureless meat. But even considering its size, what happened next was surprising.

Otter would never have predicted that Dhole might *fail* to dodge the zingai. It just wasn't like her. Maybe it was the gun's fault. Maybe she was so preoccupied by it, she'd reacted just a moment too late. If it was meant as a distraction, it had worked to stunning effect.

The mass of flesh landed directly on Dhole, crushing her under its mass. One moment Otter was watching her, and the next, she was gone, pinned beneath the gargantuan lump of meat.

Otter had to help. He had to save her, right away. He tried to kick off the ground with his right foot, still fused with Olver, but he was careless. He'd completely lost track of his surroundings, and failed to notice another threat: Omen, Yuki's white, doll-like zingai collective. They'd closed in on Otter before he realized what was happening, and in an instant, he was swarmed.

"Agh…!" Otter yelped.

The white dolls were careful, leaping toward and latching on to his left leg, his waist, his arms—every part of him *except* for the leg that Olver had merged with. They dragged him to the ground, immobilizing him in the blink of an eye.

"Heh-heh, ha-ha-ha-ha!"

A grating, irritating laugh rang out—Hideyoshi's. The spiderlike man was on the move, though by the time Otter noticed, he had already drawn close enough to crouch down and bring his scraggly, unshaven face right up to Otter's. Hideyoshi looked down at him, then pressed his gun to Otter's head, right between the eyes, still stubbornly holding it sideways.

"You people ate Ibe's zingai," said Hideyoshi, "and that means torture time's over. That's not really our style to begin with. After all, we've offered our souls up to Sullivan, and fight on behalf of his lofty ideals. We're his proud, loyal warriors—the sworn foes of the organization's dogs. We *kill* our enemies. And now, it's time for you to die."

I was wrong about one thing, Otter thought. *That's no model. It's a real gun. He's going to shoot me, and at point-blank range. It doesn't matter if he holds it like a dumbass—he's not going to miss. He's going to blow a hole in my forehead.*

Hideyoshi raised his other arm, taking hold of the gun's grip with both hands. Then he pulled the trigger.

In a moment of pure, blind desperation, Otter wrenched his head to the side. A very small part of him congratulated himself for not reflexively shutting his eyes. He was proud of the fact that, somehow, he'd survived. The bullet passed just to the right of his head, so close he could feel the impact as it slammed into the ground. His right eye felt oddly hot, but not because it was hit. He hadn't been shot—that much was certain.

"Huh?! You piece of…!" Hideyoshi snarled as he lined up a second shot.

Otter knew that this time might really be it. If he was shot at this range, it'd be the end of him. A bullet to the head, more often than not, meant instant death.

"Grrraaaaaauuugh!"

A rumbling, bestial roar echoed through the factory. Otter knew in an instant that it was Dhole. He'd never mistake her voice, even altered by her fusion with Garmr.

"What the…?" Hideyoshi spun to the side, and while the gun was still in his hands, it *wasn't* aimed at Otter's head anymore. This was his chance.

"Olverrr!"

Otter opened his eyes as wide as they could go. He didn't spare a single thought about what to do, or how to do it. He left it all to Olver, putting his life in his zingai's hands.

Using the leg he'd melded with, Olver forced Otter upright, shook off the white, doll-like Omens, and sent Hideyoshi flying with a nasty kick for good measure. Otter found himself spinning through the air, tilted at an odd angle. As he flew, he just barely managed to catch a glimpse of Dhole, still clad in Garmr's skin, lifting the flesh-lump zingai above her head in a stunning display of strength.

Otter hit the concrete hard and tumbled across the ground while Dhole hurled the flesh-lump zingai back toward Hideyoshi. He threw himself to the side and dodged in the nick of time, which was a shame—Otter would've gotten a good laugh out of him getting crushed to death by his own zingai.

Hideyoshi sat up, looking mad as hell. "Get them, Fat Man!" he roared.

Is that his zingai's name? Fat Man?

Fat Man bounced off the ground, ricocheting back toward Dhole once again. She didn't bother dodging. Dhole met the zingai's charge head-on and grabbed onto its flank. They tumbled to the ground together in a furious, violent melee. Dhole sunk her teeth into the mass of flesh in a very literal sense, tearing it apart one chunk of meat after another. It didn't bleed, though, and for every piece of meat she tore, shaved, and carved away, more emerged beneath it. It really was meat all the way down. The flesh-lump zingai wasn't exactly happy about being torn to pieces, of course. It twisted its huge, fleshy form, trying to push Dhole away, but it didn't work. She wouldn't let it escape.

Dhole had a clear advantage, but that didn't mean that Otter could sit on his hands and wait until her battle was over. *Sorry, Olver. Just*

one last push, he thought as he rose to his feet once again. It was only thanks to his zingai's efforts that he could stand at all. His other leg screamed out in pain. It could hardly bear any weight at all. He might've had a broken bone or two. But for now, he didn't care. He knew what he had to do.

Otter pushed forward, coaxing every ounce of power that he could out of Olver and his right leg. There was only one thing to do: kill. He needed to kill Hideyoshi. Otter had to end a human's life.

Maybe that would make him a murderer, but it was his mission. It had to be done. And more importantly, it was the only way he could help his mentor. He didn't want to be the sort of coworker who left all the dirty work to his more experienced colleagues. Dhole had always been the one to pull him out of trouble, and he couldn't let that status quo last forever. He had to help her bear their job's heaviest burdens.

Hideyoshi was kneeling on the ground, watching Dhole and Fat Man duke it out. Otter barreled toward him, bellowing an unconscious war cry. That inadvertent shout was the one reason why he didn't catch Hideyoshi off guard.

"Wha—?!" Hideyoshi yelped. He spun around and fired several shots at Otter in quick succession.

Otter felt an incredibly heavy impact in his gut, like someone had driven a baseball bat into his abdomen. He staggered, but he didn't stop. He tried to run through the pain. He couldn't find his center of balance, and his legs weren't moving the way he wanted them to, but that didn't matter. He'd been injured and off balance ever since he woke up. He took another bullet, this time to his left arm, but that didn't matter either. Otter told himself he was fine—that he didn't need his arms for what he was about to do.

"Shit, I'm out of—!" Hideyoshi began. He was still pulling the trigger, but his gun was empty. And before he could finish his sentence, Otter was finally close enough to grab hold of him. He wrapped a hand around Hideyoshi's neck, letting his momentum carry both of them to the floor.

Not good enough. I have to kill him. This is a job for Olver, not my puny hands.

Hideyoshi's mouth flapped open and closed. He was trying to say something, but Otter's grip was cutting off his windpipe, and he couldn't spit out so much as a single word.

That's fine. It's better that way. Just die.

Otter leaned in and put all his weight into crushing Hideyoshi's throat.

Die already. Die.

Otter fully intended to go through with it—to end Hideyoshi's life. But he didn't manage it, and it took him quite some time to figure out just what had happened instead.

It started with a low, loud *bang*. It hadn't come from Hideyoshi. Something else had made the noise, and it had sent Otter flying in the process. His best guess was that something had hit him, but he was so disoriented, he couldn't be certain. The next thing Otter knew, he was on his hands and knees—or maybe flat on his back. Not even that was totally clear to him.

Someone was there, standing right next to him. It was a man. A huge man, with long boots and thick, glove-like hands. A medical mask with a set of bared teeth drawn on it covered his massive face, and he was either bald or wearing some sort of hat—Otter wasn't sure which. His eyes were hollow, vacant, and trained directly on Otter.

"…Sullivan's…"

He heard a voice. Was it Hideyoshi's? It might have been.

Sullivan? No. Sullivan's. Sullivan's what?

The masked man raised one of his legs. It looked like he was planning on crushing Otter's face beneath his booted heel.

Yeah, that's gonna hurt. Actually, pain might be the least of my worries.

Otter was about to have his head pulverized against the pavement. And yet, strangely, it felt like this was happening to someone else, and he was somewhere far, far away from it all.

Guess that's a wrap. Didn't figure this was how I'd go. Sorry, Miss Dhole. I bet you'd get angry if I said that to you, huh? You'd tell me to stop apologizing. I really am sorry, though. I really am…

"Mngaaaaaahhh!"

Miss Dhole. Why am I hearing her voice?

The answer, of course, was because she was there. She shouted as she charged into the fray, tackling the masked man away from Otter. She was always there—always ready to save her unreliable coworker from whatever mortal peril he'd landed himself in. That was just who she was.

"Who in the hell…gave you bastards the right…to make mincemeat outta my partner, huh…?!"

She was a woman who always stood strong when push came to shove, covering her allies' backs while she looked her enemy in the eye and spat defiance in their face. She was the ace of the Special Affairs Response Office: Dahlia Four's Dhole. She stood before Otter, clad in Garmr's skin, a werewolf woman as beautiful as she was repulsive.

How do you like that? thought Otter. *That's my mentor you're looking at. Isn't she something? Isn't she awesome? The biggest badass you've ever seen, I swear.*

Otter chuckled—or tried to anyway. His voice didn't seem to be working right. He couldn't tell if he was in pain or not. He couldn't move, and he couldn't see much at all anymore.

Oh. This might be bad. Am I dying?

Otter got the feeling he was teetering on the verge of death, but he still wanted to laugh. After all, if he was going to die, he at least wanted to go out smiling. But this wasn't the time for that. Otter hadn't yet understood his situation—that this was absolutely not the moment for levity.





Wait. What?

Otter watched as, suddenly, Dhole shed Garmr's skin.

Why?

Garmr lifted Otter, carrying him on its back.

What the hell are you doing?

"The rest is up to you," Dhole said. Her voice was quiet, her tone flat. She wasn't looking at Otter, but he knew she was talking to him. He was certain.

It's up to me? The rest? The rest of what*? What are you talking about? What is this?*

Garmr ran. It was trying to flee the abandoned factory, carrying Otter with it.

What are you doing? What's the point of this? Stop!

He tried to struggle. To resist.

Stop, please. Put me down. You can't do this, Garmr! What are you hoping to achieve?

No matter what he tried, Garmr didn't stop. Otter did everything he could, but that wasn't much. He was half dead already. His field of vision was dim, and he couldn't be sure if it was just the nighttime darkness, or if he was already slipping into unconsciousness. Still, he called out her name from that blackness. He shouted it time after time after time after time, over and over again.

Otter knew Dhole's real name. It was Touko Shima. He'd called her Touko to her face once, as a joke, and she'd nonchalantly replied, *What do you want, Itsuya Haizaki?* She'd acted perfectly calm and cool about it, and when Otter had asked her why, she'd snorted and explained that it was only natural—that was her name, after all. Why would it be weird for someone to call her by it?

Miss. Miss Dhole. Miss Touko Shima. Touko.

Suddenly, Otter was dumped to the ground in the dark. Garmr, who'd been carrying him just moments before, was gone. It had to be around somewhere, but there was no sign of it at all. The only thing Otter could perceive was the cold, grassy ground below him.

That, and the faint sound of water in the distance. Maybe there was a river nearby?

One way or another, he was alone. Garmr was gone. It had disappeared. His mentor's zingai had vanished without a trace.

Otter didn't understand what that meant. For the time being, it wasn't something he needed to understand. It wasn't something he was ready to accept.



#3 / Standing on the Other Side

I'd Be There for You

And then, the Yark thinks of all the children he's eaten. And as if to gain some smidgen of forgiveness, he finds it hardly unjust to be eaten in his turn.

—*The Yark*, Bertrand Santini



#3-1_tobi_otogiri/ Open the Door

Tobi Otogiri wasn't horrified, and he wasn't particularly disgusted, either. All he felt was the quickening of his pulse as his heart began to pound.

"Don't look," said Baku. "You don't wanna see this, Tobi."

It didn't feel like a command. It was more like Baku was giving him *permission* not to look. Telling him he didn't have to. And yet, for reasons Tobi didn't understand, he couldn't tear his eyes away from the girl lying face down on the ground in the school's courtyard. A puddle of blood had formed around her, and it was growing broader and broader as the seconds ticked by. Her arms, legs, and even her fingers twitched and spasmed randomly.

"No!" a voice rang out as someone covered Tobi's face with their hands. It was Haizaki, the janitor. "Close your eyes, Otogiri! Don't look…!"

Tobi could only remember vague bits and pieces of what happened past that point. He remembered an ambulance arriving, and then the police. A police officer had asked him all sorts of questions, and he was fairly certain he'd responded honestly. Afternoon classes were canceled, and by the time Tobi was able to leave, the other students and teachers were all gone. One of the institute's staff members drove over to pick him up, and in the end, Tobi begrudgingly accepted the ride home.

The school was shut down for a day or two. Tobi spent his time off flipping through the institute's books, sitting around in an absent-minded daze, chatting about nothing in particular with Baku, and dozing off whenever he felt the urge. He couldn't work up the motivation to walk around outdoors.

Every once in a while, Tobi found himself thinking about Takatomo. He didn't know her well, though—in fact, he barely knew her at all. He hadn't even known that her given name was Miyuki until the police officer mentioned it during their conversation. What was he supposed to accomplish by thinking about someone he barely knew? And even if he wanted to think about her, what did he have to think *about*?

Why had Takatomo jumped? Tobi didn't have a clue.

As Tobi was leaving the institute the following Monday morning, one of its staff members stopped him to explain that he didn't have to go to school if he didn't want to. Tobi ignored the offer.

"You sure about that?" asked Baku.

"About what?" Tobi replied. Baku didn't bother to answer.

The teacher with the black-rimmed glasses was standing in front of the school gate again. Most mornings, the look he gave Tobi was downright hostile. But today, the moment he noticed Tobi approaching the gates, he simply adjusted his glasses and stared at the ground instead.

"Talk about throwing a guy off…," Baku muttered.

Tobi changed into his indoor shoes, then headed for his classroom. He got the strange feeling something was missing, though. A weird sense of disappointment washed over him, and it wasn't until he was about to step into his classroom that he realized why: It was because Shiratama hadn't been lying in wait for him that day.

Class 2-3's atmosphere was rather subdued. It wasn't a complete, deathly silence—some students were still chatting with one another—but everyone was speaking at a noticeably lower volume than they usually did. There was a certain diffidence to their voices. Tobi couldn't hear anyone laughing, for once. Nobody could bring themselves to joke around.

Shiratama was sitting at her desk. She stood up the moment she noticed Tobi and, for some strange reason, gave him a polite bow.

"Good morning," she said.

"…Morning," Tobi replied. He could feel his classmates' stares boring into him. Most of the other students in the room were looking right at him.

"It's 'cause you're a witness," Baku said in a slightly mocking tone.

Oh. So that's what this is about.

Over the course of morning homeroom, Tobi's teacher, Mr. Harimoto—aka Harry—explained that Miyuki Takatomo was in critical condition. "She's been hospitalized, and the doctors are doing everything they can, but she still hasn't regained consciousness," he said.

Harimoto was wearing a white button-down shirt and a pair of black slacks rather than his usual red sweatsuit. Tobi had no idea why. No clue whatsoever.

"I'm sure all of you are very worried about her," Harimoto continued. "If any of you have anything you'd like to tell me, don't hesitate to share. It looks like some weird rumors are spreading about all this, so let me say this right now: Don't believe any of them. Understood?"

Weird rumors? What weird rumors? Once again, Tobi was clueless. There were so many things he didn't know, it felt like he didn't know anything at all. It was like the world itself was made up of a vast quantity of mysteries, each and every one unknowable to him.

There were thirty-five students in Class 2-3, not counting Tobi himself. One of them was Shizukudani, the girl who spent her school days in the nurse's office. Tobi had never even seen her, so for all practical purposes, there were *thirty-four* other students in his class. In any case, it had always felt like there was a transparent barrier between him and those thirty-four other people. It was thin and flexible, but unbreakable, and it shut Tobi out from the rest of the class entirely.

Right now, Tobi missed that barrier dearly. If it was still standing strong, he'd never take this much of an interest in his classmates, and they'd pay him no mind in turn. Now Tobi's classmates were

stealing glances at him, even when class was in session. They'd pretend to look out the window, using it as an excuse to casually inspect Tobi instead. Tobi was no better, though. He found himself unconsciously glancing around the classroom whenever he had a spare moment. He'd keep it up until he happened to meet another student's gaze, which would make him more uncomfortable than ever.

Shiratama spent most of the day staring at her desk, brooding. Her complexion was usually very fair, almost pale. But now, she was a whole shade paler. Tobi thought she looked a little sickly. Maybe she hadn't been getting much sleep recently. Tobi wondered if Shiratama had been close with Takatomo. He had no idea.

During the break between second and third period, a girl in Tobi's class burst into tears. She'd been whispering with a pair of other girls, and apparently their exchange had caused her to break down into sobs.

"Chiami…"

One of the other girls called to her awkwardly. They looked bewildered. Meanwhile, a weird *thing* a little like a bat and a little like a flying squirrel clung to the crying girl's back. Chiami Kon was sobbing.

Shiratama stepped toward Kon, then seemed to reconsider, stopping partway across the classroom. Eventually, the two girls who'd been talking to her helped escort her out of the room. All three of them returned after the bell signaling the start of the third period had already rung, but the teacher didn't scold them.

Third period came and went. When it was over, Shuuji Masaki—aka Masamune, the boy with the tarsier-like *thing* in the speak-no-evil pose perched atop his head—stood in front of the blackboard and cleared his throat.

"So hey," he said, "I get why everyone's in a mood. But I don't like it. I mean, just to be clear, I really do get it, okay? It makes total sense. But what are we accomplishing by being depressed? I'm not

saying that we should throw a party, but couldn't we act…I dunno, a little more normal, I guess?"

Reactions among Tobi's classmates were muted. About four-fifths of them just seemed baffled, and the remaining fifth were hostile. Of course, that was assuming Tobi was judging their reactions correctly.

"Oh god, please forgive me!" Masamune bellowed. He leaned over the teacher's podium, brow furrowed in obviously feigned sorrow. "I shouldn't have said that! Oh, woe is me! I'm so, *so* sorry…"

A few of the students snickered. It was sort of astonishing that he had the guts to play the class clown at a time like this. Tobi was kind of impressed, but some of his classmates were less than pleased.

"Shut the hell up. I mean it," one of the boys spat, voice low and menacing. He punctuated the implied threat by kicking the ground. His foot only scuffed across the floor, but it still made enough noise to startle Tobi, whose seat happened to be nearby.

Baku, who was hanging from Tobi's desk, shivered slightly. "Ooof," he murmured.

The boy who'd spoken up had hair long enough that his bangs mostly covered his eyes. His surname was Asamiya, if Tobi remembered correctly.

Right, Asamiya. That was it. Something Asamiya. Shinobu? Yeah, that sounds right. Shinobu Asamiya.

Masamune looked at Asamiya, then averted his gaze almost instantly. *Shut the hell up. I mean it*, he'd said. Maybe Masamune hadn't heard him? The speak-no-evil tarsier atop his head, however, kept its eyes firmly trained on the other boy. Or at least that was how it looked to Tobi, though part of him suspected he was overthinking or imagining it.

Tarsier aside, Chiami Kon was definitely casting Asamiya a sidelong glance. The weird *thing* clinging to her back had turned its baby-like face toward him as well.

Suddenly, Tobi found himself pondering that same question all over again: Why, exactly, had Miyuki Takatomo jumped off the roof?

Tobi bolted down his lunch and left the classroom, carrying Baku. The weather was decent that day, but the courtyard was sealed off. It was a crime scene, after all. Tobi didn't necessarily have to go through the courtyard to get to the roof—he could scale the school from anywhere, as long as it was outside. But when he thought about it, he just didn't feel like going up there. He didn't want to be on the roof, all because Takatomo had jumped. A girl who went to his school, who was in his class, had jumped off the roof, and he still couldn't stop asking himself: *Why?*

Tobi walked through the hallways at such a rapid pace, he might as well have been jogging. He didn't have a destination. He just didn't feel at ease standing still. Unusually, Baku kept completely quiet. He'd fallen into a stubborn, gloomy silence, and it was starting to grate on Tobi's nerves. When Baku was quiet, he was no better than an ordinary backpack.

Tobi couldn't go to the roof. Not now that Takatomo had jumped. Did that mean it was her fault? Was she to blame? Tobi had a hard time accepting that. Surely she hadn't jumped off the roof because she wanted to. She knew what would happen if she did. It wasn't hard to imagine. She must have been perfectly aware she wouldn't just walk away from a fall like that—that she'd be horribly injured at best, and at worst, dead. He just didn't understand. He didn't get what sort of feelings had driven Takatomo to do it. How could he?

Before long, lunchtime came to an end. Students spilled out into the halls, and Tobi started looking for somewhere he could be alone. It was like he was on the run from his classmates, and he felt ridiculous.

Baku, for some reason, was still silent. Maybe he really *was* just an ordinary backpack. Maybe he'd been one from the very beginning. Tobi couldn't help but ponder the possibilities, even though he knew for a fact they weren't true.

Say something already, Baku, Tobi thought. He couldn't say it out loud, though. That would make him feel like he'd lost. But what was he losing? What were they competing over, exactly?

Eventually, Tobi wound up on the third floor of the special-use classroom wing. No one else was in the hallway, and Tobi, feeling a little worn-out, sat down on the roof staircase.

The special-use classroom wing was three stories tall, with another set of stairs leading up to a door to the roof. Assuming you couldn't climb up the outside wall like Tobi, that was the only way to access it.

Takatomo, then, had used this staircase to get to the roof. She'd passed through the door at the top—but how had she unlocked it? The janitor, Haizaki, had said that the key to the rooftop had gone missing. Most likely, it had ended up in Takatomo's hands. Normally it would've been kept on a rack of keys hung up in the staff room, close to the vice principal's desk. Had Takatomo stolen it from there? Considering how exposed the rack was, that would have been pretty challenging.

However she'd gotten ahold of it, Takatomo had unlocked the door, stepped onto the rooftop, and thrown herself off it, into the courtyard. Tobi had watched her fall. He'd seen the moment she landed, and the aftermath, very clearly. But the details of that image now escaped him. He remembered her lying face down, but was her face actually pressed into the ground? Or was her head turned sideways? Were her arms and legs bent, or were they straight?

Tobi closed his eyes and tried to recall what she'd looked like, but his heart started pounding wildly. A suffocating pain began to spread through his chest. It felt like his heart was telling him to stop—telling him not to remember, no matter what.

"…What's wrong with me?" he muttered to himself.

Just then, he heard the sound of footsteps. Someone was climbing up the stairs to the third floor, just one flight below him. He heaved a sigh and had already started standing up when he caught sight of the person who'd interrupted him.

"Ah."

There, on the stairs below, was Shiratama. Her face lit up the moment she saw Tobi.

"So this is where you've been, Otogiri."

"I guess…," Tobi replied as he sat back down.

For a moment, Shiratama just stood there below him. Neither of them spoke. Eventually, she climbed the stairs and sat next to him.

"Were you looking for Tobi, Oryuu?" Baku asked.

Shiratama nodded. "I was," she said. "I was hoping to speak with him."

"Bad call. You're gonna be so bored. This guy's the worst conversationalist you'll ever meet, unlike me."

"Oh, I'm sure that isn't true! He's not boring at all," Shiratama replied. She'd laid her pouch on her lap and was now fidgeting restlessly with it. "In fact, I haven't felt bored while talking with him even once."

"We've barely spoken, though," Tobi said, choosing his words very carefully. He found himself watching her hands as she played with her pouch. Her nails were so cleanly trimmed, he couldn't pick out a single hint of white on them. "I mean, it hasn't been very long since we started talking."

"I suppose that's true, now that you mention it," said Shiratama. "It's so strange," she added at a much lower volume.

What's strange? Tobi wanted to ask, but for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to.

In the end, Tobi and Shiratama barely spoke. They didn't sit in complete silence, but what words they did exchange hardly amounted to a conversation. Every once in a while, a passerby would stop and give them a confused, dubious stare before moving on, which didn't seem to bother Shiratama at all, but got under Tobi's skin a little at first. Once he realized that Shiratama didn't care, though, he gradually lost the will to care about it himself.

The two of them kept sitting in the special-use classroom wing until just before the start of afternoon classes. Aside from the occasional benign exchange, they simply sat there. Tobi didn't mind

it. That was a little surprising—he would've expected it to feel a lot more uncomfortable than it actually did.

Later on, about halfway through fifth period, Shinobu Asamiya—the boy with the long bangs—suddenly raised his hand.

"What is it, Asamiya?" the teacher asked.

Asamiya's hand was only half raised, really. His elbows were both resting on his desk, and he was leaning forward, hanging his head. For a moment, he didn't say anything at all—long enough for a stir to pass through the classroom and silence to set in again.

Finally, Asamiya opened his mouth. "I feel sick," he said.

"Oh, I see," the teacher replied. "Then you should get some rest. Who's this class's health officer?"

"That's me," Chiami Kon said, raising her hand.

"Oh, good. Kon, please walk Asamiya to the nurse's office."

"Okaaay."

As Kon stood up from her desk, a loud clatter rang out. It hadn't come from her, though—it was the sound of Asamiya shooting to his feet so quickly he knocked over his chair. He charged for the door, pursued by a panicked and bewildered Kon.

"Asamiya, wait!" she shouted.

"Stay away from me!" he yelled back. He threw open the sliding door, then paused to shoot a nasty glare in Kon's direction. It was a downright menacing expression, and Kon flinched away from him. "I'm… I'm fine on my own," he added in a much weaker, less aggressive tone, almost like he was trying to excuse his outburst. With that, he left the room.

"Yiiikes," someone in class muttered under their breath. It didn't take long for other students to follow their lead and start commenting as well.

"Quiet down!" the teacher shouted, punctuating the order with a couple quick claps. "We're still in the middle of class. Kon, take your seat."

"But…" Kon looked at the classroom door, then at Asamiya's empty seat. She must have been worried about him.

Around that point, Tobi happened to look over at Masamune. He was sitting with his hands clasped over his mouth in what was, perhaps coincidentally, a very similar pose to the speak-no-evil tarsier on his head.

Kon returned to her desk, and the teacher carried on with the lesson. Tobi wondered if leaving Asamiya on his own was really a good idea. Had he actually gone to the nurse's office?

Tobi's gaze met Shiratama's a few times over the course of the lesson. Her brow was furrowed, and her lips slightly pursed. Finally, when he met her gaze again toward the end of class, she mouthed a few words at him. Tobi, however, wasn't able to figure out what she was trying to say.

A chime rang signaling the end of fifth period, and Tobi stood up before his teacher could dismiss them. He'd made it most of the way to the door before he realized he'd forgotten Baku at his desk.

"Hey, Tobi! C'mon! Are you kidding me?!" Baku yelled. Tobi ignored him and left the classroom.

He walked through the halls at a restless pace, his stride broad, despite not knowing where he was going. Eventually, he made his way to the restroom, but when he got there, he realized he didn't need to use it. This wasn't his destination.

He wasn't sure where he wanted to go until his feet finally carried him to the nurse's office. Tobi was a little surprised he'd ended up there, despite having walked there himself.

Well, here I am. The nurse's office, it is.

Tobi couldn't stop thinking about Asamiya, no matter how hard he tried. Would he be in the nurse's office or not? Tobi wanted to see for himself. He didn't know what he'd do with that information—probably nothing—but he still wanted it. He'd never even spoken with Asamiya before, and he wasn't particularly interested in doing so now.

This is weird. I'm being weird right now, and I know it, Tobi thought. It wasn't too late. He could still turn around and leave. There was still time. He could just *go*.

"Otogiri!"

Shiratama ran over to Tobi, who spun on his heel to face her. She jogged right up next to him and paused, hunching over to catch her breath.

"…I—I was w-worried about Asamiya, too," Shiratama explained.

"Okay, but you didn't have to sprint here," countered Tobi.

"Ugh… You're just so fast, Otogiri! I t-tried to keep pace with you, and, well…," Shiratama said, trailing off. She pulled a handkerchief from her skirt's pocket and blotted her brow. "I think I've worked up a sweat!"

"Did you really have to catch up with me, though…?"

"I suppose I didn't, when you put it that way. It was an impulse."

"So, uh…," Tobi began, before finding himself at a loss for words.

"Hmm?" Shiratama replied, leaning toward him without missing a beat. Tobi nearly flinched away from her but managed to keep himself from actually stepping back. It wasn't easy.

"I just, well… I mean, I don't really know Asamiya or have anything to do with him…"

"I happen to be rather close with him!" Shiratama replied.

"Oh. Really?"

"We were in the same class in seventh grade, too. We knew each other well enough to make small talk, from time to time."

"'Small talk'? 'From time to time'…?"

"Oh, you know—like *it's a lovely day out* or *it sure has been hot lately*, or *I can't believe it's this cold already*. "

"And you think that makes you 'rather close'…?"

"You wouldn't talk about the weather with someone you didn't get along with, would you?"

"…Is that how it works?"

"Isn't it?"

"Dunno. I don't really get all that socializing stuff. You'd probably know better…"

"I'd know better than you would?"

"Yeah."

"Well then, I'm glad to hear that you agree with my position!" Shiratama said, glancing down bashfully as she stowed her handkerchief in her pocket. Then she called out "Excuse us!" and stepped into the nurse's office.

Tobi had never been to the nurse's office before, but he was aware that the school nurse made a habit of walking around in a lab coat. The nurse wasn't present at the moment, but the room wasn't empty, either. Instead of the nurse, Tobi found a girl with glasses, sitting in a chair with her legs crossed.

"Oh?" she said, blinking rapidly as she noticed Shiratama. "If it isn't Shiratama Dango!"

"Hello, Shizukudani. Good day to you," Shiratama said politely, not at all surprised by the girl's presence.

Tobi had entirely forgotten that one of his classmates spent her days there. Shiratama was the one who'd told him that in the first place, so it made sense that she'd expected to see her.

"You're as weirdly polite as ever, huh, Shiratama Dango?" Shizukudani said with a chuckle. She leaned an elbow onto the nearby desk, spinning a pen in her other hand. For someone who'd stopped coming to school for a time and now shut herself in the nurse's office, she seemed oddly nonchalant.

"Sorry, what?" asked Tobi. "'Shiratama dango'? Like the dumplings…?"

Shizukudani stopped spinning her pen. "And what was your name, again?" she asked. "You're Class 2-3's biggest freak show, I know that much. Oh—don't tell me the answer, Shiratama Dango! I'd rather suss this out myself. Feels like I'll remember if I give myself some time. Hmm… Oh, right! I got it—Tobi Otogiri. That's your name, isn't it?"

"…Y-yeah," Tobi replied.

"Great. Then from now on, I'm gonna call you Tobitobi."

"Seriously…?"

"All right, I'll let you choose: Obiobi, Girigiri, or Tobitobi. Pick your poison."

"…Tobitobi, then."

"Great, that settles it. Good talk."

"Just who do you think you are…?"

"Shizukudani's the name! Ruka works too, on account of my full name being Rukana Shizukudani. Feel free to call me li'l ol' Ruka if you want, but fair warning, it kinda pisses me off when people do that, so I might beat the hell out of you if you try it. Nice to meet you, and all."

Shizukudani capped off her bizarre self-introduction by thrusting her pen toward Tobi. Tobi wasn't interested in having the crap beaten out of him or getting stabbed with a pen, so he made a mental note to *not* call her Ruka under any circumstances. Not that he wanted to be on a first-name basis with this girl to begin with.





Tobi took a moment to glance around the nurse's office. There was a stool lying nearby, as well as a single, circular table with two chairs and a laptop set out on top of it. Three beds were set up in the room, each equipped with a curtain to give the occupant some privacy. One of those curtains was currently drawn.

"Hey, Shizukudani," said Shiratama. "Did Asamiya come in here?"

The girl jabbed her pen toward the bed with the drawn curtain. "Yup," she said. "He's asleep, though. Said he felt sick, or something."

Shiratama looked up at the ceiling and let her eyes drift closed. Then she put both hands to her chest and let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, good."

"Huh?" Shizukudani cocked her head and looked over at Tobi.

Tobi couldn't fathom why she was staring at him and simply averted his gaze.

At that moment, the curtains surrounding the occupied bed slid open just enough for Asamiya to poke his head out.

"Shiratama…and Otogiri, too? What are you here for?" He sounded more unhappy than unwell, and he glared up at Shiratama, who for her part seemed pretty upset by his hostility.

"Asamiya," Tobi began before pausing. How was he supposed to speak with him? What sort of tone would be appropriate? Asamiya had been fairly curt and direct so far, so maybe it wasn't worth worrying about. "Your hair," Tobi finally said.

"…What?" Asamiya grunted.

"The bangs. They're pretty long."

"Okay…?"

"There's a teacher. Black glasses. He always stands by the school gate in the mornings—"

"Mr. Yagarashima?"

"I don't know his name, but probably. Doesn't he chew you out?"

"Well, yeah. Sometimes."

"Figured."

"Right."

"That's all."

It was only after the exchange was over that it occurred to Tobi to wonder what, exactly, he'd wanted to say in the first place. If even *he* didn't know, it wasn't a surprise that Asamiya was befuddled.

"…Seriously, what are you here for?" Asamiya asked. "Shiratama's one thing, but we've never even talked, have we, Otogiri?"

"I mean, no…"

"Come to think of it, I don't think I've seen you talk with anyone at all."

"Ugh," Tobi groaned involuntarily. He knew that if he were in Asamiya's position, he probably would've thought it was weird, too.

"*Ahem!*" Shiratama said, forcing her way into the exchange. It seemed she was stepping in to bail Tobi out. "How are you feeling, Asamiya? Are you ill or in pain?"

"…It's not like that," Asamiya replied. He was sitting on the bed, and Tobi noticed that he wasn't wearing shoes. They were lying on the floor by his feet, and Tobi saw something else there as well, which instantly stole his attention.

Something was under the bed. Had Asamiya not noticed it? How? It was right next to his feet. Was it just not in his field of vision? All he'd have to do was glance down, and he'd see it in an instant. It wasn't small, either. It was probably about the size of a human torso—not the sort of thing you could just *miss*.

In fact, it resembled a human's upper half rather closely. It even had arms. The issue was how *many* arms it had: four, in total. It had a head as well—bald, with unclear features. They were humanoid, yet utterly unfamiliar and alien, especially the eyes. It had two pairs of them, giving it four eyes in total.

Tobi surreptitiously checked Shiratama's expression. She looked back and flashed him a smile. It was a pleasant gesture in isolation, but Tobi assumed it was supposed to mean something.

Tobi had heard a number of things about Shizukudani from Shiratama. She was the theoretical occupant of the empty desk in

Class 2-3, but she spent her days in the nurse's office. She'd been in Shiratama's class during their first year in middle school. And finally, she had a weird *thing* of her own.

Tobi had Baku, Shiratama had Chinurasha hidden in her pouch, Masamune had his speak-no-evil tarsier, and Kon had that creature that was halfway between a bat and a flying squirrel. Even compared to all those, Shizukudani's *thing* was on a whole different level of weird. It was positively *grotesque*. A monster. Not only did it *look* creepy, but the way it moved didn't help at all.

Its arms wriggled and writhed, its fingers squirming restlessly as it slithered its way out from under the bed and across the floor in a repulsively smooth motion. Apparently, it could also climb up walls. This fact, again, did *not* help. It was like some sort of bug. A bug of that size was disturbing enough, and this one wasn't just a bug—it was *humanoid*. It was like something straight out of a nightmare. It made its way onto the ceiling and into a corner of the room, where it drew in its arms, shrinking itself down to perfectly fill the space—though its arms were still twitching and squirming, even after it folded them up.

"It's weird, right?" Asamiya said, his voice dark and subdued.

Does he mean Shizukudani's monster? Tobi wondered, but only for a split second before it became clear he was talking about something totally different.

"Our class, I mean. It's weird. I just couldn't take it anymore…"

"'Weird'?" Shizukudani repeated dubiously, her words directed at no one in particular. She'd started spinning her pen again. "Oh, I get it," she continued a moment later. "You mean the incident, right? The jumper? Yeah, that probably wouldn't have happened if everything in your class was right as rain. Fair enough. Crazy stuff, though, right? 'Course, li'l ol' Ruka's stuck in the nurse's office regardless, so I wouldn't know the first thing about all that."

Asamiya clicked his tongue and shook his head with obvious irritation. "If you don't know anything, then keep your mouth shut."

"Oooh, I'm so scaaared!" Shizukudani said, hugging her shoulders as she shivered with obviously affected horror. "Really, you should think twice about saying stuff like that! You'll scare me away! I'm a truant, you know? It took me *so* long to work up the nerve to spend my days in the nurse's office, and you're gonna risk ruining it all, just like that?"

"I don't give a damn. Miyu still hasn't woken up. She's in critical condition. She might not even…" Asamiya trailed off and shivered himself—though, unlike Shizukudani's, his gesture seemed considerably less voluntary. It was like he couldn't stop himself from shuddering.

"Aww, I'm *so* sorry," Shizukudani said, pressing her hands together in a gesture that, once again, looked completely insincere. "Wait, though. Miyu? Who's that? Oh, is it Takatomo? I think her full name is Miyuki Takatomo, isn't it? So Miyu comes from Miyuki, I get it! Wait. Don't tell me the two of you are *dating*?"

"Like hell we are. We're… We're not like that. We've just known each other forever. We're neighbors. We've barely talked since we started middle school. Our parents know each other, too, though, so —"

"You're so close, you've introduced each other to your parents! I see," Shiratama cut in with a knowing nod.

"*No!*" Asamiya shouted. "I already said we're not like that…"

"You're a pretty emotionally unstable guy aren't you, Asamiya?" Shizukudani said with a smirk.

Tobi was rapidly reaching the conclusion that the owner of his class's empty seat and the master of that monster was a real piece of work.

"But really, though, I can see Class 2-3 having some issues," she continued. "Spending five days a week in the nurse's office like me actually makes it pretty easy to tell. You'd be surprised how many kids from our class turn up here with upset stomachs and the like. That sorta thing usually stems from a mental problem rather than a

physical sickness, right? Not to brag, but I'm pretty much an expert when it comes to that stuff. Learning by experience, y'know?"

"…What about Miyu?" Asamiya asked.

"*Oui*," Shizukudani replied, busting out a foreign language for no clear reason. "A few times, as it happens, and just recently. She'd lie down for a while, maybe take some medicine, and leave again. As for other people who've been showing up lately, off the top of my head, there's Yoshizawa. You know, the hot one. And Murahama and Shimomaeda—they've both been coming here from time to time for a while now. Oh, but not together! One at a time."

The only one of those names Tobi could put a face to was Yoshizawa. Shizukudani had described him as hot, but the way Tobi saw it, he was more the charming, affable sort of handsome.

"Murahama and Shimomaeda…," Asamiya muttered, chewing on his right thumb as he considered the names. "Those are the two girls in Kon's clique. Miyu used to spend a lot of time with her, too, up until recently."

Tobi and Shiratama exchanged glances. Tobi was thinking about the bat-flying squirrel hybrid that always clung to Kon's back. He didn't know why it came to mind—by all rights, it had nothing to do with the situation—but for reasons he couldn't explain, he just couldn't help fixating on it.

Shiratama closed her eyes. "Kon seemed very distressed about what happened."

That wasn't hard to guess, considering she'd broken down in tears in front of the whole class earlier that day. Tobi assumed the two girls who'd comforted her at the time were Shimomaeda and Murahama.

"Not that it matters," Asamiya said. He held his head in his hands, mussing up his shaggy hair. "It doesn't matter who cries, or who shouts, or whatever… None of it's going to make Miyu better. Not even the doctors know whether she'll recover. Not knowing's the scariest part, huh? I'm scared… I'm so terrified, I can't sleep. I keep thinking about the worst. And she's just unconscious… I wonder

what that's like? Do you think she can hear anything? Is she dreaming? Does she still feel what's happening to her body? Do you think…she's lonely, being in the hospital on her own? Being paralyzed, and probably in pain? Why didn't I notice that something was wrong? No… That's not it. The truth is, I *did* notice. I thought she was acting weird. That something might've happened. But it had been so, so long since we'd talked to each other. I figured approaching her out of nowhere would creep her out. So…I didn't do anything. I noticed, but I didn't help. I never imagined it would end like this…"

Shizukudani spun her pen absentmindedly as she gazed out the window. Her monster was still in a corner of the ceiling, silent and unmoving.

Soon, the bell rang. Asamiya raised his head and gave Tobi and Shiratama a dull, gloomy look. "Shouldn't you be going? Sixth period's starting," he said.

"Yes… I suppose," Shiratama replied. She clutched the pouch containing Chinu to her chest. It looked like she was hesitating.

"We could cut class," Tobi suggested, for good measure.

Shiratama shook her head so vigorously, it was like the very thought was inconceivable to her. "No, I won't," she said. "I won't, but…Asamiya?"

"What?" Asamiya was already reaching for his bed's curtain. "I'm gonna lie down for a bit. If you don't want to miss class, you'd better get going."

"Would you like to visit…?"

"…What?"

"…Would you like to visit her with me? Takatomo, that is, in the hospital. And you'd be welcome to come along if you'd like, Otogiri."

"*Huh?*" Tobi grunted. Her invitation had caught him completely by surprise. Shiratama was giving him an uncomfortably earnest stare, as well, which made him think it was less of an invitation and more of a request. Unless he was completely misunderstanding her, she was asking him to come along. He couldn't see it any other way.

She wants to visit her? In the hospital? Takatomo? Why? Visits like that are for when people get a little sick or break a bone. Takatomo is in critical condition. She's been unconscious for days. They don't even let people in that state have visitors, do they?

Shiratama would know that as well, and yet she said she wanted to visit Takatomo anyway. Tobi knew she must have a reason for going, and for wanting him to tag along.

"…Sure, I guess."

After school, Tobi went with Asamiya and Shiratama to the hospital where Takatomo was being treated. It was about fifteen minutes away on foot. Asamiya spoke with the clerk at the front desk when they arrived but was told that Takatomo was currently in the ICU and not allowed to have visitors. Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, only family members were allowed to see her, and only for very specific periods of time.

"Yeah… Figured as much…," Asamiya said as he sat down on a nearby bench. He plopped down so heavily, it was more like he'd collapsed. Tobi and Shiratama stayed standing. "I got carried away and came all the way here, but of course they won't let me see her…"

"They said Takatomo is in the intensive care unit, didn't they? Why don't we go check it out?" Shiratama suggested. Toby didn't understand why she was so determined.

Asamiya seemed baffled as well. "They're not gonna let us in. We'd just be wasting our time…"

"Still, it's good to be sure!" Shiratama insisted. She seemed dead set on going.

"Oryuu's a lot more aggressive than she looks, huh?" Baku muttered. Shiratama glanced at him and flashed him a tiny smile.

Checking a map on the wall, Tobi saw that the ICU was located on the third floor of the hospital's main building. A nearby elevator made getting to it easy, but when they reached the door leading into

the ICU, they found it locked. Unless they had a staff member open it with their ID card or buzzed down using the intercom and had someone unlock it remotely, they couldn't proceed any farther.

"See? What'd I tell you…?" Asamiya muttered, sounding more sad than irritated.

As they retraced their steps, Tobi noticed a small waiting room he hadn't seen on the way in. A woman sitting on a bench there caught sight of the trio and called out to Asamiya.

"Shinobu? Is that you?" she said. Tobi put the pieces together and concluded she was Takatomo's mother. Asamiya walked over to her, and tears began to pool in her eyes. "You came all the way here? I'm so sorry, Shinobu. Miyu's not in a state to see anyone right now…"

"Nah, it's fine. I knew it might turn out that way—I just couldn't sit still, that's all…"

Asamiya, somewhat falteringly, introduced Takatomo's mother to Shiratama and Tobi, explaining that they were classmates. Takatomo's mother thanked them profusely for coming, and Tobi felt so uncomfortable, he could barely stand it.

Tobi felt bad for her mother, but he still hadn't figured out how he felt about Takatomo. Would it be right for him to tell her mother about what he'd seen? To tell her he'd witnessed the very moment when Takatomo had jumped? That he hadn't been able to stop her? That there had been no way to stop her in the first place? Maybe he should apologize. Maybe he *had* to apologize. But did he even feel like he'd done something wrong? He still wasn't sure.

Tobi knew his lack of guilt about the incident could mean he was a coldhearted person. But why, if he was so coldhearted, was he here at all? Would someone like that have come along to the hospital?

Shiratama gave Tobi's sleeve a gentle tug. Asamiya and Takatomo's mother were deep in conversation, and it seemed Shiratama was telling Tobi to give them some space. Tobi nodded, and the two of them ended up wandering back to the ICU's door, for lack of anywhere else to go. It was still shut, of course.

"Wonder if there's any way we could get in," Tobi mused.

Shiratama didn't reply. Instead, she opened up her pouch. The little, fluffy creature within poked its two-horned head out right away. This was Chinurasha, aka Chinu.

Chinu hopped out of the pouch and scurried up Shiratama's arm. Its movements weren't sluggish, but they did come across as a little unsteady. Still, it made its way up Shiratama's arm without too much trouble and came to rest on her left shoulder. Then it turned toward Tobi, looking rather proud of itself.

"'Sup?" said Baku. Chinu cocked its little head and chirped back at him.

Tobi cocked his head, too, though not because he was imitating Chinu. "…Huh? What?" he asked, perplexed.

"Chinu?" Shiratama said, shrugging slightly to nuzzle the critter with her cheek. Chinu didn't budge.

Tobi was about to speak up again, but Baku interjected before he could. "Shh! Shut up for a sec, Tobi."

Why? What's going on? Tobi wanted to object, but he had a feeling that Baku didn't really understand, either. Instead, he just watched Shiratama and Chinu intently. Chinu seemed to droop a little—almost like it'd fallen asleep.

"Is this too far? What do you think, Chinu…?" Shiratama whispered.

Is this "too far" for what?

A moment later, Chinu opened its little mouth.

"Why?"

Tobi heard it, plain as day. He heard a voice—not a cry or a chirp, but a real, human voice. Not Chinu's, not Shiratama's, and certainly not his or Baku's.

"Why mine? Mine…"

The voice was feminine. It sounded like a girl's. A chill ran down Tobi's spine. "…What—? Huh? Whose voice is…?"

"Why…me…? The key… But…the key…"

Is it coming from Chinu?

Chinu's all-too-tiny mouth wasn't moving in the way you'd expect a human's to move when they spoke, but it *was* opening and closing, ever so slightly. Maybe Chinu really was speaking.

But why? Is this just how its voice sounds?

"The key… Rooftop…key… In my desk… The key…"

The voice sounded young.

A key. The key to the rooftop? In someone's desk?

"Ah…"

Tobi shivered. The voice wasn't familiar to him. He'd only memorized a handful of his classmate's names and faces, and remembering their voices seemed like a much taller order. So it wasn't that he recognized the voice. A certain possibility had simply occurred to him.

Could Chinu be speaking in her *voice? Is that even possible?*

It didn't make sense. It was a preposterous idea. And yet, Tobi had to wonder: Could it be that he was hearing the voice of Miyuki Takatomo?

"It looks like it reached us after all," Shiratama muttered. "Takatomo's voice made it here."

There was no reasonable way they could be hearing her voice. There was no way she could be speaking at all. She was horribly injured and unconscious in an ICU bed, undergoing treatment at that very moment.

"I can't take it anymore…"

Those words, now coming from Chinu's mouth, seemed to echo in Tobi's ears. The day Takatomo had fled Class 2-3, never to return—right before it had happened—those were the same words she'd shouted.

I can't take it anymore!

"So how was your day today?" my mom asked me.

My dad used to ask me that question every single day. It had been something of a habit for us since I was little—since before I could even remember. Ever since I got into middle school, my answer was usually "the same," and that's what I told her again today.

"What does that mean?" my mom asked, unsatisfied. "Did anything nice happen? Did you learn something? Did you get in trouble?"

Sure, plenty of stuff happened in my life, some good and some bad. When I rolled it all together, though, my typical day came out feeling pretty much *the same* more often than not.

"Well then, would you say your day was good, Miyu?" she asked, clarifying.

I was getting sick of this, so I just said, "Yeah, it was good."

The thing is, though—and I'm not sure when exactly this started—saying I had "a good day" always made me feel so *strained*. Like I was suffocating. After all, the truth was that today *wasn't* a good day. Not at all.

When did everything start falling apart? When did I first realize that something was *wrong*…?

Oh. That's right.

When Nagisa asked me, completely out of the blue, *Hey, you didn't accidentally take my mechanical pencil, did you?* I remember my first thought being *Huh?* She—Nagisa Murahama—was my classmate in our first year of middle school, and we'd gotten along pretty well in our second year, too. I looked in my desk and my pencil case, just for good measure, but her mechanical pencil was

nowhere to be found. "I really liked that one, too…," she'd muttered, sounding disappointed. I got the weird feeling she wasn't totally convinced I hadn't taken it.

Starting from that point onward, things gradually grew strained between *the four of us*.

The four of us—me, Nagisa, Yoriko Shimomaeda, and Chiami Kon—were together pretty often. Not all the time, though. I'd never liked the idea of constantly acting as part of a group. I just felt uncomfortable with that sort of silent pressure to *always* do everything with the exact same people. It felt sort of stifling, sometimes. If I found someone outside the group who I got along with, or who was fun to be around, I wanted to talk with them, too. And I did, quite often.

But ever since the mechanical pencil incident, Nagisa began to act weirdly high-strung. She'd never been like that before. She turned tense and snappy, and she often felt sick starting in the morning. Sometimes she'd even excuse herself to the nurse's office. Yoriko and Chiami both seemed pretty worried about her. I was worried, too, but I felt weird talking about it, I guess. After all, everyone had days when they woke up on the wrong side of the bed or just weren't feeling their best. I figured leaving her alone and letting whatever it was run its course was better than making a big deal out of it and putting on a show of being considerate.

And sure enough, it wasn't long before Nagisa went back to normal. *Nagisa* did anyway.

Next, it was Yoriko's turn to start acting weirdly irritable. We'd only started hanging out in second year, and we weren't very close yet. Apparently, she'd gone to the same kindergarten and elementary school as Nagisa. Nagisa had even joked about how they "weren't *not* best friends." I, on the other hand, had never gotten along with her that well. I didn't hate her, but I wasn't all that fond of her, either. I guess it was the way she talked. She could get pretty nasty. It sort of scared me, sometimes.

"God, *seriously*, I forgot something *again*? This blows! It's getting kind of weird. Like, who's *this* forgetful? Aren't I, like, a little *too* scatterbrained?" she'd say, sighing and clicking her tongue as she turned her desk inside out looking for whatever she was missing. I'd seen that same scene play out over and over. "…Actually, I think someone seriously might be stealing from me. Like, someone's taking my junk. It wasn't at home, so, like, where else could it be? This is *so* not funny. Like, I lose crap all the time, but this is ridiculous, right? I'm, like, super serious, actually. Mom's gonna chew me out again. Ugh, this mega sucks…"

Nagisa and Chiami just laughed it off and tried to calm her down, but it felt really hard for me to approach her. Yoriko had always been kind of a mess. She'd forget her things all the time, then go on about how someone *must* have stolen them. Even if she was just worked up in the moment, I'd always thought that was crossing a line. Stealing wasn't funny, but falsely accusing people of theft was even less of a joke.

And yet…I couldn't help but think something was strange, too. Yoriko's complexion was oddly pale, for one thing. It looked like she'd stopped taking care of her skin, and she'd say she had a stomachache and shut herself up in the restroom for weirdly long amounts of time. Sometimes she'd even leave school early.

It was just…strange, you know? It was mostly a gut feeling, but I could tell things weren't right. Something was *off*.

After all, no matter what happened, *Chiami never changed at all.*

Chiami was always bright and cheerful. It didn't matter if it was morning, or a break period, or lunchtime, or after school. She'd go right up to Nagisa and Yoriko—and me, since I was usually there, too—and strike up a conversation. She was always smiling. She'd text us about all sorts of things, and if I didn't reply, she'd come up to me and say, "Aww, why didn't you get back to me last night?" but even then, she'd be smiling. She never snapped at me, or anything like that, but in a weird way, that only put more pressure on me.

I'm making it sound like I hated her…which isn't true. I never thought she was a bad person. She was just a little hard to be around. She and Nagisa were close, though, so I ended up hanging out with her by association. I only made friends with Chiami because I was already friends with Nagisa—if I hadn't known her, Chiami and I might never have associated with each other at all.

I never thought Chiami was a bad person. After all, if something happened to Nagisa, or Yoriko, or even me, she was always the first person to notice. She was sharp like that. I guess it was also just because she was nice. "You can tell me anything" was practically her catchphrase. To me, though, it felt a little overbearing. Like, if I had something I wanted to tell her, I'd *tell* her. If I didn't, then that meant I didn't want to talk about it and would rather she just left me alone.

I always wondered: Did Nagisa and Yoriko find Chiami's tell-me-anything attacks as, well…as obnoxious as I did? Maybe the difference was that, in the end, they could tell her everything. Unlike *me*. I never could.

My smartphone went missing. It was a hand-me-down from my mom—an old iPhone. I'd used it once at school that morning, to check the weather and see if I had any texts, and then I'd put it back in my bag. Later, when I looked again during the afternoon break, it was gone.

I freaked out. How could it just be *gone*? I started searching for it, and that was when Chiami came up and asked what was wrong. I said, *Nothing*, and she said *Oh, really?* with this look on her face that told me she didn't believe me. It almost felt like she *knew*. Like she knew my iPhone was missing. That was when she broke out her catchphrase.

"You can tell me anything, you know?"

I never found my iPhone. When I eventually told my mom what had happened, she said the phone had a location tracking feature and tried to use it to help me look. The phone must have been powered off, though, because the tracking didn't work. My mom was

going to contact the school, but I didn't want it to blow up into a whole ordeal, so I convinced her not to in the end.

"That means you'll have to live without a smartphone for a while. Are you sure?" my mom asked.

I decided to tough it out. "That's fine. I mean, whatever."

But the iPhone was just the start. Once every few days, something else of mine would disappear. I'd find myself lacking an eraser, or a notebook, or a mechanical pencil. I didn't tell anyone. Not Nagisa, not Yoriko, and definitely not Chiami.

I had other people I got along with. I talked with a pretty, chill girl named Kihomi from time to time, for instance. And then there was Kuze, who was smart and willing to teach me all sorts of things, and Takaya Rindou, who'd openly declared that he wanted to be a comedian when he grew up and who was actually pretty funny. I'd talked with Masamune quite a bit during first year, too, but he had a tendency to get too carried away for his own good. In the end, he got the wrong idea and asked me out. When I turned him down, things got awkward for a while, but we still chatted from time to time. Shiratama was in my first-year class, too, and she was both comforting to be around and made a habit of talking to me now and then, even if she didn't have anything to say. Long story short, I had plenty of people I talked with. But I couldn't tell any of them about this.

Things turned into a bit of a mess when my pouch disappeared, though. That pouch was where I kept certain items I needed when it was my time of the month. Without it, I was in big trouble—in fact, trouble didn't even begin to describe it. I started to panic, and thought about borrowing one from someone else, but I just couldn't bring myself to ask. My only choice was to go to the nurse's office.

The second time my pouch disappeared, I had a thought: Maybe this had happened to Yoriko, too. She'd looked mad as hell when her things went missing, after all. Having your period stuff disappear would definitely justify that level of anger. I thought about asking her but decided against it. It had been way too long since all that

had happened, and I knew she'd tell everything to Chiami. I couldn't let *her* get wind of all this.

I had my suspicions. Maybe Chiami was the one behind it all. Maybe she was stealing my things—taking them and hiding them somewhere. But…*why*? And how? She could have done it while we were out using the special-use classrooms, but I'd been pretty vigilant about watching my stuff lately. I was keeping more distance from Chiami than I had before, too, though I still ended up hanging out with her, Yoriko, and Nagisa as a group a lot of the time. All I could do was keep a close eye on her.

To be honest, I didn't think Chiami could steal anything. It couldn't be her. She had no reason to do something like that. She was a good person. Wasn't I the weird one for doubting her—for doubting my friend?

And yet, my things kept disappearing. I couldn't deny it. Once, Masamune asked me *Hey, is something wrong?* and I flipped my lid. *Huh? What's wrong with* you? I said. It was right after that, when I was walking through the hallways alone, that I heard a voice.

(Wasn't that crazy?)

Who was that? I was alone. There was no one else in the corridor. Was it the wind? Did I just imagine it?

(*I* think it was crazy.)

It was coming from right next to my ear. A little voice—practically a whisper. Reflexively, I shouted, "Who's there?!"—I'd *thought* I was alone. But when I looked, I found that I was right. There wasn't a single person anywhere nearby. Just the voice of someone laughing, far off in the distance—Masamune joking around with a few of our classmates in front of the door to Class 2-3.

"…Who are you?" I asked. *Who's saying these things to me?*

(It's you,) the voice said. I plugged my ears, but I could still hear it. (*You're* crazy.)

What is this voice? Who is it? I don't want to hear this. Nobody's around, so why? Am I not alone?

"Who's saying this?" I asked aloud. "Who? You? Me? Who? What *is* this…?"

I took off down the hallway, charged into the restrooms, and locked myself in a stall. I flushed the toilet without using it.

I can't hear it. I can't hear anything. Of course I don't hear any voices. See? Nothing. I really can't hear anything.

That time, it worked. The voice went away.

That time.

One morning when I got to school and went to change into my indoor shoes, I found that one of them was missing. *Again?* I thought. (Isn't this crazy?) the voice said. *You think? Because I think so, too. Maybe I am crazy.* (That's right,) said the voice.

(You *are* crazy.)

It wasn't anyone else's fault. It was mine. I was the problem. I mean, I was hearing a voice that couldn't possibly be real. (This is crazy,) it said. And it *was* crazy. Something was wrong with me. It really felt like I was going crazy. *Am I just crazy? That can't be it, right?*

I hadn't just made all this up. Things really were disappearing. My stuff was vanishing. Someone had to be responsible. Who was doing it, though? I didn't know, but it had to be someone. (Maybe it's because you're crazy,) said the voice.

(It's all because you're crazy.) "I'm crazy." (It's your fault.) "It's my fault?"

Who's saying these things? Whose voice is this? Whose?

The voice whispered into my ear. (You know whose fault this is? It's…)

"Mine?"

Is this my voice?

"…mine."

"It's my fault…?"

I was tired—not that I'd ever admit it. Every time I let my guard down, Chiami would hit me with another tell-me-anything. As if I could *ever* tell her any of this. I'd just say "thanks," or "sure," or "I

know," and brush her off as casually as I could. And that left me exhausted.

I just couldn't do it anymore. I was at my limit.

Whenever I was having a hard time, I'd always go somewhere high up. Before I'd moved, my favorite place was the roof of the apartment building I lived in. I liked the rooftop of the department store by the station, too. And Ferris wheels. One time in elementary school, during summer break, my family took me to an amusement park with the biggest Ferris wheel I'd ever seen. I talked about all this at school once, and Masamune said, "Yiiikes! I'm an acrophobe!" He seemed terrified, but I just didn't understand what was so scary. I don't even know how many times I went to that department store's roof on my own. I'd look down through the gaps in the fence around its exterior, and I wouldn't feel scared at all. I wasn't brave enough to climb the fence, though. If anyone saw me, they would've thought I was crazy. They might've tried to stop me. Shut up. Shut up. Shut *up*. I just want to be left in peace.

I was in class, and I couldn't hear the voice. It was silent. My teacher was talking, but it was silent. It was so silent, it made me anxious. I searched through my desk. It was always at times like these that my things went missing. I felt something with my fingertip. It was hard. I grabbed it. A key? I pulled it out of my desk to look. As expected, it really was a key. It had "rooftop" written on it.

What is this? A key to the roof? Why would this be here? Why was it in my desk?

The roof. I'd always liked high places. A key. The door to the roof was locked. I knew that. I'd talked with my friends about wanting to go up there. I'd tried to go. The door was always locked, though. A key. I had the key to the rooftop.

I stood up. *Oh, I see*, I thought.

"Hmm? What is it, Takatomo? Takatomo…?"

My teacher was saying something. This wasn't the time to listen. I had somewhere to go. I was being told to go. I *had* to go.

"Excuse me, Takatomo."

Someone else said my name. It took a moment to figure out who it was. Shiratama. She was walking toward me. I felt like my resolve might waver.

"N-no! Stay away…!"

The moment I shouted, an army of voices pressed in on me. *Shut up. Stop it.* I clutched at my head. The voices didn't stop.

"I can't take it anymore…!"

I had to run. If I didn't run, I'd break down. Maybe I was already broken. Maybe I broke a long time ago. Maybe I just hadn't wanted to admit that I was broken. I ran. I'd been running for a long, long time.

I clutched the key to the rooftop in my hand as I walked aimlessly. When it looked like someone might notice me, I took off at a run again. I hid in the restroom and then in a supply closet under a staircase. I was dragging my feet. I knew what I had to do, though. I just had to do it.

So that's what I did.

I climbed up the stairs, jammed the key into the lock, and turned it. The door opened, and I finally arrived at the place where I was meant to be. The wind felt nice. It felt so nice to *feel* nice again. I almost cried.

I breathed slowly and deeply as I walked back and forth across the rooftop, covering every centimeter. There was a low wall surrounding its perimeter. I stepped up onto it and paused to stretch.

For some reason, I felt like my mom was asking me *How was your day today?* I couldn't answer her. A moment later, she asked again. *Would you say your day was good, Miyu?*

"Not at all," I said, shaking my head. "Today wasn't good at all. I'm sorry, Mom."

I'm sorry for telling so many lies. I'm sorry for being such a bad daughter. I have to apologize to Dad, too. And to Shiratama. She tried to stop me and now look where I am. Sorry.

I glanced down into the courtyard and saw people. Otogiri, a boy from my class, was standing with Haizaki, the janitor.

Well, that's fine. I really can't take it anymore.

I leaned forward. I wasn't afraid. Actually, that was a lie. The truth was that I was a little scared, so I closed my eyes. Then I heard an incredibly loud noise.

Since they weren't allowed to meet with Takatomo, Tobi, Shiratama, and Asamiya couldn't exactly loiter around the hospital for long. They stepped outside, where Asamiya immediately said his goodbyes and went off on his own. Tobi and Shiratama left as well, walking back the way they'd come as dusk began to fall.

"Hey, Oryuu," Baku said, breaking what had been a lengthy silence. "About, y'know, all *that*. What, well…I mean, what *was* that anyway?"

"Where to begin…?" Shiratama replied. She furrowed her brow and bit her lower lip as she pondered the question.

As it happened, there was a playground just off to the side of the road. Nobody was around, and there was a bench.

"Should we sit down?" Tobi asked. Shiratama nodded, and the two of them took a seat.

"It was quite a long time ago," Shiratama began. As she spoke, she let Chinu out of her pouch and into her arms. "I was in the fourth grade at the time, so this was about four years ago. My grandfather had fallen terribly ill and was hospitalized. One day, my grandmother took me with her to the hospital to see him…"

Shiratama's grandfather, it seemed, was a dedicated kendo and jujitsu practitioner and an extremely strict man. Shiratama hadn't even known he was sick until he was hospitalized. She'd never so much as seen him lying down before. That, perhaps, was why the thought of seeing him laid out on a hospital bed had been so terrifying for her. She just couldn't bring herself to set foot in his room. In the end, her grandmother went in on her own while Shiratama waited outside.

By then, Shiratama was already carrying Chinu around in her pouch. She knew that other people couldn't see Chinu, and so she let it out to perch on her shoulder. Still, simply sitting by her grandfather's room made her uneasy, so she decided to take a slow, unhurried walk around the hospital ward.

The hallways were lined with room after room on both sides. Some of the doors were open, allowing Shiratama to peek inside. Most of the patients on that floor were seriously ill, and some of them were only alive thanks to the help of various machines they were hooked up to.

Shiratama worried that before long, her grandfather would join them. But his surgery had been a success. Her grandmother claimed that it was just a matter of time before he got better. He wouldn't end up like the others. That thought, at least, was a little reassuring. On the other hand, Shiratama felt a little guilty for thinking that way. The patients in the hospital deserved her sympathy, and yet there she was, finding relief in their misfortune. She felt horrible and wondered if those thoughts made her a bad person.

Eventually, she came to a stop in front of one of the doors. It was a four-person shared room, and a woman and a little girl were there to visit. The woman looked like she was only about thirty or so, and she called the man she was visiting "your dad" when talking to the girl. Apparently, she was the man's wife. The little girl talked about how she hoped her dad would wake up soon, and about all the games she wanted to play with him. They called out to him, calling him "dad" over and over, but no matter how much they spoke to him, he never responded. It seemed he was in some sort of coma.

Shiratama couldn't watch any longer. She could only pray that the patient she didn't know would make a full recovery and wake up soon.

"Looking back, I suppose praying like that was my way of making up for how I used those terribly ill patients as a source of comfort. I thought it would soothe my conscience, I suppose. But then…"

That was when Chinu spoke, for the very first time. *Hana. Kayoko.* It said those two names, over and over again. It wasn't speaking in Chinu's own voice—that much was clear. Chinu had spoken with the voice of a human man.

The man's voice talked about when his daughter, Hana, was born. He talked about her first bath—about how nervous he was that he would hurt her. He talked about taking her to the zoo, and how she was way more interested in the sheep than she was in the elephants and giraffes. He talked about how he could never forget how Kayoko had smiled at him back when they first met in college. About how he'd fallen for people before but had never truly loved someone until he met her. About how she was the only one for him. About how he couldn't believe it had come to this—that he'd ended up so terribly ill, he might die. He knew he'd die someday, of course, but he'd always thought it would be far, far into the future. He thought it would be after Hana was all grown up, and after a long, fulfilling life with Kayoko by his side. He thought they'd talk about how it had all gone by in a flash—imagined the joyous future they would share.

But now I might die, before any of that can happen?

Kayoko. Hana. I can't bear the thought that I'll never see you again. I want to watch you grow up, Hana. I want the three of us to celebrate your birthday every year, together. I don't need anything else. All I want is to live with the two of you. It's still too soon for this, right? Can't I have just a little more time? Do I really have to die now? I don't want that. I can't die. I can't let that happen. I don't want to die…

"I heard his voice. I heard him talk on and on in anguish about how he didn't want to die and leave his family behind. There's no way I should have been able to hear him. He was unconscious, after all. He was asleep—in a coma. It wasn't possible for him to speak, but somehow, his voice came through Chinu…"

"Hmm." Baku hummed thoughtfully. "Sounds like Chinu's got some sorta special ability, or something. Crazy that a little runt like her could pull that off! Guess looks can be deceiving. Then again, she

doesn't exactly look *normal* … Wait. Hold up—does this mean *I've* got an ability too? Do I have some crazy awesome superpower hidden away somewhere…?"

"Your superpower's that you can talk forever without taking a break," Tobi said, only half sarcastically.

"Ohhh, that's it!" Baku replied enthusiastically. "Ha-ha-ha— Wait, no! That's not the sorta superpower I'm talking about! I mean something *big*, y'know? Flying around like a rocket or being as strong as a giant! Cool stuff!"

"Isn't being a talking backpack enough on its own?"

"Hell no, it isn't. Y'know what? Truth is, I've just never really gone all out! You wouldn't believe what I'm capable of when I take off the training wheels and go to town!"

"I can't imagine you on a bike, training wheels or not, and trying to picture it is kind of weirding me out…"

"It's an *expression*! That should be friggin' obvious!"

Tobi glanced to his side at Shiratama, who was hanging her head. She'd been deathly silent ever since she finished telling her story.

If it weren't for Chinu's strange power, Shiratama would never have heard the voice of a patient she didn't know. He'd been on the verge of passing away, leaving his wife and daughter behind, and while he was still clinging to life, even he'd known his outlook was grim. He'd fallen into despair and lamented his fate.

Tobi would never have wanted to hear something like that. What would hearing it accomplish? The man was a total stranger to Shiratama—the two of them had no connections whatsoever. There was nothing she could do for him, even after hearing his story. It was hopeless.

"…Is that why you came to visit Takatomo? To hear her voice?"

Shiratama knew Takatomo. The two were very much connected. They were classmates, and they'd spent their whole first year in middle school together, apparently. Takatomo's voice had mentioned Shiratama talking to her, and being nice company, or something like

that. It was completely different from hearing the voice of a random stranger.

"I thought there was a chance I'd be able to hear her," Shiratama said after a moment of hesitation, "and if I could, I knew I had to. After all, that might be something that only Chinu…that only I can do."

Asamiya was late to school the next day. Tobi had thought he might not make it at all, so seeing him show up was a bit of a relief. Asamiya wasn't the only classmate Tobi was keeping an eye on, though.

Chiami Kon really was close with Nagisa Murahama and Yoriko Shimomaeda. The three of them were together almost all the time outside of lessons. Back when Takatomo was part of their group, it would have been the four of them.

As her things went missing—or, perhaps, were stolen—Takatomo had started hearing a strange voice from time to time. Things that nobody would reasonably bother stealing were taken from her, and a voice that couldn't be real wouldn't leave her alone. It was easy to think it was all some sort of delusion or hallucination on her part. Maybe Takatomo hadn't been in her right mind.

Then again, Chinu had an inexplicable power: the mysterious ability to speak in place of those who couldn't use their own voices, conveying words that otherwise would never be heard. Kon, meanwhile—the girl Takatomo half suspected was behind her troubles—had a weird *thing* attached to her that was part bat and part flying squirrel.

For once, Tobi took his time eating his lunch. His desk was the third one back from the front row on the window side of the room, while Chiami Kon sat in the first seat one row to the right of him. Her *thing* was sitting on her back again that day, not moving a muscle.

"I get you, Tobi. I know exactly what you're thinking," Baku said in a low voice. "Does that thing really stay stuck to Chiami Kon all the time? Or can it go off on its own and get up to trouble? What if, say, it turned out to be a nasty piece of work that steals people's crap…?"

Chatting wasn't banned during lunchtime, but the students tended to stay fairly quiet so as not to drown out the school-wide broadcast playing over the PA system. Of course, the only ones who could hear Baku's monologue were probably Tobi and Shiratama.

"No ordinary person would've been able to steal the key to the roof from the staff room," Baku continued. "Plus, that thing could've snuck into Takatomo's desk and planted it there, easy."

Suddenly, Asamiya raised his hand. "Mr. Harimoto?" he said.

Harimoto, their homeroom teacher, was sitting at his own desk, eating his lunch. "Hmm?" he grunted, rising slightly out of his chair to get a better look. "What is it, Asamiya? You haven't even touched your lunch! Are you feeling sick or something? Everything all right?"

"Everything is *not* all right," Asamiya said. He placed his hands on his desk and shoved himself to his feet. His long hair concealed his expression, but it was easy to tell he was furious. "Of *course* everything's not all right. How are all of you just sitting there, eating your lunch like nothing's wrong? Shouldn't there be an investigation going on right now? Miyu—Takatomo's in the hospital! Don't you understand what happened to her?!"

"Well, you know, doing an *investigation* isn't that simple…," Harimoto replied uncomfortably, scratching his cheek with his big, rough hand.

"Okay, *okay*," said Masamune, standing up as well. He sidled over to Asamiya and tried to throw an arm over his shoulders. "Let's all just simmer down, all right? Asamiya, we're—"

"Don't *touch* me!"

Asamiya smacked Masamune's hand away, as hard as he could. Masamune let out an overexaggerated yelp of surprise and made a show of being blown away, spinning around a few times for good measure. A few students chuckled at his antics, which seemed to

touch a nerve for Asamiya. He stormed toward Masamune, who let out another, more genuine yelp and backpedaled frantically.

"Stop it, please!"

This time, Chiami Kon was the one who shouted. Suddenly, she looked downright distraught.

"Do you think Miyuki would be happy to see you two fighting?! Of course not! She hated it when people argued. Right now, we shouldn't be doing anything that would make her sad. Please…"

Is she crying? Tobi wondered. For a moment, he had his doubts. Something about her behavior felt overdone—like it was forced. Maybe those were crocodile tears.

Asamiya seemed to have the same suspicions. "You've got some nerve acting like she was your friend," he spat. "You hadn't even been getting along with her lately, had you? She was sure as hell avoiding *you* anyway!"

"That's awful!"

"Why would you even say that?!"

Murahama and Shimomaeda jumped in to protect Kon on the spot, showering Asamiya with verbal abuse, and just like that, the classroom descended into chaos. Harimoto shouted, "That's enough! Stop it, all of you!" but it didn't bring anyone in line.

Kon seemed to break down, crying as she collapsed into her chair. Murahama, Shimomaeda, and a few other girls rushed to her side, while several other students turned in the opposite direction and started shouting at Asamiya. Asamiya just stood there, not saying a word. But through the gaps in his bangs, Tobi could make out a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Come on, everyone, let's not get so heated! I'm sure Asamiya's just trying to make a point, right? Right?" said Masamune, who apparently still hadn't learned his lesson. He started walking over to Asamiya, and that was the straw that broke the camel's back. Asamiya shoved his way past Masamune and sprinted out of the classroom.

"Asamiya!" Harimoto shouted.

The teacher chased after him, and Masamune followed closely behind, yelling, "Hey, wait up!" Unlike Harimoto, however, Masamune strolled back into the classroom only moments later. He slumped his shoulders in exaggerated dismay and made a weird expression that was probably supposed to look troubled but ended up just looking ridiculous. Not *everyone* laughed, but quite a few of Tobi's classmates chuckled.

Tobi didn't. Maybe it was because of the speak-no-evil tarsier on Masamune's head, but to him, the whole display seemed bizarre. He glanced at Shiratama and found her the same—more indignant than amused. Tobi felt a little relieved to know she hadn't laughed.

Lunchtime came to an end, and neither Harimoto nor Asamiya had returned to the classroom. Tobi slung Baku over his shoulder and was about to leave when Shiratama called out to him.

"Otogiri!"

Tobi turned around to find that Shiratama wasn't looking at him. He followed her gaze and saw Kon sitting at her desk—or rather, lying on it. Murahama and Shimomaeda were standing nearby, talking to her. Was she still crying, maybe? She must have really been devastated, Tobi thought—assuming the whole thing wasn't just an act. That was when it hit him.

It was gone. The weird *thing* that always clung to Kon's back was gone.

"Tobi!"

Baku started flailing violently. He all but pulled Tobi toward a particular desk close to his—one with a still-untouched school lunch sitting on it. Asamiya's seat. Tobi caught something scurrying around it out of the corner of his eye. It was such a passing glimpse that he almost questioned if he'd really seen it at all. But no, he was certain.

Tobi walked over to Asamiya's seat. Nothing seemed strange about the desk itself, or the chair, for that matter.

"It's gotta be inside," Baku said.

Tobi had already reached the same conclusion. He didn't bother peeking first. He simply thrust his hand into the desk's storage

cubby, grasping for anything that might be inside. He felt something furry, and when he grabbed it, it started to struggle. It was warm to the touch—hot, even—and a rubberlike membrane seemed to stretch between its slender arms and legs. It thrashed violently, desperately flailing its four limbs in an effort to escape his grasp.

Tobi pulled his hand out of the desk, revealing Chiami Kon's *thing*. A lengthy tongue poked out from the tiny mouth of its baby-like face as it struggled for freedom.

A few of Tobi's classmates were giving him suspicious looks, but none of them were paying special attention to his hand. They hadn't noticed the *thing* he was holding. They couldn't even see it. Kon, meanwhile, was still prone on her desk, with Murahama and Shimomaeda comforting her.

Tobi and Shiratama shared a look. Shiratama's eyes were as wide as dinner plates. She looked more than a little shocked, and Tobi was right there with her. He hadn't been planning on capturing the weird *thing* then and there, but now it was in his hand, and he had to figure out what to do with it on the spot.

"…Tobi!" said Baku. "For now, let's just take it somewhere private!"

Tobi took his advice and stepped out into the hallway. Shiratama followed, bringing along Chinu's pouch. The *thing* was struggling furiously, and Tobi didn't really know where he was going. But eventually, his lengthy strides took him down a staircase to the shoe cubbies by the entrance. The area was completely deserted. He came to a stop and turned to face Shiratama.

"O-Otogiri, is that…?" she stammered.

"Not sure," said Tobi. "But…I think it was trying to steal something from Asamiya's desk. What *is* this thing…?"

Tobi pressed it between both of his hands, keeping it clenched tightly. It felt like it could slip away at any moment if he loosened his grip even a little. To be honest, he wanted to drop it. It was kind of grossing him out.

"Don't even think about letting that thing go, Tobi!" Baku sharply cautioned. "If it gets away, it'll be up to the same tricks again in no

time. Considering what we just saw, it doesn't seem like Chiami Kon even knows what it's been doing. It might be the root of the whole problem!"

"…In other words," Shiratama said, clasping her pouch—and Chinu inside—to her chest, "it was stealing on its own initiative, independent of Kon's will? And those thefts led Takatomo into a state of paranoia…?"

"I'm saying Kon might not have *known* it was happening. That doesn't mean she didn't *want* it to happen deep down. One way or another, that thing's not like me and Chinu. You and Tobi know all about us, and even if Chinu can't talk, you two understand each other. Kon isn't like that. We're only like her *thing* on a surface level—the important stuff is all different."

"…If I told Chinu to stay somewhere, she would do it for me. You listen to Otogiri's requests, too, don't you, Baku?"

"I dunno about that," Tobi muttered from the side.

"*Huh?!*" Baku gasped, outraged. "Look, pal, just 'cause I don't lick your feet and shine your shoes doesn't mean I'm not basically cooperative most of the time!"

"But *that*," Shiratama said, looking straight at the still frantic *thing* in Tobi's hands, "may not have that same sort of relationship with Kon…"

"Well, if it's what was stealing Takatomo, Murahama, and Shimomaeda's junk, then it's definitely up to no good. And it's what drove Takatomo to jump off the roof. It's the root of all evil," Baku said, reiterating his conclusion once more for Shiratama.

"And it might do it again…," Tobi muttered.

The weird *thing* he'd caught had been rooting through Asamiya's desk. Asamiya had called Kon out, criticizing her in a very public way. Maybe the *thing* was trying to get back at him. Maybe Baku was right, and it stole things from the people Kon disliked or resented as a way of hurting them without her direct involvement. Was that how all this happened?

Maybe they just hadn't been a good match, or maybe they'd had some sort of misunderstanding. One way or another, Kon's opinion of Takatomo had fallen, and if it weren't for her *thing*, that was where it would have ended. The *thing*'s interference, however, had driven Takatomo into an emotional corner. Her stress and anxiety had built up until she couldn't take it anymore, and she threw herself off the roof. If it weren't for the *thing*, then Kon and Takatomo could have just had it out and gone their separate ways.

The weird *thing* still flailing in Tobi's hands had brought about a terribly grave situation. Calling it the root of all evil struck Tobi as very appropriate.

"…Otogiri?" Shiratama leaned in, peering up at Tobi's face from below.

Tobi didn't reply. He had something more important to do, but he didn't know how exactly he was supposed to do it. And even if there was an established method, would he be capable of carrying it out?

"I've got this, Tobi."

Oh, of course, Tobi thought. It might have been impossible for him—but he had Baku on his side.

"I'll *eat* it for you."

Tobi had Baku slung across his back—but now the bag leaned in, his head looming over Tobi's shoulder. It was only his "head" in a figurative sense, of course. Baku had been a backpack since the day he and Tobi met, and backpacks didn't have that sort of anatomy. He *did*, however, have a mouth.

Baku's zipper began to open. It didn't unzip itself fully—only about a third of the way down, or maybe half, at most. That was enough, though. *Baku had opened his mouth.* The now-open zipper almost looked like a row of teeth, because that's exactly what it was. His tongue lolled out from inside, far thicker and longer than Tobi's.

Tobi knew exactly what Baku wanted to do and had no interest in stopping him. In fact, Tobi was all for it. He understood how Baku felt. The weird *thing* struggling to break out of his grip was the root of all evil. If it wasn't around, the terrible events of the past several

days would never have happened. It would've been better if it had never existed at all. That wasn't possible—Tobi couldn't undo what had been done—but at the very least, he could take it out of the picture now.

And more than anything, *he felt so strangely hungry, he couldn't help himself.*

Tobi heard a noise. Footsteps. Shiratama said something. Maybe "Haizaki." Tobi didn't care. He was starving. The word "hunger" didn't do this feeling justice. The sensation must have been Baku's appetite. Who knew he could get that hungry? It felt like every cell in his body was empty, longing to be filled with sustenance. He couldn't hold back. Not a single second longer.

"Wait…!"

Someone was trying to stop him. Haizaki, the janitor. Tobi barely even registered him.

It was too late.

Tobi let his grip loosen. That same instant, Baku's tongue wrapped around the *thing*. It let out a bizarre, grating cry, like nails scraping across a pane of glass, but it only lasted for a moment before Baku's zipper teeth—his mouth—slammed shut. He gave it a few vigorous chews, then he swallowed.

"Aaah!" Haizaki wailed. Suddenly, Tobi realized the man was standing right in front of him, both hands pressed to his head. "Oh god, no! What did you just do, Otogiri?! What did you just feed your zingai?!"

Shiratama's eyes widened, and Baku let out a burp. He was the one who'd eaten the weird *thing*, but Tobi felt a little stuffed as well.

"…What?" said Tobi. "Huh? My…zingai?"

"Oh. Oh, right…" Haizaki grimaced and shook his head. "'Zingai' is what we call things like your backpack. They have a few other names, but zingai's pretty standard in Japan, at least. Most people don't know about them at all, and they're better off that way. They can't see them, for one thing, and—"

"Does this mean you *can* see them, Mr. Haizaki?" asked Shiratama. She opened her pouch, and Chinu poked out its head.

Haizaki looked a little abashed. "Well…crap. Yeah, okay, you got me. For what it's worth, I really am just this school's janitor, nothing more and nothing less—but that doesn't mean I can turn a blind eye to something like this. Anyway, yes, I can see them, but who cares about me right now? What matters is your zingai, Otogiri! What the hell did it just eat?!"

"You're one noisy ol' busybody, y'know that?" Baku said with a sigh, followed by another burp. "What I eat is my business, not yours. Even if it was one of those zingai, or whatever you called them."

"I knew it…," Haizaki muttered. The color drained from his face, and he staggered backward, only to lurch forward again and grab Tobi by the shoulders, shaking him violently. "Whose?! Whose zingai was it?! I was really hoping all that nasty business wouldn't have anything to do with them, but was there a zingai involved after all?! Whose got eaten—was it someone from Class 2-3?!"

Haizaki's questioning was incredibly intense. He was working himself into a fit, and Tobi was overwhelmed.

"…It was, yeah," Tobi admitted.

"Dammit! There's no time!"

Just like that, Haizaki sprinted away. Tobi wanted to know what was so urgent, and wished Haizaki would explain, but the man took off before he could even ask.

"We should go, too!" said Shiratama. Tobi hesitated, however.

Baku had eaten Kon's "zingai," if that was really what they were called. Tobi had thought he was doing the right thing. He couldn't just let the zingai run free, so why not eat it? What was the harm? Baku ate a zingai, and, according to Haizaki, Baku was a zingai himself. A zingai who ate another zingai.

Tobi recalled the moment of incredible, overpowering hunger he'd felt. Baku had wanted to eat the zingai— No, Tobi had wanted to eat it, too. He'd wanted to eat it, so he had.

Tobi didn't want to go back to the classroom, but Shiratama dragged him away all the same. He couldn't bring himself to shake off her hand, and she hurried along with him in tow. When they arrived, there seemed to be a commotion underway. A crowd was gathered outside the classroom. Tobi and Shiratama plunged into it, pushing past the other students and making their way into the room.

The first thing Tobi saw was Chiami Kon lying on the floor. Haizaki was kneeling next to her, pressing his fingers to her neck. He was checking for a pulse.

"No…," Shiratama gasped. She almost toppled over as well, but she managed to grab on to a nearby desk and prop herself up. Tobi wasn't quite as disturbed as Shiratama. In fact, he wasn't sure if he was shaken at all.

What had he just done? Baku was the one who'd eaten Kon's zingai. Some might say the whole thing was on Baku, that it wasn't Tobi's responsibility. But that idea didn't even cross Tobi's mind.

Baku had eaten Kon's zingai. Surely, that was why she had collapsed. Baku had gone silent, as well, and Tobi didn't understand why. He wanted him to say *something*—but maybe there was nothing to say. Tobi didn't have any words, either.

Haizaki had pulled out a cell phone and was making a call. Probably asking for an ambulance.

Tobi just watched. Watching was all he could do.

Asamiya came to school again the next day, and Mr. Harimoto talked about Kon during morning homeroom. He told the class, in short, that she was all right. Her life wasn't in any danger, and there didn't seem to be anything terribly wrong with her, physically speaking. Still, it seemed best for her to rest and recuperate, so she'd be taking some time off from school.

When the afternoon break began, Haizaki stepped into the classroom and called for Tobi and Shiratama. He escorted the two of them to the janitor's room—a space with a small kitchen and a large

workbench, along with several other tools. Haizaki pulled out a couple of folding chairs for Shiratama and Tobi, then sat on his workbench and began to speak.

"Zingai and their human masters share an incredibly deep, unbreakable connection," said Haizaki. "And if, for whatever reason, a zingai is lost, their master…usually falls into a state we call being 'spirit-hollowed.' That's not a scientific term, by the way—medically speaking, its cause is totally unknown."

"Is it possible to recover from…?" Shiratama asked, her voice faint.

Haizaki grimaced and let out a low groan. "I'd love to say yes, but the truth is it's hard to say. Some cases are a lot more severe than others—there's a lot of variance. Some people describe it as a decline in one's mental activity. Basically, it weakens the parts of you related to your thoughts, feelings, and will. That said, once you have it, that's it. People's symptoms almost never get worse after the initial outbreak."

"Hey, there's a bit of good news," Baku quipped. He'd been oddly tight-lipped since the day before. Tobi figured he was dejected, in his own sort of way.

"How's Kon?" Tobi asked brusquely.

Haizaki hung his head and sighed deeply. "I tagged along with her to the hospital, and from what I could tell…well, it didn't seem too severe. She wasn't totally bedridden, and she could answer a few questions, though she wasn't all that clear. She's at home now, looks like. As far as cases go, I think she got off pretty light."

Tobi noted that Haizaki *hadn't* said that they could rest easy. Kon's symptoms might not get any worse, but there was a chance they'd never improve, either. It was possible Kon would be that way for the rest of her life.

Shiratama's face was blank. Tobi couldn't even tell where she was looking—her eyes seemed unfocused. It was almost like a Shiratama-shaped puppet had replaced her in her chair, and Tobi caught himself looking for signs she was still breathing. He could see

her chest moving slightly up and down. She was still alive. Of course she was.

"This wasn't your fault, Otogiri," Haizaki said with a nod, almost like he was trying to convince himself. "It was just bad luck all around that things turned out this way. Though, actually…I'm not sure there wasn't a little good mixed in. You may well have headed off another tragedy before it could happen. It's pretty hard for a zingai to turn back once it's started hurting people."

"…Are you telling me not to worry about it?" asked Tobi.

"Yeah. There's no reason to blame yourself. I know it won't be easy, but if you can, I'd like you to keep living your life like you always have. You can always talk to me if anything happens, of course. I'm just a janitor, but I'm always here to listen."

"*Just* a janitor?"

"Yeah," Haizaki said, looking Tobi straight in the eye. He didn't glance away for even a second. He didn't even blink. "I get the sense you two didn't know about zingai before yesterday. Am I right? Pretty sure that puts you in the majority, but if you look in the right places online, you'll start turning up all sorts of information about them. Whether any of it is true, I couldn't say. I'm just a perfectly ordinary janitor who happens to know a little about zingai. I don't want to fill your heads with a bunch of half-baked knowledge."

"…You're talking in circles, and I don't like it," said Tobi.

"Only because I don't know all that much myself," said Haizaki. Suddenly, the light in his eyes seemed to take on a dull, murky color. "I'm getting on in years, as I'm sure you can tell, and I'd love to say that I'm a capable adult with way more skills and knowledge than a couple of middle school kids. Unfortunately, I can't… But I still want to help you in any way I can."

"Talking like that makes you sound even more like an adult."

"I'd take that as a compliment, but I know you didn't mean it that way," Haizaki said with a chuckle. Before the sound had left his

mouth, however, all semblance of maturity fell from his face, replaced by an ugly grimace. “I’m so sorry. I really am…”

It was an expression that made Tobi wonder if Haizaki was in pain. Baku still wasn’t saying anything, and Shiratama barely seemed present. Tobi, for his part, wasn’t sure what to do either. All he knew was that sticking around here wouldn’t accomplish anything. That, at least, he knew for certain.

School ended for the day, and Tobi was the first person out the door. This time, however, he didn’t leave the building. Instead, he lurked a little ways from the entrance, watched Shiratama change into her outdoor shoes, then followed her out the door. Baku didn’t say a word. It was almost like he was just a normal backpack.

Shiratama walked for about twelve or thirteen minutes before she came to a stop in front of an apartment building. It was fairly large—ten or eleven stories, probably—and didn’t look particularly old or new. Shiratama stood by its entrance, hesitating. She seemed unsure about whether to go inside.

Eventually, Tobi decided to walk over to her. She didn’t seem to notice him at all.

“Hey, Shiratama,” he said. He didn’t want to startle her. That was the whole point of saying her name in the first place—

“Hyeep!”

—but Shiratama let out a yelp and spun around in a fluster. “T-T-Tobi?! Agh! I mean, Otogiri…?” she stammered.

“I don’t really mind either way…,” Tobi replied.

“You don’t? Really?”

“Um, is that a problem?”

“…I just thought that calling you by your first name out of the blue would be a little presumptuous of me. Otogiri’s a wonderful name, but Tobi is lovely, too. And I suppose I have to admit I’ve been secretly calling you that in my mind for some time now.”

"Right… Okay, then. Hmm…" Tobi found himself scratching the bridge of his nose, even though it wasn't particularly itchy. "Well, uh, you know… Call me whatever you want."

"Are you sure, Tobi? I mean— Ah!" Shiratama yelped once again, then waved her hands in front of her face as if trying to take back what she'd just said. "N-no, I couldn't! That would be far too familiar of me…"

"I really don't care. Baku calls me Tobi all the time."

"Yeah, 'cause we've been together for ages!" Baku finally interjected. "But y'know, if Oryuu *really* wants to use your first name, why not throw her a bone, eh?"

"…I don't think she's that set on it, actually."

"Okay, Oryuu—if you absolutely insist, I'll give you special permission to use his first name! Better be grateful!"

"Why would *you* get to—"

"Thank you so much!" Shiratama said, eyes sparkling with glee as she bowed deeply.

Why's she so happy? Shiratama's reaction baffled Tobi, but it seemed to have cheered her up, so he decided to let it go. "So yeah —you can call me Otogiri, or Tobi, or whatever you want to…," he reiterated.

"Tobi?" Shiratama repeated.

"…Yeah, like I said. That's fine."

"In that case, I'd be happy if you would call me Ryuuko as well!"

"…Nah. That's a bit much."

"Oh. I see…" Shiratama hung her head. "I suppose it's hardly been any time at all since we began associating with one another. I'm sure it would be uncomfortable for you to act so familiar, considering how shallow our relationship still is…"

"Come *on*!" Baku shouted, squirming in Tobi's grip.

Tobi felt bad for upsetting Shiratama, but some part of him just couldn't stomach the idea of calling her by her first name.

"…Can I, um, practice a little first?" Tobi asked. "You know, to get used to it."

"'Practice'?" Shiratama repeated, cocking her head.

Tobi wasn't sure what she was confused about. Had he said something strange? He probably had. It must have been the part about practicing. How exactly did you practice calling someone by their first name? Would he wait until he was alone, imagine Shiratama's face, and say "Ryuuko" out loud? Just the thought of it was enough to make him double over with shame.

"I mean, like…I'll call you that when I'm ready, I guess. Emotionally, or whatever…"

"All right, but I'm going to hold you to that! You have to make a real effort!" The look in Shiratama's eyes was completely earnest. Apparently, this was important to her.

"…Sure, I guess. If that's what you want."

"It most certainly is! And until you're ready to call me Ryuuko, I'll be calling you 'Otogiri' as well."

"What is this, some sort of contract…?"

"I would call it more of a promise than a contract."

Promise, contract—whatever it was, Tobi was skeptical about whether he'd ever feel ready to call Shiratama by her first name. He couldn't imagine it. At the very least, he was nowhere near ready now.

"…Anyway, what are you doing here, Shiratama?" he asked.

"Hmm? Come to think of it, what are *you* doing here?" she replied.

"Oh, that's easy—he was tailing you," Baku chimed in with a snicker. "Creepy as hell, right? Acting like a real stalker!"

"That's not—well, I guess it *is* true, but…," Tobi awkwardly muttered, turning away from her. "I…had a feeling you might go to Kon's place on your own after school was out. It was just a hunch."

"Why did you think that?" asked Shiratama. Her eyes were as wide as they could go, and she blinked several times in sequence. "In any case…you were right. I was so worried about her, I couldn't help myself. She told me where she lived some time ago, and I happened to remember the route, so getting here was simple enough. Though I'm not sure whether I'll be able to see her…"

"Did you think you could *hear*…?" Tobi began, only to pause. The moment the word "hear" passed his lips, Shiratama stiffened up, her mouth pursed tightly. It seemed his theory was correct. "Did you want to hear her voice? The sort most people can't?"

Shiratama didn't say a word. She just nodded.

The two of them paid a visit to Chiami Kon's home. Shiratama knew what building she lived in, but not what number her apartment was. Fortunately, that was easy to figure out by reading the names on the building's mailboxes. They used the intercom to call Kon's apartment, and spoke with her mother, who was delighted that Kon's classmates had come to visit her. She quickly invited them inside.

Kon's home was on the sixth floor, and when Tobi and Shiratama stepped out of the elevator, they found Kon's mother waiting for them. Tobi was a little surprised when he saw her. Her makeup was immaculate, and she was dressed so carefully you'd think she was on her way out to some sort of event. She smelled strongly of perfume, and was almost off-puttingly cheerful, considering the circumstances.

Kon's mother led Tobi and Shiratama into her living room, where she had them sit down on a leather couch and served them milk tea and an assortment of snacks. Shiratama insisted she didn't need to bother, and Tobi could tell she wasn't simply being polite, but Kon's mother wouldn't hear a word of it.

An assortment of intermingling aromas soon filled the living room, which was decorated in a rather strange, uncomfortably extravagant fashion. Kon's mother immediately inundated Tobi and Shiratama with a rapid-fire series of questions about Kon's school life and friendships, which Tobi didn't have any answers to, and Shiratama was only slightly more able to address.

"Oh, that reminds me," Kon's mother said eventually. She directed Tobi and Shiratama's attention to a picture hung up on the wall. It was a photo of a couple and a little girl, smiling and laughing

together on a beach. Kon's mother explained that it was a family photo they'd had taken in Hawaii. Apparently, they'd traveled to all sorts of places, like Guam, Cebu, Bali, Barcelona, London, and Paris.

"…Lady sure likes to brag, huh?" Baku muttered.

I'm not so sure about that, Tobi thought. To him, it seemed less like she was bragging and more like she felt compelled to talk about all the good times she'd had with her family. There was a certain pain to her tone that didn't escape him.

"Um, so, about Chiami," Shiratama finally said. It seemed she couldn't bear to listen to Kon's mother talk any longer, and she asked if they could be shown to Kon's room, which her mother finally agreed to. She opened the door without bothering to knock and ushered Shiratama and Tobi inside.

Almost everything in Kon's room was white or pink. Kon herself was sitting upright in her bed, wearing a very frilly nightgown.

"Chia?" said Kon's mother. Kon didn't react. "Oh, Chia? Chia? Can't you hear me?"

Suddenly, Kon's mother rushed over to the bed. She placed her hands on her daughter's cheeks, turning Kon's attention to her.

"Chia, it's me! It's Mommy! Your mommy's right here! Chia? Chia!"

"…Mommy," Kon said. At last, she seemed to blearily register that her mother was in front of her. "Mommy? You're here? Mommy?"

"That's right, Chia. I've been here this whole time, haven't I? And your friends are here to visit you, too! Shiratama and Otogiri! I know I've heard you talk about Shiratama before, right? You told me about her, didn't you? Isn't it great that they came to see you?"

"Yeah," said Kon. That one word was her only reaction. She didn't even move her head.

Kon's mother broke into a smile. "Oh, I know!" she said. "Why don't I bring you something to drink? You must be thirsty, right? Or are you hungry? I can get you something to eat right away. Mommy knows all your favorite foods, after all! Just wait—I'll be right back! Okay, Chia?"

Kon didn’t reply. Her mother excitedly hurried out of the room, leaving Tobi and Shiratama on their own.

A large window was set into one of the walls of Kon’s room. Its lacy curtains were closed, but the light of the sunset shone through them, dying her white and pink walls and furniture a shade of orange. Kon’s hair was tied up in braids—a style she’d never worn to school. Tobi imagined her mother had done her hair and dressed her in that nightgown.

Shiratama brought Chinu out from its pouch. Barely a moment passed before it began to speak—in someone else’s voice.

“I’m me. I’m Chiami.”

Kon was still looking straight ahead. In all likelihood, she wasn’t *looking* at anything at all. That just happened to be the direction her head was facing. Her lips weren’t moving in the slightest.

“I’m me. I’m Chiami, Mommy…”

It was a voice that Tobi shouldn’t have been able to hear. Even though she was sitting right in front of him, her voice never should have been able to reach his ears.

“I’m me—Chiami.”

Who was it, again? I forgot her name, but I remember talking with Mommy about her.

"You know, —— said that her parents bought her a stuffed —— !"

That's all I said. Honestly, I kind of hoped telling her that story would get her to buy me one, too. Just a little, though! I knew what would really happen.

"Oh, Chia. You remember what I always tell you, don't you? —— is —— and you're you, right? Other people have their lives, and you have yours. Isn't that right?"

I knew Mommy would get mad at me. I was me, after all. So I never said it again. If I did, Mommy would get mad. I couldn't compare myself to other kids. I was me. I wasn't like them. I was Mommy's darling little Chia. I was special. I was the one and only me. I was important. I was Mommy's daughter, and I was more precious to her than anyone and anything else.

"What should we do during summer vacation this year, Chia? You know, ——'s family is going to Hawaii! And you know, ——'s mommy told me that *their* family went to Spain over New Year's. Daddy says he can't take time off work, though. He *always* says that, doesn't he? Oh, and you know, I saw —— at my class reunion the other day, and apparently they're having a house built for their family! A single-family home! You don't want to live in this apartment forever, do you? Oh, what *will* we do this summer?"

It didn't matter to me. Every summer break, and winter break, and spring break, I'd always do whatever Mommy wanted to do. She decided that I should learn piano, take ballet lessons, attend English

classes, learn how to swim, and go to cram school, too. And if I said I didn't want to go, she'd get really, really mad.

"Who do you think I'm doing this for? Do you understand, Chia? This is all for your sake! Don't you see that?"

I wanted to try learning calligraphy. I don't remember who, but someone was learning it, and their writing was really pretty. I got jealous and asked Mommy if I could learn too, but that made her mad.

"—— is —— and you're you, right? Other people have their lives, and you have yours. I've told you that a thousand times, haven't I? Why can't you just *understand*, Chia?!"

It was my fault because I didn't understand. Other people were other people, and I was me. Everything Mommy decided was for me. After all, I was important to her. I was her special little girl.

But you know what, Mommy? I was bad at piano and ballet. You always scolded me for that, didn't you? And English class wasn't fun at all. Swimming made me tired—I didn't like it, either. When I said so, you got really mad and shouted, "Well then, just quit! Tuition isn't free, you know?!" so I stopped doing all of them. I kept going to cram school because I was afraid you'd get mad if my grades went down. But to be honest, I didn't want to do that, either.

"It's fine. After all, you're you, Chia. You can just stay the way you are. I love you because you're you. Right? You understand, don't you, Chia?"

I don't know when it started, and I knew she'd get mad if I told her, but whenever she called me "Chia," I got goose bumps. It felt like I couldn't breathe. It was a really nasty feeling. I could never tell her, though. I didn't want to make her mad. After all, Mommy loved her darling Chia, and I loved her, too. But sometimes, I'd start wondering.

Maybe Mommy didn't love *me*. Maybe she only loved *her perfect little Chia*.

I shouldn't have quit piano, and ballet, and English class, and swimming. Mommy had wanted me to take them. If I didn't do what

she wanted, I'd stop being her perfect little *Chia*, and then she'd hate me. I couldn't be greedy. *Chia* wouldn't make Mommy mad.

When I got into middle school, some of my classmates had smartphones. I really, really, *really* wanted one. I couldn't stop myself from wanting one, but if I asked Mommy, she'd get angry. That was why I asked Daddy instead, and he bought me one!

Then Mommy and Daddy got into a big fight. Mommy kept shouting at him all night long.

"You've never bothered to buy me a single ring, but oh, if your *daughter* begs you even a little, you'll buy her *whatever* she wants! Just what am I to you?! Do you have any idea how much I've sacrificed for you and that girl?!"

I acted like I couldn't hear them. I went *Ahhh, ahhh, ahhh, ahhhhh, I can't hear you, I can't hear you, ahhh, ahhh, I can't hear you, I can't hear you, I can't hear anything at all, ahhh, ahhh, ahhh!*

Mommy's really scary when she gets mad. I can't make her angry. She's really nice when she's not mad, though. Everyone always says how great she is. When she's outside, she's always super nice and friendly, and when I was in grade school, she was even on the PTA! She has tons of friends, too. My grandma and grandpa—Daddy's parents—always take Mommy's side instead of his. Mommy loves me. She's my mommy, after all. Or at least, she loves *Chia*.

Did I do something wrong? Was it my fault? I wasn't as good at acting nice—I mean, at *being* nice—as Mommy was. I couldn't keep smiling all the time just by trying hard like she could. I always ended up comparing myself to other kids. I didn't have many friends, either, and sometimes I went on social media sites to complain in secret. If I didn't, it just hurt so, so, so, so much that I couldn't stand it.

If nothing changed, I might stop being Mommy's precious little *Chia*. Mommy might stop loving me. I was doing my best. I was always nice to all my friends, and said they could tell me anything. I decided I'd accept anything they said to me, no matter what. When I wanted something, I almost always made do without. I tried to do

what Mommy told me to as much as possible. I was super careful not to do anything that would make her mad at me. Even if she called me *Chia* and I got goose bumps, I'd just smile and say, "Yes, Mommy?" I did my best, I really did.

Sometimes, when I complained online, people would try to cheer me up. They really did make me feel better. They'd say that it wasn't my fault, too, but I think they were wrong. I think it *was* my fault.

(This is crazy, right?)

Sometimes, I'd hear a voice.

Crazy? What's crazy?

(You are.)

Me?

(It's all *your* fault.)

I was sure that was true. I wish I could've been myself *and* the Chia that Mommy loved so much, but I couldn't.

I always knew. Nagisa, Yoriko, and Miyuki never really liked me. I went on the internet enough to know that people always have things they don't tell you to your face. Mommy was the same, in the end, and so was I. I was never really *Chia*. I wish I could've been the perfect little *Chia* that Mommy loved, but I couldn't. I was just me. I was Chiami.

I worked so hard, so why couldn't everyone just love me?

"Find your true self!" I saw the words online, on some social media platform. **"Look for the real you!" "Uncover your inner truth!"** I decided to try, and so I asked myself: What am I? Who am I? What do I want to do? Who do I want to become? What do I want?

"Chia!"

I don't want Mommy to call me Chia. But I don't want her to hate me. I want her to keep loving me. After all, I love her. I want Nagisa, Yoriko, and Miyuki to love me, too. I want them to love me more and more. I'm lonely and anxious, so I want everyone to love me. Please don't hate me. I'm not her, Mommy. I'm not your precious little *Chia*.

I'm Chiami. I'm me—Chiami. Do you hate me for that, Mommy?

Don’t hate me. Love me. Love me as Chiami.
And if none of you will love me…then I’ll hate all of you.

"Otogiriii…"

The same teacher as always, clad in an impeccably pressed suit and black-framed glasses, called out to Tobi from his usual spot by the school gate.

Tobi stopped in his tracks. "Good morning, Mr. Yagarashima."

"…R-right. D-did you need something, Otogiri?"

"I wanted to tell you something. It's about this backpack," Tobi said, lifting Baku up slightly and gesturing toward him. "I have to use it. Other bags don't work for me. I know it bothers you. Sorry about that."

"It's not that it *bothers* me, exactly…"

"Oh? Anyway, thanks for keeping watch every morning."

"Y-yes, well, it's my job, so…"

Tobi gave the teacher a quick nod, then passed on through the school gate.

"Hmm. Had a change of heart, eh, Tobi?" asked Baku.

"…Just felt like it, that's all," Tobi replied.

Shiratama was waiting by the shoe cubbies. Tobi changed into his indoor shoes, and the two of them walked to class together. Shiratama seemed like she had something to say, but she couldn't quite find the words. Tobi could tell, because he felt the same way. When they arrived at the classroom, Tobi was relieved to see that Asamiya had shown up to school, and once again, Shiratama seemed to feel the same way.

Mr. Harimoto talked about Kon during morning homeroom. He explained that she would need a little more time to recover, and so

she was taking a leave of absence in the meantime. That was all. He didn't even mention Takatomo.

Murahama and Shimomaeda, the two girls who'd been close with Kon, were hanging out with a mixed group of boys and girls. Shuuji Masaki—aka Masamune—was part of the group and was currently making the others laugh with his usual antics. Asamiya watched them from a distance, frowning.

Tobi demolished his school lunch in seconds, except for his bread roll. Then he took Baku and the roll and left the classroom. The courtyard was still off-limits, so he made his way to the entrance instead, only for it to start raining just as he was about to step outside. That didn't leave him with many options, so he resigned himself to squatting by the shoe cubbies and eating his bread there.

"Life goes on, huh…?" Baku muttered.

Tobi finished off his bread. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just a thought. What, don't get it? C'mon, use your head."

If Tobi had to guess—and apparently, he did—Baku was reflecting on how quickly everyone had gone back to their everyday lives after the terrible things that had happened to Takatomo and Kon. Even if Tobi were to vanish from the face of the earth that very day, life would still go on for the rest of the world. His disappearance would barely register as a blip on the radar. The world would keep turning, come what may, and its people would keep living the same way they always had.

Rain fell in scattered droplets beyond the school's glass entryway. Tobi couldn't hear it at all.

After lunch ended and the afternoon break began, someone else approached the entryway and squatted down beside Tobi. The two of them sat there in silence for a moment, simply gazing out at the rain.

"Did you look them up?" Tobi asked, not even glancing at the girl beside him. "Like…with your phone? Online?"

"You mean, did I look up 'zingai'?" she asked. Tobi nodded. "Yes, but only a little."

“What did you find out?”

“Supposedly, when people talk about seeing monsters, or ghosts, or demons, or fairies, what they really saw were usually zingai. People say the strange phenomena that give rise to urban legends likely often involve zingai, as well.”

“So people use them to explain anything and everything?”

Tobi let out a sarcastic chuckle. The girl laughed, too. Tobi looked to his side, and Shiratama looked back at him.

“So what, me and Chinu are supposed to be monsters now?” Baku said before making a noise that sounded distinctly like an irritated click of the tongue.

Shiratama gave Baku a gentle, soothing pat. “It seems certain people seek out excuses to attribute anything inexplicable to zingai,” she said. “Though none of that changes the fact that only certain people can see them in the first place.”

“People like you and Tobi, eh? Yeah, that still seems to check out,” said Baku.

“And because the vast majority of people can’t see them, it’s rare for anyone to take stories about them seriously. They’re treated like any other tale of the paranormal.”

“So Baku’s like a ghost, huh,” Tobi muttered.

Baku started throwing a fit. He didn’t have legs, but it still felt like he was trying to give Tobi a solid kick—or maybe a punch? Shiratama spent another moment soothing him.

“As for social media,” she continued, “I’ve never used it before. I’ll have to make an account sometime soon.”

“I don’t have a smartphone, so that’s not an option for me,” said Tobi.

“You should consider getting one! They’re convenient in quite a number of ways.”

“They are, huh?”

“For one thing, having one means that people can get in touch with you no matter where you are!”

Several other people living at the institute had smartphones. Staff members were always warning them not to stay up late texting or calling their friends.

"Plus, if anything ever happens," Shiratama said, turning her gaze outside, "we could always talk. Any time…"

"Right…," Tobi replied half-heartedly.

"Peh!" Baku grunted. It seemed like he had something to say, and Tobi wished he'd just come out with it.

"Oh, and another thing!" Shiratama pulled her phone out of her pocket. She tapped on its display, starting up an app and turning the screen toward Tobi. "You can use them to look at maps, too! You can zoom in and out and even turn the image to face whatever direction you'd like!"

"Oh? That's pretty cool," said Tobi.

"You'd never get lost again!"

"Is it just me, Shiratama, or are you trying to sell me on getting a phone…?"

"Perish the thought!" she said, the oddly old-fashioned expression nearly causing Tobi to choke with laughter. Her look of wide-eyed surprise didn't help, either.

"Maps, huh?" Tobi muttered.

"And it would let you stay in touch with people," Shiratama said for the second time as she fiddled with her phone. "Oh… Am I being too insistent?"

Tobi shook his head. "Nah, not really."

The rain fell harder. It felt like thunder would start rumbling at any second.

"I've been meaning to ask," Shiratama said, only to hesitate and fall silent.

"What?" Tobi replied.

Shiratama put her phone away and took a deep breath. "It's about the voice."

Tobi knew what she was talking about right away. He'd been thinking about it as well.

"You mean…the one that kept saying 'Isn't that crazy?' and stuff?"

Both Takatomo and Kon seemed to have assumed it was some kind of hallucination. Such things probably did happen to people when they were mentally unstable. However, it was harder to believe that not just one, but *both* of them would hear the same sort of voice saying the same sort of things.

Shiratama looked down and bit her lip. "I just can't bring myself to believe they were simply hearing things or just having hallucinations…"

Baku made a noise that sounded like a lengthy sigh.

Takatomo still hadn't regained consciousness. There was no telling what would happen to Kon as time went on. For the time being, though, it seemed that everything was settled. But was it really?

Life went on. The world kept turning.

If it wasn't a hallucination…then whose voice was it?

By the time afternoon classes began, the rain had picked up enough that Tobi could hear it clearly, even without listening for it. From time to time, streaks of lightning forked through the sky in the distance. When the rumble of thunder rolled in moments later Masamune would say something stupid, causing the class to break out in laughter until the teacher scolded them into silence again.

From time to time, Tobi would glance over at Asamiya. His textbook and notebook were both open on his desk, but he was just staring blankly downward, not reading or writing anything. It was like he had a heavy, invisible stone pressing down on his back, and it was all he could do just to bear its crushing weight. That was how it looked to Tobi, at least.

Whenever Masamune spoke, Asamiya would glance up for a moment. He'd turn his head ever so slightly, looking in Masamune's direction, then shake it and sigh deeply. He seemed to be mumbling, too, though Tobi couldn't make out any of the words.

Just after fifth period, a particularly loud peal of thunder rang out. Masamune let out a shrill "Bwugyaaah!" and toppled from his chair, before rolling across the floor. The students of Class 2-3 broke out in laughter, and even the fifth period teacher, who was getting ready to head to the next class, cracked up.

"No, I'm *not*!"

Asamiya's shout rang out with no warning at all. He shot to his feet, glaring straight at Masamune. The class's laughter died out in the blink of an eye, and Masamune, still on the ground, gaped up at Asamiya.

"If anyone's *crazy*, it's you!"

It wasn't totally clear who Asamiya was talking to, but to Tobi, it seemed pretty clear he was shouting at Masamune. Tobi agreed, after all—watching him perform all his ridiculous antics with that bark-skinned speak-no-evil tarsier on his head was, indeed, a crazy sight. But that was only because Tobi could see the zingai. To anyone who couldn't, Masamune would look like a perfectly normal class clown.

"I'm *not* crazy!" Asamiya all but howled. "I'm not crazy! I'm not, I'm not, I'm *not*! Stop it…! I'm not crazy, I'm telling you, I'm not! It's not me! You're the crazy one! You, not me! I'm not crazy! I'm not! I'm *not*! I'm not, I'm not, I'm not! I'm *not* crazy…!"

"…Okay, but, like, objectively? You're acting *pretty* crazy right now, dude," Masamune said with a forced, twitching smile. A few of Tobi's classmates must have taken it as a joke, and they quietly laughed in the background.

Asamiya started battering his own head with his fists. "Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut *up*! Who *are* you?! I'm not crazy! It's you, isn't it?! All of you are the crazy ones! *You* are, not me!"

"A-Asamiya…!" Shiratama shouted and rushed toward him.

"Tobi—"

Just as Baku began to speak, Tobi had a realization. Something had changed. He didn't know when; he'd only noticed it just now. It

was the speak-no-evil tarsier, Masamune's creepy zingai. It was still sitting on Masamune's head—but it wasn't its old, speak-no-evil self.

Tobi had started thinking of it as "the speak-no-evil tarsier" because of the way its hands were constantly clasped together in front of its mouth. But that had changed. Its mouth wasn't obstructed anymore—or rather, the place where its mouth should have been was now visible. But there was no mouth. Instead, there was nothing at all. Its eyes, ears, and nose all resembled those of a tarsier, but it lacked a mouth to match them. Maybe it had never had one. Or maybe it once did, and now it was gone. Either way, the *thing* had been covering its nonexistent mouth every time Tobi had seen it up until now, when it had suddenly dropped the pose. Why?

As those thoughts raced through Tobi's mind, Asamiya shoved Shiratama away from him. She let out a sharp gasp as she collided with a nearby desk and staggered, nearly falling. Asamiya doubled over, leaning forward as far as he could go before suddenly rearing back, then leaning forward once more, over and over again.

"Ugggaaaaaaaauuuuuuuuuggggggggghhhhhhhhh…!"

The rest of the class was starting to lose its composure. Some of Tobi's classmates were so scared, they looked like they might flee at a moment's notice. Panic was setting in. Tobi was surprised, too, of course. What had happened to Asamiya? He'd started shouting about not being crazy out of nowhere—almost as if someone had been insistently telling him that he *was* crazy, and he was trying to fight back. Who was it, though? At the very least, Tobi hadn't heard anyone. Was it something only Asamiya could hear?

Then Tobi saw it. Masamune—Shuuji Masaki—was clasping his hands in front of his mouth. He'd assumed the speak-no-evil pose in his zingai's place.

"…Oh, that little bastard!" Baku spat.

Masamune's eyes were narrowed, and his shoulders were trembling. He was *laughing*. What, exactly, was so funny to him? Whatever it was, it had him so amused that it was all he could do to desperately hold back his laughter.

Tobi reached down and grabbed Baku from where he'd hung him on his desk. He knew that if he left him behind this time, he'd never hear the end of it. Tobi weaved his way through the desks, chairs, and other students, making his way toward Masamune, whose eyes widened as he noticed Tobi's approach. Tobi was just about to pounce on him, *when he heard a voice*.

(This is crazy, right?) (It's all your fault.) (You're to blame.) (You!) (It's you!)

"Mnagh…"

Tobi pressed his hands to his head and crouched down. He wasn't the only one affected—Shiratama let out a shriek, as well.

A voice. It's a voice. Or is it? Is that really what this is?

(It's you.) (You're crazy, aren't you?) (That's right, you!) (It's all your fault!)

It felt like a cacophony of voices had all joined together and taken a physical form, sometimes liquid, sometimes solid, like a roiling mass of searingly hot molten metal, and it was all being poured directly into Tobi's mind.

(You're crazy, right?) (Yeah, you!) (You're crazy!) (You are!) (You are!)

"…Tobi! Tobi?!"

Tobi could hear Baku shouting. He looked up at Masamune and saw the mouthless tarsier zingai with its bark-like skin, still sitting on the other boy's head. There was still no mouth on its face, but the place where one should have been seemed to be squirming disconcertingly.

(Crazy!) (This is crazy, right?) (It's crazy!) (You're crazy!)

Is this crazy? It is. Am I crazy? I feel like I might go crazy.

Is it him?

I get it. It's Masamune's zingai. It's that thing. This is its *voice.*

"Let me do it, Tobi…!" said Baku.

Let you do what? What can Baku— Oh. Of course.

Tobi lifted Baku over his shoulder and hurled him toward Masamune.

"Waaah…!"

Masamune flinched away, avoiding Baku by a hair's breadth. He'd dodged, and after sparing a sidelong glance to watch Baku slam into the locker at the back of the room, Masamune took off running.

Is he trying to leave?

Tobi stooped down to pick up Baku, then charged after Masamune, who wrenched open the classroom's sliding door and fled into the hallway. Just then, Shiratama shouted.

"Otogiri, wait! I'll come, too…!"

"Go tell Haizaki!" Tobi shouted back, not even turning to look before he sprinted out the door as well. Would telling Haizaki about this accomplish anything? He wasn't sure, but it was the first idea that sprung to mind. Either way, he didn't want Shiratama following him. He knew he was running straight into danger.

"Where does that slippery asshole think he's running?!" Baku shouted.

"How should I know?!" Tobi yelled back.

Masamune didn't have the longest legs, but he could move them pretty quickly when push came to shove. Tobi managed to gain some ground on him while he was sprinting down the stairs, but it wasn't going to be easy to catch up. Masamune headed for the shoe cubbies, but he didn't stop to change out his footwear, instead blowing right past them and pushing the glass doors open so forcefully that it looked more like he was tackling them. He flew outside, and Tobi pursued him, still in his indoor shoes, as well.

The rain had turned into an outright downpour, and Tobi was soaked to his skin before he knew it. He saw Masamune off in the distance, sprinting wildly as he shouted something at the top of his lungs. The rain was too loud for Tobi to make out exactly what he was saying, but he caught a few scattered words here and there, like "wrong," "not me," and "not my fault."

"Talk about a piece of work, huh?! This guy's as bad as they come…!" Baku growled.

It felt like the rain was falling in literal sheets. Masamune sprinted across a crosswalk while the light was red, and a driver blared their horn at him. He flinched, almost coming to a stop, but then charged forward anyway. Tobi, however, had no choice but to wait for a moment. Cars were speeding across the crosswalk from both directions, and it took a while before there was a large enough gap for him to thread the needle and make it across. Once again, Masamune had gained a sizable lead on him.

Why not just give up? It's pouring rain, I'm out of breath, and honestly, this feels awful. Is chasing him important enough to put myself through all this? Because of the zingai? Is it because they're involved?

Tobi had Baku, and he could see other zingai. Baku had eaten Kon's zingai, and as a result, Kon had become spirit-hollowed, or whatever Haizaki had called it. Tobi bore the responsibility for Baku's actions—it was partially his fault—but on the other hand, hadn't Kon brought it upon herself?

She clearly had a lot of issues regarding her relationship with her mother. But even if that was the driving factor behind her actions, the situation would never have spiraled so far out of control if her zingai hadn't gotten up to its nasty mischief. Takatomo never would have thrown herself off the roof.

Then there was that voice. It was the work of a zingai as well: Shuuji Masaki's. His zingai had used its voice to torment Kon and Takatomo, driving them into a corner emotionally. If his zingai hadn't decided to cause trouble, then the whole string of tragic incidents would never have happened.

If Tobi left Masamune's zingai to its own devices, it would do the same thing all over again. He knew that for a fact—after all, that was exactly what it was doing, targeting Asamiya.

No— *Much better to eat it.*

They could eat the zingai and be done with it.

Masamune was heading toward the Asakawa River. Tobi thought he might cross the bridge, but he ran down the embankment

instead. They were close to the tent city on the floodplain of the Asakawa, commonly known as the Asakawa Den, and Masamune was just beyond it, in an area overgrown with weeds. Only a little ways ahead of him the shrubs were taller than he was, and they were quite thick.

Masamune looked over his shoulder as he ran, but the face Tobi saw wasn't what he'd expected. It wasn't the face of Shuuji Masaki. Instead, Tobi saw a pair of large eyes and rounded ears much more sensitive than a human's. His nose jutted out from his face, and he had no mouth at all. It was the tarsier's face. Had he put on a mask that just happened to look like his bark-skinned zingai? That seemed impossible, and more importantly, Tobi noticed, the zingai was no longer resting on his head.

"Did he *fuse* with his zingai…?!" Baku asked incredulously.

Tobi thought that sounded pretty likely. Masamune's head, and only his head, was the spitting image of his zingai's. From the neck down, he was the same human he'd always been.

"Masaki…!" Tobi shouted. He knew it was hopeless, but he called out for him to stop anyway. Masamune, however, dove into the foliage and tried to beat a path through it. Tobi knew he'd just keep going until he escaped—or that was what he'd assumed anyway.

Much to Tobi's surprise, he was wrong. Masamune spun around to face him.

(What's your problem?!) (What's your deal?!) (What are you?!) (What is this?!) (What the hell are you?!)

"Augh…"

Tobi plugged his ears reflexively, but it was futile. Although Masamune didn't have a mouth, the place where his mouth should have been was squirming strangely. It looked like there were countless maggots—hundreds, thousands, or even more—writhing on his face, but what they formed couldn't be called a *mouth*, and the voice that Tobi was hearing wasn't made up of *sound*.

(What are you?!) (Who are you?!) (You!) (Just who the hell are you?!) (What is this?!)

Tobi could feel his brain trembling. The voice was projecting directly into his mind, sending intricate shock waves through his gray matter.

(What do you even know?!) (You don't know jack!) (I'm not to blame!) (It wasn't my fault!) (This is crazy, right?) (It's crazy!) (You're crazy!) (You are!) (It's you!) (Not me!) (You are!) (Crazy!) (You're crazy!) (You're the crazy one here!)

"…Tobi! Tobi! Hey, Tobi?! Tobiii…!"

Tobi heard Baku calling his name, over and over. A moment later, he realized he'd fallen to his knees on the wet, grassy ground. Masamune had turned around again and vanished into the foliage.

Tobi could still feel his brain trembling. Was that even something brains did? Regardless, he felt sick. Very sick.

Still—I have to eat him.

Tobi stood back up. He plunged into the junglelike foliage, pushing his way through dripping wet shrubs and trees in search of Masamune. Tobi knew the other boy had been heading for the river. Somehow, he could just sense it. Where was he now, though? Tobi couldn't see him, but he knew. He knew he was just up ahead.

Only a little farther.

The wet branches stung like whips, but Tobi shook them off and pushed on, finally emerging on the narrow riverbank. There wasn't much to it, really—there were barely any stones, and not much sand, either. At the moment, it was more of a bog. Looking downstream, Tobi saw a railway bridge that crossed the river, with a pedestrian walkway right next to it. The Asakawa River was cloudy, murky, and seemed to be running faster than usual.

Masamune had waded into the water. He was up to his knees, with his back to Tobi. Tobi followed him into the bog. It was terribly muddy, but he had to keep going. He had to eat it.

Eat it?

*I'm going to eat it. But…*why*?*

"…I'm starving," Baku said in a voice that was almost a groan. "I'm just…so hungry, I can't take it. You feel it, too, right, Tobi…?"

Tobi felt empty. It felt like every cell in his entire body was hollow. He was a void. He had to find some way to fill himself. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to go on. He had to eat, or he'd die. This was so he could live. He needed to eat so his life could carry on. He had to eat it—to eat the zingai.

Baku was starving. The hunger was his, but Tobi could still feel it, plain as day. *Tobi* wasn't hungry. *He* wasn't interested in eating the zingai. But could he really say that with certainty? No one could live without eating, could they?

What's so wrong with eating to live?

It was the same as when he'd eaten Chiami Kon's zingai. Was he going to do that again? What would happen if he did? What happened if you ate a zingai that had fused with a human's head? What would happen to Shuuji Masaki?

"What are you doing over there, Masaki?"

Tobi stopped where the bog became the river. He couldn't let it happen. He couldn't let Baku eat the zingai.

"You should turn back. The river's dangerous when it rains like this."

(You left him to die.)

There it was—the voice. The voice that shook Tobi's brain instead of his eardrums.

(You abandoned him… You left *your big brother* to die.)

But this…was Masamune's voice.

(You were never much like him. He was thin, and smart, and athletic, too. He was great at games, he could draw—he could do anything. Your big brother was as kind as could be. And what about you?)

(You…were always misbehaving. You always got scolded by your parents, and he always stepped in to protect you. He made it seem like it was his responsibility. Sure, his little brother was a sad piece of work, but you were still his little brother, so what could he do?)

(You were always following him around, clinging to him. "Big Brother, Big Brother, Big Brother"—you think he didn't get sick of

that? Every once in a while, he'd give you the cold shoulder, and you'd throw a big, screaming fit about it. Your parents would tell you to give it a rest and chew you out all over again…)

What? What—no, who *is this about?*

(Your family used to go camping all the time. That was the last time you ever went, wasn't it? The river. You set up at a campsite by a river. It was just nearby. It was your big brother's idea, right? "Let's go swim, Shuu," he said. Shuu! Short for Shuuji—the "ji" comes from the character for "two," right? They named you that because you were the second son, didn't they? But you were too scared. You sent your big brother off to swim on his own. You stayed by the riverside, stacking stones…)

A big brother?

(He swam way out, far away from the bank, and then he started shouting, "Shuu, help me!")

Whose big brother? Shuuji Masaki's?

(And you…? You didn't even try to save him, did you?)

(I was scared, okay?! I could barely even swim! How could I have possibly helped him?!)

(Right! That's exactly right! And so…you just stood there and watched, didn't you?)

(I saw…him drowning… He'd bob up to the surface, then sink down again… The river was flowing fast, and it swept him away… He was swallowing so much water, but he kept shouting "Help me, Shuu!" over and over and over)

(And you just watched, right? Your big brother was begging for help…and all you did was listen.)

(I have to help him right now, or he's gonna die!)

(That's what you thought, isn't it? You knew…and yet you didn't do anything at all, did you?)

(He was swept away. I couldn't see him anymore…)

(And that's when you did something, right? Right! *After* he was already gone, you ran off to get your parents!)

(I went up to them in tears… "He vanished," I said, "Big Brother disappeared…")

(But that's not what happened, right? Right? It isn't, is it? That wasn't true, was it? That's not how it went at all, right?)

(Big Brother kept shouting "Help me, Shuu!" over and over… He begged me to save him…)

(But you ignored him, didn't you? And in the end, you lied about it.)

(I left my big brother…to die.)

(That's right. You left your big brother to die.) (You watched it happen.) (You let him die.)

"…You…," Tobi said, wiping a hand across his face. The rain was pouring down as hard as ever. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

(I,) said the voice. (I—) (I'm—) (I'd—) (I—) (I was—) (I—) (I—) (I—) (I—)

(I abandoned my big brother and left him to die. How could I ever do something like that?)

(Isn't that crazy?)

(No.) (…No.) (It wasn't—) (No!) (It wasn't me!) (I didn't do it!) (I—) (It wasn't my fault!) (Who are you?!) (Who keeps saying it was my fault, and I killed him?! Who keeps blaming me?!) (Someone's blaming me for it!) (I hear you!) (This voice is haunting me!) (You're imagining it.) (But you know what your parents think?) (I do.) (They're always thinking *Why wasn't it you*?) (They wish *you'd* died instead of your big brother.) (They do. I'm sure of it.) (I'm not smart like he was, and I can't draw, and I never got taller…) (I don't follow directions.) (I'm a liar.) (I abandoned my big brother.) (I left him to die.) (I killed him.) (He called out, begging me to save him.) (But you didn't do anything at all.) (You could've run to your parents right away.) (I never would've made it in time!) (You're a real piece of shit, huh?) (He was drowning.) (It looked so painful…) (And you acted like you didn't see it.) (You're one hell of a monster, you know that?)

"Just stop it already…!" Toby shouted.

I don't want to hear this. I never wanted to know about any of this.

"It wasn't on purpose, was it?! It wasn't your fault, Masa—"

(It wasn't me!) (It wasn't my fault!) (I'm not in the wrong!) (I'm not crazy!) (I—) (I remember it so clearly.) (When they held my big brother's memorial service I just cried, and cried, and cried…) (And they laughed! Everyone said that I looked like an awful mess, and they laughed!) (Even my parents laughed!) (It was just like my big brother always said!) ("You're so funny, Shuu!") (He always laughed when I did something funny!) (Am I funny?) (Am I, Big Brother?) (Am I funny?) (I'm funny, right?) (I'm a funny guy!) (Laugh!) (Laugh for me!) (I'm funny, aren't I?) (So laugh!) (I'm funny, so you should laugh about it!) (Aren't I funny?) (I'll make you laugh, just watch!) (I'll do anything to make you laugh!) (So laugh!)

Tobi watched as Masamune began to change. No, that wasn't right—he'd started changing long ago. Masamune's head had already turned into that of the bark-skinned, mouthless tarsier. He'd fused with his zingai. But at first, it was just his head that had transformed—nothing from the neck down. That was no longer true.

(This is me!) (It's just like that post I saw on social media!) (**"Find your true self!"**) (**"Look for the real you!"**) (**"Uncover your inner truth!"**) (I found my true self!) (I found the funny me!) (The me who makes everyone laugh!) (The me who left my big brother to die!) (Isn't that crazy?!) (I'm—) (I've—) (I'd—) (I—) (I'm—) (I—) (I—) (I—) (I—) (I—) (I'm—)

The bark-like skin of Masamune's face had spread down his neck to his shoulders—no, all the way to his chest. Every centimeter of it was relentlessly writhing and squirming.

(Takatomo!) (I thought she would understand me!) (But then she—) (That bitch!) (I told her!) (I told her about my big brother!) (She comforted me!) (That means she liked me, right?) (So then why'd she—?) ("Go out? With you, Masamune? Get real!") (She rejected me, and she laughed about it!) (Takatomo!) (But I still cared about her! I looked out for her, didn't I?) (I knew something weird was

going on with her!) (So why?!) (Why'd she—?) ("Huh? What's wrong with *you*?") (What's her *problem*?!) (That's crazy, right?) (It's crazy!) (And anyway, it was her fault to begin with, right?) (She could've just gone out with me!) (She's to blame!) (Takatomo!) (Serves you right!) (Now that was a sight for sore eyes!) (You got what you deserved!)

The pace of Masamune's transformation was escalating by leaps and bounds. At the rate it was going, his whole body would be altered in mere moments. Masamune would become a zingai.

(She didn't have to jump off the roof, though, right?) (That's on Kon!) (That's right!) (It was her fault, wasn't it?) (Asamiya!) (What're you flipping out at me for?!) (You should be laughing!) (Laugh!) (I'm cracking jokes, so laugh!) (I work so hard to play to the crowd and make everyone laugh!) (So laugh!) "*Laugh*, dammit!"

Tobi was no longer just hearing that voice that shook his brain. It was still there, and as potent as ever, but another voice had begun to ring out in unison.

(I'm—) "I'm—" (I'm trying so hard to make you laugh!) "Laugh!" (Laugh, you carefree dumbasses!)

Even Masamune's arms and legs were being engulfed by his zingai form. His midsection, now strangely plump, squirmed, writhed, quivered, and finally, burst. It spread open in an instant, forming a gaping hole in his body.

"Laugh!" (Laugh, dammit!) "You idiots!" (I'm telling you to laugh!) "Laugh!" ("Laugh your stupid lives away!")

Is that a mouth? Tobi thought. The hole in Masamune's midsection was lined with rows of small teeth. What else could it be?

"("AH-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!")"

The mouth—the massive, wound-like mouth in Masamune's gut—burst into a fit of horrible laughter.

"…Stop it!" Tobi yelled. It felt like he was only barely staying upright. Baku was saying something—maybe "Keep it together, Tobi"—but Tobi could barely hear him.

Keep it together? How am I supposed to do that? I don't have a clue.

The zingai Masamune had become was moving toward Tobi now, splashing through the river as it advanced on him. Tobi no longer understood what was happening.

"Tobiiiiii…!"

Baku thrashed around like a huge fish fresh from the water. The momentum of his flailing threw Tobi off balance, and he toppled to the side and tumbled across the muddy ground. He ended up a mess, covered in mud, but he managed to dodge Zingai-Masamune's charge by a hair's breadth.

"Eat it, Tobi! We've gotta eat it!"

Baku struggled violently, attempting to force Tobi to his feet.

"("GRAH-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!")"

Zingai-Masamune's repulsive abdominal mouth opened wide and erupted in another fit of wild laughter, shaking Tobi's mind, the air, and even the drops of rain around him. At the same time, it prepared to charge at him once again.

Tobi shook his head. "But if we eat it…"

"If we *don't*, it's gonna eat *us*!"

Baku seemed dead set on eating the zingai, but that would mean *eating Shuuji Masaki*, and Tobi now knew he'd only ended up like this because of the tragic loss of his brother. Tobi grabbed Baku's strap with both hands and clenched it tightly.

"We can't! We can't do that…!"

He tried to run. The muddy ground made for terrible footing, but it didn't even faze him. It didn't matter if he couldn't run as fast as he wanted to—he just had to run. His goal wasn't to escape, but to put as much distance between himself and Masamune as he could. Baku was champing at the bit to eat him. Tobi understood how he felt—painfully well. But he also understood that if he let it happen, he would be sure to regret it.

Masamune chased after Tobi.

(Don’t—) “Don’t—” (Don’t—) “Ignore me!” (Otogiri!) “Tobi Otogiriiiiii…!”

“Ugh!” Tobi grunted as his foot got stuck in the mud, sending him tumbling face-first into the ground. He couldn’t see it, but Masamune chose that moment to finally pounce at him—only for Baku to take advantage of the situation and attempt to sink his teeth into Masamune. Masamune jumped away, but closed in again almost immediately, grabbing on to Tobi’s right ankle.

“Augh…!”

Masamune hurled Tobi with all his strength. Tobi tumbled through the rain-streaked air, soaring above the river. Then, moments later, he plummeted toward its surface.

The instant Tobi crashed into the water, something coiled itself around him.

Is that Masamune?

Tobi was under water, in a raging river, and could hardly tell up from down. He kicked his legs, flailing frantically for freedom, and Baku struggled as well. They somehow managed to break free, and Tobi tried to make his way to the bank but found that he couldn’t move. The water was only about as deep as his chest, so he could stand, but walking wasn’t getting him anywhere. He decided to swim instead—but that was hopeless, too. The current was so strong it just swept him farther downriver, and in the end, Masamune was able to grab his ankle once again.

“Ugbhhgh…”

For a moment, Tobi was dragged all the way down to the riverbed. He swallowed several hefty mouthfuls of water on the way; he had no idea why he wasn’t drowning.

The next thing Tobi knew, he was in a stretch of water no higher than his knees. Had he managed to struggle his way there himself? Or had he just been swept there by the current? One way or another, he was beneath the railway bridge just as a train passed by overhead. He could see the pedestrian bridge, and he saw that someone was standing on it. They were leaning over the railing,

looking down at him. No—not just one person. There were two of them.

"Tobiii!"

Baku shouted, and Tobi spun around. The noise he heard next no longer resembled a voice. It was tremendously loud—an earsplitting din that drowned out even the sound of the train above him, and for a moment it felt like Tobi's brain was boiling inside his skull. Masamune opened his massive mouth so wide it seemed to dominate a full half of his body, then he leaped toward Tobi again, attempting to devour him in a single bite.

You want to eat me that badly, huh? You're that hungry? You want to eat me so much, you can't help yourself?

Life couldn't survive without eating. That was the only reason Tobi had lived as long as he had. He had to eat. Eat or be eaten. That's all there was to it.

Unfortunately, Tobi couldn't move at all. He was choking—maybe thanks to all the water he'd swallowed. His consciousness was hazy, and eating was the last thing on his mind. He'd be eaten long before he had the chance to eat anything.

"Sorry I'm late!"

Suddenly, something—some*one*—shot into Tobi's line of sight, plowing into Masamune and sending him flying. If it weren't for him, Tobi would've been eaten for sure. And it was a him—Haizaki. Haizaki the school janitor, still wearing his work clothes, landed in front of Tobi. He was one of the two people who'd been standing on the pedestrian bridge just moments before. Apparently, he'd somehow managed to make his way from there to the river in mere seconds. Was that even possible? Certainly not for a human.

Something was strange about Haizaki's right leg. It had a dark, blackish hue to it. While his left leg was normal, his right looked like it was covered with some sort of leathery skin, or fur, maybe.

"Otogiri…!"

Next, Tobi heard Shiratama's voice. Haizaki wasn't the only person who'd been up on the pedestrian bridge. Shiratama had been with

him, and now she was charging down the embankment between it and the railway bridge at a breakneck pace. She looked like she might trip and fall at any second. Tobi could hardly bear to watch. To be frank, he didn't have the time to observe her reckless stunt. Masamune's voice—no, his horrible, soul-searing shriek could hardly be called a voice—was once again directed at Tobi.

"Ugh…" Tobi moaned. He was barely clinging to consciousness. Was Haizaki not bothered by the din? Glancing at him, Tobi could see he was suffering, too—he was stooped forward, just barely managing to stay upright.

Tobi could no longer see the being before him as Masamune. It wasn't even the mouthless tarsier zingai. Its skin writhed and roiled, the massive mouth in its midsection opened wide, and it *screamed*. It cried out, over and over, in an expression of single-minded blame. It blamed everyone dear to it—everyone around it—and, more than anything, it blamed itself. It could no longer express that sentiment in words, though. So instead, it used pure, undisguised animosity. It roared with hatred, fear, and resentment, all caught up in a vortex of guilt.

"Where's that zingai's master…?!" Haizaki choked out with some difficulty.

"He's inside it!" Baku shouted.

"Wha—?!" Haizaki gasped. "It… It absorbed him?! It's gone berserk?! Or did it *consume* him…?"

The tragic, fearful enmity of the zingai that used to be Masamune was palpable. It dominated the riverbed.

Stop, thought Tobi. *Stop it, please. I'm begging you, just stop!*

Shiratama had come to a halt partway down the embankment and was now crouching in place. Tobi hoped she'd stay where she was. He didn't want her anywhere near this. He wanted her as far away from it as possible.

Tobi grabbed Haizaki's shoulder. "What should we do?!" he shouted.

"W-well," Haizaki stammered, then he shook his head. His eyes were narrowed, and his jaw trembled.

That expression told Tobi everything he needed to know. It was too late. Masamune was beyond saving.

Suddenly, Haizaki opened his eyes wide and shook off Tobi's hand. "Just stand back," he said. "I'll take care of this."

Something was different about him. Haizaki usually spoke with a soft, unassuming tone, but now there was something else there—something harder. Tobi could tell in an instant that he intended to *dispose* of the zingai and Shuuji Masaki along with it. Could he even do that? Was he capable of it? Tobi couldn't possibly know, but if Haizaki intended to go through with this, all he could do was leave it to him.

But was that the right thing to do? Was it, really?

"You stay the hell out of this!"

Baku started flailing violently on Tobi's back. It wasn't one of his usual tantrums, though. Tobi grabbed his strap and tried to hold him down, but it was hopeless, and he had to let go mere moments later. It felt like he didn't have a choice. What would have happened if he'd held on? He didn't know. He couldn't even imagine.

Baku *peeled away* from Tobi's back, pushing past Haizaki. The thought that the thing before him might not be Baku never crossed Tobi's mind. No matter what form he took, Tobi could tell that Baku was Baku, no more and no less. He was surprised, of course. To say otherwise would have been a flagrant lie.

Baku stood on his own two legs, his back turned to Tobi and Haizaki. He had arms, as well, and remarkably large hands, each tapering to four fingers. He wore a long, cloak-like garment that seemed to be made of the same material as Baku's backpack form. Tobi wasn't sure if it was really clothing, or part of Baku himself. His head, meanwhile, was an almost featureless tube. Featureless, that is, except for a mouth Tobi could make out when Baku turned back to face him.

"If anyone's doing this," said Baku, "it's me…!"

“Do it, Baku!” said Tobi. He gave Baku a nod, which Baku didn’t return.

The zingai that used to be Masamune was bearing down on them. Baku didn’t wait to meet his charge. He dashed forward, going on the offensive. He leaped with such force he practically soared, grabbing onto the zingai’s head with one hand. That was when Tobi noticed—Baku’s mouth might have been the only feature on his head, but that didn’t mean he lacked eyes. He had two of them, one on the back of each of his massive hands.

“I’ll tear you open…!” Baku shouted.

He planted his feet on Zingai-Masamune’s shoulders, bracing himself while keeping hold of the creature’s head. It seemed like he’d decided that the zingai was nothing more than a suit Masamune was wearing, and he was now trying to tear it off him. Was that even possible?

“GRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH…!”

The zingai didn’t go down without a fight. It flailed wildly, swinging its arms in a frenzied attempt to shake Baku off. Water sprayed in all directions, and eventually, the zingai toppled into the river, taking Baku with it.

(It’s not my fault!) (I didn’t—) (It was you!) (It wasn’t me!) (It was you!)

The voice still shook Tobi’s brain, but now, he found he could bear it. Maybe he’d gotten used to it, or maybe it had grown a little quieter.

Haizaki glanced over at Tobi, then turned his attention back to the zingai and Baku. “What is that, Otogiri…?!”

Tobi didn’t reply. Baku was Baku. That was the only answer he could give.

“Baku…!” shouted Shiratama. She’d finally reached the bottom of the embankment. She was soaked to her skin, and covered in mud, probably thanks to a tumble down the slope. Chinu was clinging to her shoulder. “You can do it, Baku…!”

The fact that Shiratama recognized Baku right away, even in his new form, was oddly reassuring to Tobi. *I bet you feel the same way, right, Baku?* he said internally.

Tobi and Baku had been together ever since Tobi's brother disappeared. They were all each other had. Some people had tried to reach out to Tobi, sure, but none of them had been able to hear Baku's voice, and Baku was Tobi's partner. He was more important to Tobi than anything. He wasn't just a backpack, but explaining that to anyone else was hopeless. They'd simply never understand.

Then Shiratama came along. She understood that he and Baku shared an unbreakable bond. After all, just like Tobi had Baku, she had Chinu.

Baku and the zingai grappled with one another in the middle of the muddy river. Tobi didn't shout encouragement like Shiratama had. He didn't have to. After all, he was fighting right along with Baku—and not in a metaphorical sense. His life was on the line just as much as Baku's. If worse came to worst and Baku was defeated, what would happen to him? He'd wind up spirit-hollowed, or whatever it was called, and he'd cease to exist as he was, just like Baku.

"Ahhh…!" Haizaki yelled as he watched the fight play out.

Baku's eye-studded hands were still latched firmly on the zingai's head. He kept his right foot on its shoulder while he moved his left to its chest—directly above the mouth in its midsection. The mouth flapped open and shut, trying desperately to consume Baku whole, but Baku was dead set on pulling Masamune out of the zingai before that could happen.

Just a little more! You're so close!

Zingai-Masamune was *stretching*—and not just a little. Any resemblance it had once borne to a tarsier was now lost. Even its big, circular eyes were stretched into tall, distorted ovals. It was at its limit. It couldn't stretch any further.

"HRAAAAAAUUUUGHHHHHHHHH…!"

Baku let out a roar and peeled the zingai away. For all the effort it had taken, when it finally separated from Masamune, it slipped all the way off in a split second. The zingai flopped in Baku's grasp like a hopelessly stretched, worn-out animal suit.

"Hah-*hah*! How'd you like that, Tobi?! Woo-hoo!" Baku called out—only for the lingering momentum to carry him crashing straight into the Asakawa River, stretched-out zingai still in his hand.



What about Masamune? He was inside the zingai—is he all right?

Tobi could see something other than Baku and the zingai floating down the river. It looked human. Was it Masamune?

"We have to help him…!" said Shiratama. Before she could take more than a few steps toward the river, though, Haizaki cut her off.

"I've got this!"

He leaped into the air. The power of his jump was jaw-dropping, especially considering he hadn't gotten a running start. Tobi briefly wondered if that was thanks to his strangely altered right leg. At any rate, Haizaki sailed all the way out to where Masamune was floating in a single bound and grabbed on to him.

"Phew…" Shiratama sighed in relief, before slumping to the ground.

Baku, meanwhile, was sloshing his way through the river toward them, dragging the empty zingai suit behind him. "It's okay, right, Tobi?!" he shouted.

Tobi Otogiri had Baku. Ryuuko Shiratama had Chinu. And Shuuji Masaki had the zingai in Baku's hand.

"Yeah," Tobi replied.

Baku whipped his arm into the air, almost as if to hurl the empty zingai up above him. His tubelike head seemed to split open in the middle, revealing a mouth that just kept widening, seemingly without limit.

Baku didn't swallow the zingai whole. He had to chew a few times before getting it down. Still, for all intents and purposes, he devoured it in a single bite. Baku ate Masamune's zingai on the spot.

Tobi watched it happen, from start to finish. He didn't look away. He didn't blink. And as Baku swallowed it down, Tobi felt like something had settled into his stomach as well. He'd eaten it. He'd really eaten it.

"Baku," Tobi said, holding out a hand. Baku instantly returned to his backpack form, and Tobi caught the strap in midair, grasping it tightly as he slung it back onto his shoulder.

Haizaki, meanwhile, was carrying Masamune in his arms as he made his way out of the river. Both his legs looked exactly the same now—just a perfectly ordinary set of work pants, with nothing strange about them. A weasel-like creature, however, was now coiled around his neck.

That must be it, thought Tobi. *That's Haizaki's zingai.* Most likely, it had been fused with his leg until just moments before. It seemed he really was in the same boat as Tobi and Shiratama.

"Ryuuko," said Tobi. He no longer hesitated to call her by her given name.

Ryuuko Shiratama turned to face him. It almost looked like she was crying, but Tobi told himself that it was probably just the rain.

"You're gonna catch a cold, you know?" he said.

Ryuuko nodded, ever so slightly. A moment later, her eyes narrowed and a hint of a smile began to creep across her face.

"I should be saying that to you, Otogiri…*Tobi*."

A long time ago, Tobi had asked his brother a question.

"Hey, Big Brother? Why does it always stop raining?"

Tobi's face was pressed up against the window as he gazed at the landscape outside. It had been raining since early that morning, but the window was still cracked slightly open. Tobi's brother was standing beside it, smoking a cigarette.

"There's nothing that doesn't end," he'd explained.

"Everything ends?"

"Everything with form is bound to fall to ruin someday, and nothing in this world is formless. Everything ends, no exceptions."

"Even me, and you?"

Tobi's brother looked down at him, then patted his head. To this day, Tobi still remembered the smell of his cigarette.

The rainstorm had been furious, but by the next morning, it was gone without a trace. Tobi hoisted Baku onto his shoulder and set off

for school, as usual.

When he reached the shoe cubbies, Tobi found Ryuuko Shiratama waiting for him. He spotted Asamiya in the classroom, as well. He looked like he was in a terrible mood, but he greeted the two of them, if a little curtly.

Homeroom began, and Mr. Harimoto explained that Shuuji Masaki, aka Masamune, was taking a leave of absence on account of poor health. Going to school was probably beyond him for now. He might very well never come back.

Miyuki Takatomo. Chiami Kon. Shuuji Masaki. In a very short span of time, three seats in Class 2-3 had been left empty. But Tobi's classmates simply carried on as they always did. The teachers seemed just as unruffled and taught their lessons as if nothing had changed at all. Baku started humming a tune—poorly—during one of their lessons, and Ryuuko looked away from the board, her shoulders quivering with suppressed laughter. Tobi jabbed Baku in the side.

When the afternoon break arrived, Tobi and Ryuuko went out to visit the janitor's room. Haizaki was inside, and Tobi could tell at a glance that he hadn't gotten much sleep lately. He looked downright haggard, and even though he was wearing the same work clothes he always did, they looked sloppier on him somehow.

"Hey, you two," said Haizaki. "Seems you're doing okay. Glad to see it. If this is about Masaki, then don't worry—you can leave all that to me. Everything's just fine."

"Doesn't look very fine to me," Tobi commented.

Haizaki chuckled bitterly, then shook his head. "I just ended up pulling a bit of an all-nighter, that's all. I used to be able to go two or three days without sleep no problem, but the years are catching up to me, I guess. Long story short, I'm just sleep deprived. I'm totally fine."

"Sleep is important, you know?" Ryuuko countered.

Haizaki put on an exaggerated frown, which his tired features only enhanced. "I'm supposed to be the one worrying about you kids,

and look at me now! It's gone all backwards!" He paused, then called out a name. "Olver!"

A small, weasel-like creature appeared from under the workbench. It ran over to Haizaki and scampered up his side.

"I know this isn't exactly your first meeting, but this is my zingai, Olver," he said. Olver perched on his shoulder, its nose twitching slightly.

Baku peeked over from his spot on Tobi's back and gave the zingai an appraising glance. "Ohhh…?" he muttered.

Ryuuko offered the zingai a polite nod. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Olver."

Haizaki gestured with his chin, and Olver zipped back down to its hiding place under the workbench.

"Personally, I'm hoping the two of you can continue your studies like normal. I'd rather you didn't trouble yourselves with any of this stuff, and I'm planning on doing everything I possibly can to make that happen. I won't tell you to believe in me, but I'll do my best. Don't hesitate to give me a shout if you ever need anything."

That day after school, Tobi had just picked up Baku and was about to leave the classroom when Ryuuko stopped him. "Would you care to walk home with me?" she asked. Tobi felt a little awkward about it—or maybe embarrassed. It was an odd feeling, but he didn't have a good reason to say no, so he agreed.

The two of them walked along the embankment of the Asakawa River together. As they neared the bridge spanning water, Tobi felt a sudden urge to jump up onto its railing.

"You're not climbing up today?" Ryuuko asked, tapping the rail with her hand.

Tobi didn't need to be asked twice. He hopped up with ease.

"For cryin' out loud…," Baku muttered.

Ryuuko chuckled, then let Chinu out from its pouch, lifting the zingai up onto her shoulder.

Looking downstream, Tobi could see the railway bridge in the distance. The sight brought everything that had happened the day before flashing back into his mind.

Tobi walked slowly along the railing, and Ryuuko strolled across the bridge below.

"I guess it's true," Tobi said, not fully understanding why he'd felt the need to say it, "Everything ends, doesn't it?"

Ryuuko came to a stop and looked up at Tobi. He stopped as well.

"I think about it, from time to time," Ryuuko said, pressing a hand to her chest. "I think about what it might be like when my life comes to its end. It's a painful thing to consider. It's difficult to bear. I'd much prefer if my life never, ever ended."

Tobi turned to face the road and sat on the railing, and Shiratama leaned against it.

A thought suddenly struck Tobi. Had his brother known? Had he predicted that he and Tobi would be separated? Nothing in the world was without form, and everything with form was bound to fall to ruin. That meant that the end of their life together had been inevitable, as well. Maybe he'd been ready for that.

Even if Tobi found something important to him someday, it would disappear like his brother had. The only exception was Baku. As long as Tobi never let him go, Baku would always be right there with him. He'd been convinced of that, but he was wrong. Someday, Baku might wind up being eaten. Just like he'd consumed Kon and Masamune's zingai, someone else's zingai could eat him.

But that was fine. Well, no—Baku being eaten was definitely not fine—but Tobi would deal with it when the time came. It wasn't like he'd make it out unscathed, either.

Something very important must have broken inside Takatomo. She'd been driven further than she could stand, and as a result, she'd jumped off the roof. Now her parents were on the brink of losing their daughter. Tobi hoped that wouldn't be how it ended, but all he could do was pray that she'd somehow recover.

Baku had eaten Chiami Kon's and Shuuji Masaki's zingai. It hadn't seemed like either of them were aware of their zingai, but they had always been by their sides. They were irreplaceable portions of what made up Kon and Masaki as humans—and those portions of them had hurt and injured the people around them.

That was why he hadn't had a choice. There hadn't been any other option.

"Tobi?" said Ryuuko.

"Yeah?"

"Just hypothetically, if you…"

"If I what?"

"If you regret it, even a little…"

Regret. Tobi turned the word over in his mind, again and again.

Do I regret it? Do I?

"…then please share those regrets with me."

Ryuuko was gazing far off into the distance. A strong wind blew, sweeping her hair aside and exposing her whole face to Tobi's view.

"If you ever find yourself thinking about something ending, and it makes you feel sad, or lonely, I'd like you to tell me about it."

"Tell you?" Tobi hung his head. "And…then what? What would that solve?"

"I don't know," said Ryuuko. Tobi stole a glance at her out of the corner of his eye and saw that she was biting her lip. "I'd just like you to tell me, that's all."

The truth was that he didn't regret anything. Though he felt a little guilty about the fact that he had no regrets. He wasn't sad, and he wasn't lonely—so what was he supposed to say to her? Was there something he wanted to talk with her about, or not? Even that question was still beyond him.

"You know, I've thought this for a while now," Tobi said, looking up at the sky. "But you're a strange person, Ryuuko."

"Oh, like *you* can talk." Baku scoffed. Ryuuko chuckled as well.

Tobi sighed as he gazed up into the pale blue sky. Then, ever so slightly, he smiled.

To be continued.



Afterword

The very first of Eve's songs that I encountered was *Dramaturgy*, and ever since then, whenever he's released a new one, I've made a point of listening to it. Needless to say, I did so as just another listener. It was a stroke of good fortune that I ended up writing this novel, and it was only after that decision was made that I started really reading the lyrics to Eve's songs.

I've always loved writing lyrics, but I'm not very good at it. I've even tried busking in the past, singing along to my own compositions, though the truth is that I can barely even read sheet music. I also can't memorize lyrics. Whatever part of people's minds it is that lets them remember the words to songs, I can only assume that I'm missing it. I can listen to a song hundreds of times—thousands, even—and still not remember the lyrics accurately.

I've watched the music video for "How to Eat Life" countless times. I've listened to it while reading its lyrics. Could a song possibly be any more abstract? It communicates some things very clearly, but when you try to boil them down into a simple, linear sort of meaning, they become all but impossible to grasp. That's part of what gives it its indescribable charm, of course, but when it came time to sit down and spin a story out of it, it left me at a bit of a loss as to what on earth I should write.

It was like trying to solve a problem with no answer. I was baffled. And yet, at the same time, my spirits were lifted. I've had quite a lengthy career as a writer, and over the course of that time, I've

found that there aren’t any correct answers when it comes to writing. Even if you’re utterly convinced that you wrote something in just the right way, there’s every chance that your readers will beg to differ. And on the other hand, sometimes works that you have no confidence in at all will be the ones your readers find particularly worthwhile.

In the end, my only choice is to fumble blindly through the darkness. Once I’ve done that, I can look back on a single, linear path, and that path becomes the story.

I spoke with Eve many times regarding this novel. Those conversations gave rise to quite a few new ideas, and I received no end of incredibly valuable advice and input from him. Writing novels is generally a very lonely profession, but this time, for once, I wasn’t working on my own. I had a guide to show me the way. I had someone to help me think through my options every time I reached a fork in the road. I had someone to take me by the hand and encourage me with warm, delicate song.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Eve and all of his staff; to Mariyasu; to this story’s illustrator, lack; to my editor, Nakamichi, and to everyone who decided to read this novel. I sincerely hope we’ll meet again.

Ao Juumonji

Next Time…

Yet another zingai
stirs up trouble around
Tobi and Ryuuko.



How to Eat Life

Volume 2

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