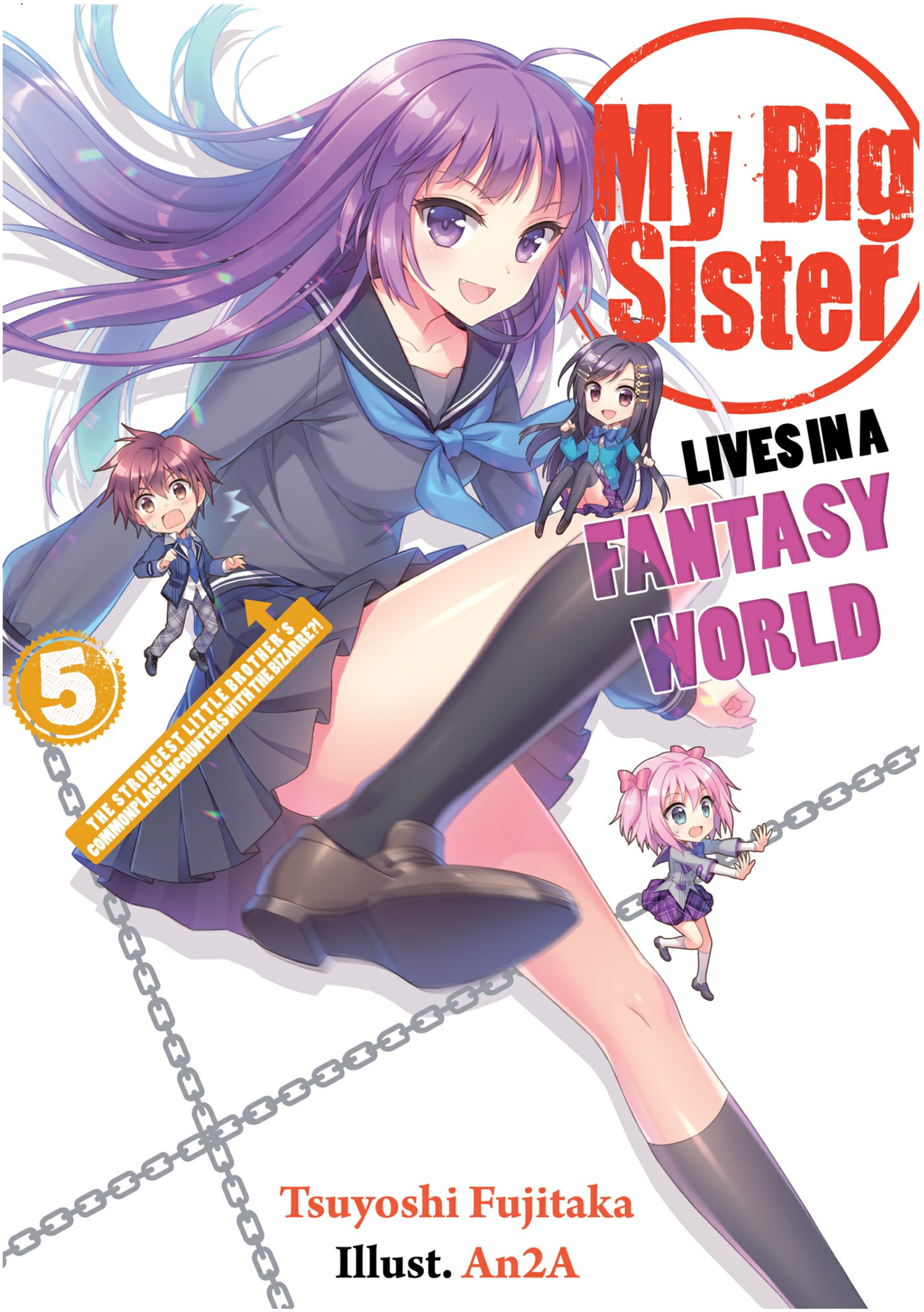

My Big Sister
LIVES IN A
FANTASY WORLD
5
THE STRONGEST LITTLE BROTHER'S COMMONPLACE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE BIZARRE?!
Tsuyoshi Fujitaka
Illust. An2A


"YU...
AN ACTUAL KINDER-GARTNER?
THIS IS SIMPLY UNACCEPTABLE."
My Big Sister
LIVES IN A
FANTASY WORLD
5
THE STRONGEST LITTLE BROTHER'S COMMONPLACE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE BIZARRE?!
Yuichi had been forced to kneel on the other side of the low table from his sisters. They sat side by side, looking at him.
Chapter 2: Second Week of October: The Hinoenma


"BEAT DOWN EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM!"
BIG SISTER
"BIG BROTHER, DO YOUR BEST FOR ME!"
LITTLE SISTER
There must have been a thousand of them, all of them King's personal henchmen. Absurdly, it seemed they were planning to run a raid on the Sakaki household.
"Easy for you guys to say..." Yuichi picked up the staff lying at his feet and stood up.
Mutsuko Sakaki
Yuichi's big sister. She's president of the survival club and knows a lot about specialized martial arts.
Yuichi Sakaki
The story's protagonist and the world's strongest little brother.
Yoriko Sakaki
Yuichi's little sister. She has a serious brother complex and is quite strong in her own right.
Chapter 6: First Week of November: Yori's So Popular



Yuichi turned to face the sudden interruption. Mutsuko was standing at the entrance to the roof. For some reason, she was wearing the outfit of a miko, with white “kosode” kimono and red hakama.

Chapter 7: Second Week of November: Spirit



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Prologue: The Melancholy of the High School Girl Light Novel Author Never Ends

“Um... what is this in regards to?” Kanako Orihara was at a loss to hear the sound of her editor’s voice on the other end of the phone.

She had been lying in bed in the middle of the night, fooling around with her cell phone, when she’d gotten the call. She hadn’t expected anyone to call her this late at night, let alone her publishing company.

The company that was putting out Kanako’s book was a sham organization created by Makina Shikitani to make Kanako a published author. When Makina’s plans had been crushed, Kanako had convinced herself that her career was over.

“Huh? What is this in...?” the editor said. “Surely you jest, Ms. Orihara... It’s about your manuscript, of course.”

“Um... I thought you weren’t putting out my books anymore...”

Kanako hadn’t written anything. Before the phone call came in, she had been looking at pictures of Yuichi on her phone. She’d been doing that a lot lately, as a matter of fact.

“What?! Why would you think that? Did I say that?” He paused. “I’m getting a rather sinking feeling, here... I don’t want to believe it, but... is it possible you haven’t written anything?”

“Yes...”

She hadn’t heard anything from them lately, but she had told herself it didn’t matter and given up. She had wanted to be a writer, but being freed from the continuous pressure was liberating, in its own way.

“Ah, well, I knew I’d been pressuring you a lot lately, so I was waiting for you to call me...” the editor said.

That waiting had proven fruitless; Kanako hadn’t written a thing.

“Since the November publishing date will be impossible, we were going to talk about an extension... but it seems a one month extension won’t do it, either. What will we do...” The voice through the receiver sounded extremely flustered. Kanako felt herself swiftly being dragged back to reality.

Even with Makina gone, her sham company was still in business. It seemed so obvious now, yet it hadn’t occurred to Kanako.

“What about *Demon Lord* volume two? It’s half written already. I could probably finish it right away...”

Kanako was referring to her maiden work: *My Demon Lord Is Too Cute to Kill and Now the World Is in Danger!*, or *Demon Lord* for short. Volume one had gotten a positive reception, so she had started up on volume two. The plans to release it had been scrapped temporarily, but since that had turned out to have been part of Makina’s intrigues, Kanako wondered if it would be okay to release it now.

“Ah... actually, we really do want you to write a new story,” said the editor. “It’s not that we don’t want volume two. We just want to delay it a little bit...” The editor’s tone was awkward; it seemed he didn’t understand why this was the case, either.

“I understand. Then you want me to continue with *The Half-Isekai Classroom*?” This was the plot that they had urged her to write after *Demon Lord* had been scrapped.

“No... I’m really am terribly sorry, but we had an editorial board meeting and had to scrap that one, too...”

Kanako rarely ever raised her voice, but this made her want to scream. It was only the editor’s genuinely apologetic tone that allowed her to keep her head.

“So, could you think up a new plot?” the editor asked hopefully. “If you do, we can extend the deadline by two months.”

Kanako’s mind went blank. The next thing she knew, the call was over, the phone thrown down on the bed beside her.

“But what should I do? A new plot...” she murmured. She had submitted several plots to them, but this meant they hadn’t found any of them acceptable.

It would take a while for Kanako to get her feelings in order. For now, she just lay there on her bed, staring up at the ceiling.

⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂

It was early October, when the students of Seishin High School had switched to their winter uniforms.

Yuichi Sakaki came to the survival club's meeting room after class.

When he opened the door, the first thing he saw was a girl. She had striking chestnut hair in soft waves, and a gentle sort of manner about her.

It was the club's vice president, Kanako Orihara. The label "Love Interest III" floated above her head.

Yuichi had acquired a special ability called Soul Reader: ever since spring, he had been able to see labels over a person's head, which seemed to convey something about their role in the world.

Kanako didn't seem to notice Yuichi's arrival right away. She was seated at the table, her face downcast, deep in thought. She looked depressed.

"Um... are you okay?" Yuichi asked in concern.

"Yuichi..." Kanako looked up at the sound of Yuichi's voice. She certainly didn't *look* okay: there were huge bags under her eyes, and it was clear she wasn't getting enough sleep.

"Orihara, what's... did something happen?" Yuichi was wondering if perhaps the recent drama around Kanako hadn't fully resolved yet. Kanako had briefly become an "Isekai Writer," and it was always possible that someone else might show up, trying to make use of her power.

Hoping they could talk it out, Yuichi sat down across from her.

"I have to write a novel!" Kanako burst out, her voice unusually panicked. She seemed like she was at her wits' end.

"What's wrong with that? You're a writer, after all..." Yuichi couldn't quite see what the problem was; of course a writer should have to write. Then he remembered the conversation he'd had with Kanako in the cafe a little while ago. "But it's what we talked about before, right? Are you still struggling with

material?”

“Put simply, yes...” Kanako began, then froze, staring past him, her mouth slightly open.

Sensing there was someone behind him, Yuichi turned around. What he saw there shocked him.

A tall, beautiful woman in glasses — Makina Shikitani — was standing at the entrance to their club room.

“You!” He hadn’t expected to ever see her again.

Makina Shikitani was their enemy; he didn’t have a shadow of a doubt about that.

Makina had recently made their school the stage for a massive disaster. She had used Kanako to turn the school into an isekai, then tried to force the students trapped inside to kill each other.

He stood up quickly and got ready to fight.

“Calm down, would you? You really should show more respect to your teachers,” Makina said with a shrug, as if Yuichi were nothing more than an unruly child.

“I do *not* acknowledge you as a teacher!” Yuichi shouted.

“You don’t have a choice in the matter,” Makina said matter-of-factly. “I am Ms. Nodayama’s substitute, which makes me this club’s advisor.” There was no label above her head; Makina was a being that existed outside of the world — an Outer — which meant that Yuichi’s Soul Reader wouldn’t work on her.

“You haven’t even been to school since then!” Yuichi exclaimed.

Makina hadn’t been seen at school since the incident, so he’d assumed she had just run off.

“Losing to you was quite traumatic,” Makina said. “I had to take some time off. Didn’t you hear?”

“I heard you were taking time off, but I figured it was just an Outer’s worldview normalization! I didn’t think you were coming back!” Yuichi shouted.

When an incident occurred that influenced a large number of people with differing worldviews, things typically resolved with events being made consistent with the most powerful of those worldviews. Mutsuko called the phenomenon “the world’s ability to normalize,” and he’d assumed that it had been behind Makina’s supposed “taking time off.”

“You’re free to think what you want, but we can’t have a conversation until you calm down.” Makina was unfazed by Yuichi’s anger.

Yuichi had certainly lost control of himself, but when he realized how afraid it was making Kanako, he forced himself to calm down. Fortunately, he’d beaten this woman once before. If they had to fight, he could probably do it again.

“I’m impressed you were willing to show your face again,” he said. After what he’d done to her, Yuichi had assumed she’d give him a wide berth.

“I intended to come sooner, but it took a while to sort out my mental state,” Makina said.

“So? What did you come here for?” Yuichi demanded.

Makina was the enemy. Yuichi knew that very clearly, yet he felt no sense of hostility from her. At the least, she had no intention of starting a fight just yet.

“I wonder if you’d be willing to hear the whole story...” she said.

Yuichi thought for a moment. “Try me.”

He didn’t see any particular reason to indulge her; he’d just as happily kick her out. But he couldn’t deny he was curious to see what she had to say for herself. He wanted to know what so important to her that she’d risk coming back to do it.

“I don’t feel that what I did to Kanako Orihara was wrong,” said Makina. “Looking back, I don’t think anything I’ve done was wrong, either. Of course, it’s not that I can’t tell good from evil. From an objective point of view, I’m aware that what I did counts as the latter. I suspect a psychiatric evaluation would find that I’m perfectly capable of taking responsibility for my actions. That’s why, though I have no regrets about what I did, I do want to change. If I don’t, I can never gain your understanding — and I need that, because I’m still afraid of you. There are various ways to deal with fear, but generally speaking, you can

either conquer what you're afraid of, or surrender to it. At first, I thought I should try to conquer my fear — after all, who would pick yielding as their first resort? — but that proved impossible.

"Yuichi Sakaki, it was impossible for me to imagine any scenario in which I might beat you in a fight. Just thinking back on what had happened left me curled up in a trembling, immobile ball on the floor. After playing it over and over again in my mind, I realized that I could not conquer my fear. This left surrendering to it my only option. Under most circumstances, that would be humiliating; it basically means prostrating yourself before another, and doing whatever they say.

"But do you know what? The moment I chose to submit to you, the immense fear that had seized my heart turned into joy. The thought of serving so powerful an entity enveloped my mind in serenity, and filled me with a pervading sense of well-being. Yes, I suddenly knew that for all of my very long life, I had simply wanted to be dominated. Yet I never even realized this fundamental part of myself! Once I understood that, it all became simple. I just had to let you dominate me.

"Of course, it means nothing for a submissive like me to simply declare herself under your control. I need your assent. In other words, Yuichi Sakaki, I need you to agree to dominate me! To achieve this, I must have your understanding, which means I must regret the things I've done. I must apologize, repent, and seek forgiveness. But if I don't truly believe what I did was wrong, does a superficial apology have meaning? Perhaps that would be the true act of bad faith..."

"Shut up!" Yuichi's frustration with Makina's wordiness was outstripping even his anger.

"I know that the ritual of apology is necessary, even if it is superficial," she continued. "But objectively speaking, I have no illusions that a spoken apology will be sufficient for what I did to Kanako Orihara. Not even getting on my hands and knees would suffice. Shall I break one of my own fingers, then? Or an arm, perhaps? I could even offer my life—"

"Stop it!" Yuichi shouted. "Stop talking so trivially about killing things!"

That shut Makina up immediately.

Yuichi was torn: Makina sounded earnest, and he could sense that she wasn't lying, but he also couldn't understand why she was saying all of this.

"If you want to apologize, stop making excuses," Yuichi said angrily. "You're supposed to lead with the apology, whether or not it's gonna be accepted!"

"You're right," she said. "Loquaciousness *is* a terrible habit of mine. Kanako Orihara. I am very sorry. Forgive me."

Makina turned back to Kanako, bowed, and spoke the conventional words of apology.

Kanako's eyes darted around uncertainly. She seemed to be at a loss as to how to respond.

"Um... please stand up." Despite her slight panic, Kanako was able to calm herself down enough to say that much.

Makina stood again in response.

Kanako continued haltingly, but genuinely. "Um... the idea that you've done something to me still doesn't feel real... and even if you have been manipulating my life, I really did enjoy the book you recommended. It's what got me reading books, and why I chose to write stories... and that much I don't regret. But... maybe later, it will start feeling real, and maybe I'll feel angry with you then... so if you want to apologize, then please wait until after that happens."

Yuichi still had resentment towards Makina, but if Kanako's feelings were more ambivalent, it wasn't his place to object.

"Now that that's settled," Makina began, turning back to Yuichi. "Will you let me be your submissive?"

"No way!" he snapped back.

"Is the term too abstract? You can call me your servant, or your slave, if you wish."

"Oh, that sounds *really* great!" Yuichi shouted back sarcastically. "My teacher, the slave!"

“Sounds like a porn game to me!” a new voice declared.

As the declaration resounded through the room, all those present turned towards the door. Mutsuko was standing there, hand on her hips, chest thrust out.

Above her head was the label “Big Sister.” Objectively speaking, she was an attractive girl, with a slender build and long hair. As the label suggested, she was Yuichi’s older sister, as well as president of the survival club.

“*That’s* the first thing you have to say?!” Yuichi shouted.

Makina was someone they’d just been fighting, yet Mutsuko didn’t seem surprised by her presence at all. She clearly had her own sense of priorities.

Aiko and Natsuki were standing behind Mutsuko; they must have met up with her on the way.

Aiko Noro was a pretty, petite girl, with the label “Love Interest” hanging over her head. She came from a clan of vampires, and the first label he’d seen over her head had reflected that. But after he’d saved her from a kidnapping, she’d acquired the new label.

The tall girl with cold eyes was Natsuki Takeuchi, whose label was “Love Interest II.” Hers had originally been “Serial Killer,” but the label had also changed after she’d lost in a duel with him.

“C’mon, she’s no threat!” Mutsuko scoffed. “You beat her once before, and she hasn’t triggered any ‘I’m stronger now’ flags! It’s not like a recycled monster design ever wins, anyway!”

“I’m not a fan of that phrasing, Mutsuko Sakaki...” Makina said. “But you are correct. I’m well aware that I can’t beat you, and I have no malicious intent towards you. So please settle down, Yuichi Sakaki.”

Even with the other club members present, Makina still seemed perfectly at ease. She really was showing no trace of hostility.

“I am never going to trust you!” Yuichi snapped. Those were his feelings in a nutshell; even if they were no longer directly opposed to each other, he’d never met anyone he could trust less than her.

“That’s fine; I don’t expect to win you over immediately,” said Makina. “Trust isn’t something that’s built overnight, after all. I’ll just have to show how reliable I can be, little by little...

“I know. Why don’t I bring you to the height of ecstasy in ways that these little girls never could? You can confess to me all those dark desires that you couldn’t possibly venture to speak of in public. I’ll accept them all, and indulge you in any dirty fetish you ask for. I’ll even modify my body, if that’s what it takes... I don’t mind adding a hole or two. I can even reduce my breast size, though I’d ask you to be sure before you request it, since it would be hard to restore them to normal later.

“Oh, but don’t get the wrong idea — I’m perfectly willing to have irreversible procedures done. It would be hard for me to become a little girl, but I can supply them to you... perfectly brainwashed and prepared for whatever you want. I’ll be sad that you aren’t satisfied with me, but some things can’t be helped.

“Also, oh... you said you wanted to kill my fellow Outers, yes? I’ll help you with that, too. Despite your grand declarations, you don’t know how to do it, do you? But with my help, it will be easy. I’ll make all the Outers bow before you; make them slaves to do with as you please. That reminds me — you’ve been acting as Monika’s surrogate in the fight for the Evil God’s body parts, haven’t you? I’ll help you with that, as well.”

The endless stream of words, all managed in a single breath, sent a dull shock through Yuichi. There was a dangerous madness hanging at the edges of those words. It convinced him, more than ever before, that he couldn’t afford to leave her at large.

“The dominance stuff aside... you’ll do anything I say, right?” Yuichi demanded.

He was angry with Makina. He couldn’t forgive what she’d done to Kanako, and saw no reason why he should. Even so, he hadn’t killed her, which meant he had some responsibility for what she might do from now on.

“Yes, I’ll follow any order you give me,” Makina said.

“If I told you to live a life as a quiet nobody, not bothering anyone, would you

do it?”

“I would,” she said. “But how would you know if I was keeping my word? You’re worried that I’ll revert to my old ways, aren’t you? If you want to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I’ve stopped my evil schemes, the most reliable method would be to kill me yourself. Of course, if you chose to kill me now, I wouldn’t resist. I’d happily let you do it.”

“So... you’re saying I have to keep you nearby, right?” Yuichi asked.

“That’s right,” she said. “You can’t trust me, but you can’t kill me, either. It’s the only logical answer, isn’t it?”

She had seen right through him, and she was right. He couldn’t just send her on her way.

“Never use your abilities again,” he said.

“Very well,” Makina said with a bright smile. However reluctantly he had come to it, she knew that she was getting what she wanted.

“You said you could distinguish between good and bad, right?” Yuichi asked. “Then don’t do things that society at large would deem bad.”

“Understood,” she said. “From now on, I’ll conduct myself as an ordinary high school teacher. But I do run a publishing house. If I hold strictly to your word, that’s a conflict of interest for a civil servant, isn’t it?”

“I couldn’t care less about that,” said Yuichi. “I think you know that, right?”

Yuichi had been talking about bad things like torturing people using her role as an Outer. He didn’t care if a civil servant had a side job.

“Of course,” she said. “But as you know, I’m doing all this to keep you from hating me, so I want to make sure we’re on the same page.”

“If you have any long-term plans in the works, put a stop to all of them now,” Yuichi ordered. “If you’ve made trouble for anyone in your plans in the past, make it up to them to the best of your ability.”

“I’ve already halted all my plans, and minimized the damage as best I could,” said Makina. “I swear to put the utmost effort into this in the future, as well.”

“What will you do about Ms. Nodayama?” Yuichi had heard she’d been released from the hospital and was resting up at home. They said she’d be back at school soon.

“Good question,” said Makina. “I’m not entirely sure. Should I reunite her with her childhood friend, or should I try to get her to give up on him and focus on the future? I’d like to give her the best possible resolution, personally.”

Now that she mentioned it, Yuichi wasn’t entirely sure which would be better. “Just keep an eye on her and proceed with caution,” he responded eventually.

That was the final demand he could think of, for the moment. He didn’t know how much he could trust that she’d do what he said, but all he could do was watch her.

“By the way... it’s a bit awkward to do all this talking standing up, isn’t it?” Makina asked. “Why don’t we have a seat?”

Mutsuko, Natsuki, and Aiko had just been standing in the doorway, watching Yuichi and Makina talk. Yuichi, not wanting to continue quarreling forever either, decided to sit back down.

“I only just got here, and things are already crazy...” Aiko murmured confusedly, as she sat down to his right.

“It’s not like I know what’s going on, either,” Yuichi muttered.

Natsuki sat down to Yuichi’s left. On the surface, she seemed unconcerned, but it was always hard to tell what she was thinking inside. Makina had beaten her badly in the earlier incident, after all.

“The enemies you defeat always seem to come back wanting to be your allies,” the usually expressionless Natsuki said with a sigh. “You may have what it takes to be a Monster Master.”

“I think I’ll pass!” Yuichi shot back, annoyed.

“Ibaraki, Takeuchi, Ms. Shikitani... and Konishi, I guess?” Aiko said. “I feel like she counts...”

“Noro... don’t say that stuff...” Yuichi muttered.

By that logic, Aiko’s brother, Kyoya Noro, would also fit in there. Yuichi didn’t

dislike Kyoya, but he didn't like thinking about things that way.

As if intending to be part of the club herself, Makina took a seat next to Kanako, diagonally across from Yuichi.

Mutsuko set up camp at the whiteboard as usual, and looked at the club members, but didn't seem like she was going to start the meeting. In that case, Yuichi decided, he'd continue his conversation with Makina.

"You said you'd help me beat the Outers, right?" he demanded. "Do you know where they are?"

"I knew, at one time," Makina said. "Now that I've betrayed them... well, I suppose that phrasing is deceptive. Relationships between Outers are flexible, and I wasn't really working with them to begin with. But they probably already know I've joined you, so I wouldn't expect to find them in the old hideout anymore. I can tell you where that is, though, if you want to know."

"It's worth a look," he said. "There might be clues. What do you know about the Divine Vessels?" It was a vague question, but Yuichi didn't know enough to ask a more concrete one. Certainly, Makina seemed to know more about them than Monika and Yuichi.

"Let me see," she said. "Divine Vessels can be located through their resonance... and you don't have a host, do you?"

"Monika has the two eyes, but she said they were both already in use," he answered.

The Divine Vessels could be used only by the host they possessed, and once they had a host, they couldn't be used by someone else. To make them usable again, you had to kill the host, and neither Monika nor Yuichi was eager to do that.

"If you give me the left eye, I could have *him* use it again," said Makina. "You know, the one you half-killed during summer vacation."

"The one I half-killed during summer vacation..." Yuichi thought back, but the description didn't really narrow things down.

"We've had this exchange before, I believe," said Makina. "Rather

bloodthirsty, aren't you?"

"What am I supposed to do? They come after me!" he protested.

"I mean the one who attacked you in a truck."

"Oh! Yeah, you mentioned he was working for you," Yuichi said.

She was referring to a hulk of a man with the label "Immortal" whom Yuichi had fought over summer vacation.

"Who is he, anyway?" Yuichi wondered, perhaps belatedly. Monika had called him a yokai of unknown origin, but that didn't give him much in the way of details.

"He's a dangerous kind of makura-gaeshi, a pillow-turner," said Makina. "It's a long story, but... ah, no, never mind. He's lost the will to live. He's basically a walking corpse now. I'm not even sure I could have a decent conversation with him."

It sounded like a gruesome fate, but Yuichi found it hard to have sympathy for him. That man had murdered innocent people.

"Well, I have a few clues as to the locations of the Divine Vessels," said Makina. "Just sit back and relax while I investigate."

"Relax? There's no telling when they'll resonate next, and we have no way of knowing when they do, right?" Yuichi asked.

"Don't worry about that, either," she said. "They won't resonate for a while, probably. How to put it... Oh yes, it's sort of an 'it never rains but it pours' situation. Once a resonance starts, it remains in place for a while, but then it will go a long time without starting up again. There are patterns to the resonances, and that's one of them. I think you should be all right for another month or two."

"How can you know that if you don't know when it's resonating?" Yuichi asked.

"Because I'm an Outer. Even if I can't feel the resonance itself, I can feel when a story is proceeding."

It didn't sound like Makina was lying.

They couldn't afford to completely forget about the Evil God and the Divine Vessels, but this was better than being on full alert at all times.

"Does that mean we'll have uneventful, ordinary school days for a while?" Yuichi asked hopefully.

Makina said nothing in response.

"Hey, you're scaring me. Are you saying something *is* gonna happen?"

"Soul Reader is too much for an ordinary human to handle," she said. "Seeing things you shouldn't is going to cause all kinds of trouble for someone who isn't an Outer. I think you've had plenty of experience with that already, haven't you?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Yuichi said. "But seeing all that stuff means I can actively work not to get mixed up with weirdos."

"An admirable approach, but I think you'll find that resistance is futile," she said. "Seeing worldviews with Soul Reader will cause them to mix together around you. The more you see, the more chaotic your life will become. The more time passes, the faster it will accelerate. Your best option would probably be to abandon Soul Reader entirely."

"But the only way Monika knew to do that was to ask the Evil God."

"I suppose you'll have to wait until after the Evil God comes back into play, then," she said. "Until then, you'll probably get involved in even more strange happenings. I hope you'll navigate them well enough."

Yuichi had already navigated through more than his share of bizarre events. Her warning didn't sound like it signified anything new.

But in fact, Makina was right. Yuichi's situation was quickly about to change.

Chapter 1: First Week of October: The Light Novel Conference

The usual members had assembled for the survival club meeting after school.

The club president, Mutsuko, stood in front of the whiteboard. The vice president, Kanako, and members Yuichi, Aiko, and Natsuki, were sitting at the table set in front of the whiteboard. Their advisor, Makina Shikitani, sat in a chair a little ways away, watching the proceedings.

Makina's arrival had thrown the survival club into chaos, but now that things had finally calmed down, Kanako timidly raised her hand. "Um, may I ask a question, Miss Shiki— I mean, President Shikitani?"

"Yes?" Makina asked. "I assume from the fact that you're addressing me as 'President' that this is publishing business, right?"

"Yes. Um... I had thought you didn't need me as a writer anymore. But the other night, my editor contacted me and requested a new novel..." Kanako had only been made a writer because Makina had needed it for her plan. She'd stopped trying to think of plots when she'd assumed she was of no use to Makina anymore.

"Yes, Hirata did that at my direction," said Makina. "I had a feeling that you hadn't written anything. You really put a scare into him, you know?"

"But you said I had no talent!" Kanako cried. "That you created the company just to make me a writer!"

"Oh, I did say that you had no talent. It was a lie, though."

Makina's casual dismissal had Kanako at a loss for words. Didn't she know how much those words had hurt her? They had been the primary reason she had stopped trying to write.

"Let's set aside the circumstances under which you became a writer," Makina said briskly. "If you had no talent, your first volume wouldn't have sold, but the

truth is, it got a good reception — and, rare for light novels nowadays, it had a long tail. In addition, regardless of my reason for setting up the company, I can't just close it that easily. The livelihoods of my employees are riding on it."

Makina appeared to be surprisingly responsible, in some regards.

"Very well," Kanako said. "So I just have to write something?" Feelings swirled through Kanako's mind, but she decided to swallow them all down. Becoming a writer had been her dream, after all.

"Of course," said Makina. "I hope you'll continue to contribute to the profits of my company from now on."

"But why can't I publish a second volume of *Demon Lord*? You only wanted *The Half-Isekai Classroom* because of your plan, didn't you?" Kanako burst out.

She was sure it was Makina's scheme that had resulted in the delay of the second volume's publication. With her plans halted, there should be no issue with publishing the continuation of *Demon Lord*.

"No, I still want to delay *Demon Lord* for a while," said Makina. "There's a chance that Glowsphere might try to manifest again, so while it's probably all right, I'd like to wait and observe for a little while longer. *The Half-Isekai Classroom* is out for the same reason."

Glowsphere was the setting of Kanako's novel, *My Demon Lord Is Too Cute to Kill and Now the World Is in Danger!*, and in the recent incident, it had begun to merge with the real world. *The Half-Isekai Classroom* was off limits because it was part of the same worldview.

"Oh, no..." Kanako murmured. It was just as she'd feared. She had been hoping that talking directly to the president might change the situation somehow, but it seemed it really was hopeless.

"Hey, what's up with Orihara's power anyway?" Yuichi broke in after listening in on the conversation in silence. "All she did was write a novel and hold a ritual, and it gave her the power to rewrite the world? Isn't that a little extreme?"

Indeed, Kanako had wondered about that, too. She had never shown any signs of special abilities before then, and had always assumed she was an

ordinary person.

“I’ll refrain from commenting on that one,” said Makina. “You told me not to use my abilities. That should include the use and sharing of information about people I’ve acquired with those abilities, shouldn’t it?”

“But you can still tell her not to write *Demon Lord*?” he asked.

“You could have reasoned that out from what you already know. Besides, I can’t put the world in danger by turning a blind eye to it. Keeping my silence would count as ‘bad’ by your standards, wouldn’t it?”

“But you don’t think it’s important for us to know about Orihara’s power?” he asked.

“I don’t. At the moment, there’s no need for you to know.”

“Okay.” Yuichi backed off, seeming to trust Makina’s words.

Kanako also more or less felt like she understood, and so she didn’t ask Makina anything else.

Still, knowing for sure now that she had to write something, Kanako fell back into stewing over a new plot for a story.

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“Okay! Today’s club meeting is a women’s self-defense class! At least, that was the original plan...” Mutsuko cut in as the conversation dwindled.

“When the atmosphere in the room turns awkward, you shout ‘Okay!’ and change the subject. In a way, it’s impressive...” Yuichi muttered.

The person with whom he’d been locked in a battle to the death not long ago, and the person who had been extremely cruel to Kanako, was now joining them as their advisor, yet Mutsuko didn’t seem to mind at all.

“Um! About that...” Kanako had fallen silent after Makina had finished speaking, but now she looked up again.

“What? It’s rare to hear you speak up, Orihara!” Mutsuko exclaimed.

“There’s something I have wanted to ask you all,” Kanako said. “I’m running out of time to think of a subject for my novel, and I don’t know what to do...”

“You’re always getting along by the skin of your teeth, Orihara...” Yuichi said. He’d thought so before too, but he had assumed she couldn’t always be this way. “But you’ve got the president of the company over there. Can’t you extend the deadline?”

Kanako’s book was being published by the company that Makina ran. It seemed to him that she should have some control over that.

“Hmm,” said Makina. “It’s true that I *could* extend the deadline. And since you’re irreplaceable, I couldn’t refuse you if you asked. But — and I’m not saying this just to abuse you — it’s for your own good to stick to the current one. The world of light novels moves quickly nowadays. The readers might forget about you if you spend too much time between installments, which can have an impact on sales. So if you want to keep on as a writer, trying to push your way through now is probably the best thing you can do.”

“But if you’re the president, can’t you give her any advice?” Yuichi asked.

“I’m management, not editorial. There’s not much that I can say. As president, the most I can say is that I would like you to write something that will sell.” Makina wasn’t much help, it seemed.

“Then let’s use this meeting to work together to help Orihara!” Mutsuko declared excitedly.

If she said it, that’s what they would do.

“But I thought aspiring writers always had lots of ideas,” Yuichi suggested curiously. Kanako had dreamed of becoming a writer, and had apparently written lots of stories before. He wondered why she couldn’t just adapt one of those.

“Apparently... they’re not cut out to be light novels,” Kanako drooped.

“That’s right,” Makina said. “To elaborate on that, our company mainly publishes web novels, so we know exactly how likely they are to sell. From what her supervising editor has said, none of the plots she’s submitted so far have seemed likely to sell. I looked through the plots as part of my earlier plan, too, but I don’t know much about what sells.”

“What about the *Demon Lord* story? That one didn’t seem like it would sell...

ah, though I do like it," Aiko asked. She was a fan of Kanako's, and was apparently very much looking forward to the next volume.

"That one... just happened to gain popularity on the internet fiction site," said Makina. "That's why it's a problem now."

My Demon Lord Is Too Cute to Kill and Now the World Is in Danger! seemed to be the only work of hers that had gotten good reviews on the internet.

"Anyway! It's not the content that sells a light novel, is it?" Mutsuko declared casually.

"That's too out of nowhere!" Yuichi objected.

"But it's true! It's not the content that determines whether the first volume sells or not! The readers only have superficial information to go on!"

"That's true, now that you mention it. It's not as if they read it first, and then buy it," Aiko said, but Yuichi wasn't convinced.

"True... ah, but web novels still sell, and everyone knows what's in them..." Kanako said awkwardly, apparently being unable to fully agree that the contents didn't matter at all.

"What about putting a social game serial code on it?" Mutsuko asked. "You can unlock rare weapons or rare characters! And if you make it so they need more codes to make the weapon or character stronger, a single person might buy dozens of volumes! Oh, and put a meet-and-greet ticket in with them! Free for one handshake with the beautiful high school girl light novel author! If you include a photo of Orihara with the book, the boys will line up around the block! That's the best way to get them to buy! They'll buy it in droves! They won't be able to live without it! Then, if it's a good story, they'll buy the later volumes, too!" Mutsuko gushed on, apparently thinking it was a great idea.

"Isn't that a bit harsh? It's like saying that what's inside doesn't matter at all." Yuichi scowled. Kanako surely wasn't asking for their help to do something so exploitative.

"Sakaki, I don't have any control over that..." Kanako said.

"If you want to do it, there's no reason why you can't," said Makina. "I have

clout with game stores, too.”

Mutsuko’s random idea that had seemed irresponsible was suddenly given the weight of reality by Makina.

“Huh? Ahh... well... m-maybe we shouldn’t...” Kanako looked around awkwardly. She must have thought it over.

“I see... what about flame war marketing?” Mutsuko asked. “Post something people will want to attack on the internet! Then when everyone’s talking about it, you give a half-baked apology and fan the flames! You get aggregate sites and news sites up in a furor, and people start thinking ‘Fine, what did this idiot end up writing?’ It’s a great way to get sales!”

“Would you stop it with the crazy schemes?” Yuichi shouted. “Even if you got sales that way, you couldn’t keep it up!”

All that would do was ruin Kanako’s reputation. It would be one thing if the book sold, but if it didn’t, her life as a writer would be over.

“Fine, we’ll stick to the above-board!” Mutsuko said. “To get people to pick up your book, you need to appeal with the surface information! That means the packaging is important! To trigger the buying impulse of readers in the stores, you need them to know what it’s about when they just see it on the rack! In other words, you need a gimmick in the title, the cover illustration, and the obi!”

“I understand what you’re saying, but that’s something you do after you know what the story is about, right?” Yuichi asked. “Thinking about marketing doesn’t matter until the story’s decided.”

“Wrong!” Mutsuko declared. “You can come at it from another angle! Think of packaging that will sell, then come up with story to match! You can come up with the plot and the themes later, but first, you need to look at it from the point of view of ‘what kind of packaging will sell’!”

“Are you sure about this?” Yuichi looked around the room to see what the others thought.

Aiko’s jaw was dropped in shock; perhaps she had been blown back by Mutsuko’s forcefulness. As usual, Natsuki’s expression was unreadable. Makina

was looking at Mutsuko with an intrigued expression on her face, while Kanako, the person most invested in all of it, appeared to be deep in thought.

“That’s true... the fact that I’m desperate enough to ask for your help does suggest that I don’t have any ideas of my own,” said Kanako. “Maybe it would be good to write based on a prompt...”

So Mutsuko’s suggestions hadn’t crushed her pride as an author? Yuichi had been worried about that, but Kanako seemed surprisingly unfazed.

“If I could weigh in?” Makina asked. “Cover design and obi are an editorial matter; not everything goes through the creative staff. But Mutsuko’s idea isn’t a bad one. And if you can attain synergy with the editorial side from the start, it just might work.”

“Synergy?” Yuichi asked, unfamiliar with the word.

“It means a team effort that leads to something better than what each individual could produce on their own. I’m speaking in business jargon. Paradigm, leverage, proactive, consensus... we love our three-syllable words.”

“I don’t suppose you could speak to my editor for me?” Kanako asked.

“I’d rather not,” said Makina. “Of course, I could give the order as a member of management, but that would reduce the editor’s motivation. He has the right to pursue his own duties however he seems fit. I don’t want to impose on that.”

It felt a bit strange hearing Makina talking like a responsible CEO. It was hard to understand how someone could have so much knowledge of how the mundane world worked, yet still set up those murder games.

“I see,” said Mutsuko. “We’d need their help with the cover and the obi, but first, the title! That’s the most important thing! If you can’t plan the cover and the obi, the right title can spark word of mouth, and viral advertising and lists! Why don’t we think up that first?”


Let's
think
of a

Mutsuko wrote “Let’s think of a title!” on the whiteboard. As usual, her handwriting was ridiculously good.

“First, let’s all offer some ideas! Yu first! Whatcha got?” Mutsuko pointed straight at him.

“That’s pretty abrupt... um, let’s see... how about ‘Forte Piano’?” Yuichi asked. He had no idea what kind of title would sell, so he just pulled a phrase from his hobby, piano-playing, that he thought sounded a little stylish.

“Disqualified!” Mutsuko struck the whiteboard.

“Why?!”

“The title sounds like it has to be about classical music, and that’s not going to grab the readers’ interest. It also has a fundamental problem that you can’t hear music in a novel, which would make doing performance scenes very difficult. You’d also need a lot of specialist vocabulary to write it, and it would get very tedious.”

“You can’t know that!” Yuichi exclaimed. “Even if piano is the theme, *The Perfect World of Kai* and *Your Lie in April* both sell. How can it be bad for a novel but okay for a manga?” Yuichi felt a bit miffed about having his suggestion shot down so abruptly.

“You can hear music in a manga!” Mutsuko answered forcefully. “It says so in *Even a Monkey Can Draw Manga*!”

“Then you think up a title, Sis!”

“Good point!” she exclaimed. “I can’t just shoot you down without coming up with an idea myself! Let’s see... we want to pull from titles popular on the internet now... and catchy, too...”

Mutsuko thought for a moment, then, as if getting together her thoughts, wrote on the whiteboard: “When I Saw the Most Beautiful Girl in Class Being Sold as a Slave...”

“That’s way too harsh!” Yuichi found himself bolting to his feet.

“Really? I’d be incredibly curious to hear what it was about!”

“But Orihara is the one who’d have to write the story!” Yuichi looked at Kanako. She was sitting there, mouth hanging open, and apparently surprised by the suggestion.

Aiko’s face turned red, as if it had triggered certain thoughts in her mind. Natsuki was, as usual, expressionless, while Makina was trying to stifle a laugh.

Kanako was calmer than he’d expected. “Sakaki... it does feel rather catchy, but I feel like it’s missing something.”

“Good point... it’s from the protagonist’s point of view, but it does sound like the material might be limited... how about this, then?” Mutsuko added to the title.

“When I Saw the Most Beautiful Girl in Class Was Sold as a Slave... (I Got a Part-Time Job!)”

“He’s planning to buy her?!” Yuichi yelped.

“Yes! The protagonist is going to try to buy the girl! It’s a simple, easy-to-understand goal!”

“That is *never* going to sell!” he shouted.

“You think? It would sell a lot more than yours, Yu!”

“You don’t know that!” he exclaimed. “Is it really that bad?!”

“Light novel titles are something you need to put thought into!” she told him. “What about you, Noro? Do you have anything?”

“Ah, let me see. I’ve been looking at quite a few...” Aiko seemed to have been looking them up on her smartphone. “I put together some popular keywords. How about ‘I Was Reincarnated in an Isekai With My Class and I’m Raising a Cheat Harem to Explore Dungeons’?”

“Noro... you...” Yuichi looked at Aiko in exasperation.

“Noro... that’s a classic bad pattern, you know?” said Mutsuko.

“Huh? Is it?”

“It’s okay to put popular keywords together,” Mutsuko said. “But what you’ve done is dilute the theme. Isekais, reincarnation, and harems go together, but

cheats and raising don't mesh, and doing a class reincarnation story might make it hard to tell all the characters apart."

Mutsuko's criticism of Aiko's idea was much more gentle than her treatment of Yuichi's. He felt a little annoyed by the favorable treatment.

"I see..." Aiko mused, then turned to Natsuki, who had snorted at her suggestion. "Fine, Takeuchi, do you have anything?!"

Natsuki, who had otherwise been listening quietly, spoke up. "Those long titles are so predictable. I stopped listening to it halfway through. Here, then, is my suggestion."

Natsuki stood and walked towards the whiteboard. Then, she wrote: *Massacre*.

"That's totally not a light novel title!" Yuichi shouted. It just evoked images of a series of tragic, blood-soaked scenes. Certainly there were light novels with high body counts, and one had even been a big hit in the past, but it would be hard to repeat that success.

"I see... You rarely see light novels with just one-word titles nowadays, so it could stand out..." Mutsuko put a finger to her chin, looking rather intrigued.

"If we want short, how about this?!" Aiko exclaimed.

"."

Rebelliously, Aiko wrote a single dot on the whiteboard. Just a period, nothing more.

"That's... also actually pretty good, surprisingly," said Mutsuko. "Sort of like striking down a full stop. It's cool."

Yuichi found himself walking forward and wrote his own suggestion: "fp".

"That's just an abbreviation for 'Forte Piano'! Why are you so obsessed with that?!" Mutsuko exclaimed.

"Why do you only object to my suggestions?!"

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Kanako watched blankly as the club argued with each other.

I guess this won't work after all...

She had asked the others for help, but it didn't look like this was something that could be settled by committee.

She would just have to write the novel by herself, without shunting the task to anyone else.

Kanako swore that she would do the best she could.

Chapter 2: Second Week of October: The Hinoenma

“I now call this family meeting to order!” Mutsuko declared to Yoriko and Yuichi.

They were sitting in the room he shared with Yoriko, and while she called it a family meeting, their parents weren’t involved. Their mother was preparing dinner, and their father was out late, as usual. Their parents probably didn’t even know they were holding this meeting.

“Isn’t it more like a sibling meeting?” Yuichi tried to object, but Mutsuko completely ignored him.

“Big Brother, take this seriously,” said his little sister.

Yoriko sounded like she meant it, so Yuichi fell back into silence. He was getting the feeling this was not a situation he could fight back against.

Yoriko was in middle school, famous as the younger of the Beautiful Sakaki Sisters. Even Yuichi, her brother, thought she was a lovely girl whose long, black hair suited her well. Above her head hung the label “Little Sister.”

“Well, okay, but what I don’t get is why it feels like I’m being attacked.” Yuichi had been forced to kneel on the other side of the low table from his sisters. They sat side by side, looking at him.

“Really? You don’t have any clue at all, Big Brother?” Yoriko asked.

“Well, I do, but...” Yuichi cast a glance at his left shoulder.

There was a little girl dressed in a red kimono clinging to it. She looked about six years old, and had a big smile on her face.

“Yu... an actual kindergartner? This is simply unacceptable,” said Mutsuko.

“Exactly,” Yoriko agreed. “It’s all right if you’re close with Noro and such, but this is just... wrong!”

“Hey! It’s not like I sought this out!” Yuichi shouted.

“What is going on here? First Noro, now this real little girl... is my big brother a pedo?” Yoriko murmured, fixing a glare on the girl.

“I can still hear you even if you whisper,” Yuichi said furiously. “And I’m not a damned pedo!”

“Your ears only seem to hear what’s convenient to you, Big Brother!”

“Hey, Yu,” Mutsuko said, “I’m a forgiving person. I don’t care what fetishes you indulge in the 2D realm. Love as many fictional little girls as you like! But... this is one thing your big sister cannot allow!”

“It’s like you guys think I’m a lolicon or something!” Yuichi was getting angrier and angrier at each statement.

“Then how do you explain this? You just bring a little girl home with you, and immediately try to get her in the bath?” Yoriko demanded, just like an interrogator. Yuichi had never seen her so intense before. It had his head spinning.

“Well... she was dirty, so she wanted me to bathe her!” He cast a glance at the little girl. She was covered in mud from a fight she’d been in.

“Bathe her in what?! You perv!” Mutsuko pounded the low table.

“If that’s what you wanted, you could have asked me!” Yoriko scowled.

It was true. Maybe he hadn’t needed to put her in the bath himself.

“I’m telling you, you guys have got it all wrong,” Yuichi said. “She looks like a kid, but she’s not. She’s not even human.”

“Then what is she?” Mutsuko demanded. “Explain right this second, or as your big sister, I swear I’ll take things into my own hands!”

“She’s a Hinoenma. A yokai!” His voice cracked.

The Hinoenma clinging to him just laughed.

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It had all started not long ago. That afternoon, in fact.

Yuichi had just finished his classes at school. He’d stopped by the house, then headed for the mountains.

Seishin City was between the ocean and the mountains, rich in natural beauty, as big cities went. The residents had everything they needed close by, but with a little walking, they could also get back in touch with nature.

The mountain in question was to the north of the city. He arrived at the foot via bicycle, then folded up the bicycle and carried it as he walked the rest of the way.

The transforming bicycle had been one of the things pushed on him by Mutsuko, but he really liked it. It was compact, after all, and when folded up, it became small enough to carry with him.

Yuichi walked up one of the hiking courses for a while, but at some point, he left the path to walk deep into the dense forests of the mountain. It was hard to tell at a glance, but Yuichi could make out signs of where people had passed, and he followed those.

He was heading towards the oni settlement to see Monika Sakurazaki.

He had met Monika during summer break, after their training camp. She had appeared out of nowhere to demand that Yuichi give Soul Reader back to her.

In the end, the question of how she had given Soul Reader to him in the first place remained a mystery, but he had decided to help her in her mission of trying to collect the Divine Vessels, parts of the Evil God's body that had been divided up. Whoever collected them all could have a wish granted, and as a result, a war had broken out over them.

Monika currently had two Divine Vessels, which meant people might come after her to try to steal them. Since he didn't want his own family getting targeted, he had left her in the care of an acquaintance, Ibaraki.

Makina had said the chances of getting attacked would be low for a while, and he'd wanted to call her and let her know, but he couldn't get in touch with her. Feeling a little worried, Yuichi had decided to talk to her face to face.

After walking for a little while, he came to an open space.

There was a village there, but it looked poverty-stricken. There was a dreary and lonely aura around it.

What era is that supposed to be? he wondered.

Indeed, it felt like a place forgotten by time, with its houses of thatched and shingled roofs. It was hard to believe that a village like this could still exist, even this far out in the mountains. Perhaps, like Nihao the China, it existed in a slightly different dimension.

Yuichi checked his cell phone. He was still getting a signal.

“Well, I’ve managed to call her before, so that stands to reason...” In addition, when he looked closer, he saw phone lines leading to each house. It seemed the village hadn’t completely been abandoned by civilization.

Despite having made it to the oni settlement, he still had no idea where to find Monika. He looked around, and saw no sign of anybody nearby.

I give up... He walked around a little more, but nobody came into view.

He was just about to go in a little deeper, when he noticed something strange. Between two buildings, just above the ground, hovered a label.

“Oni Girl,” it said.

Where there was a label, there must be a person below it, Yuichi thought as he approached. Still, there was nobody there.

He knew that labels tended to hang about ten centimeters over someone’s head, which meant that if someone was there, they must be under the ground.

Yuichi reached down at a dark patch in the earth. It seemed a little too dark, even for a spot that was in the shadow of a building.

He wasn’t sure what he was expecting, but as he reached out, instead of touching the ground, his hand merely sank into the darkness. It touched something that felt like a head of hair.

He kept reaching down, grabbed what felt like a collar, and pulled.

Hanging from his hand was a little girl.

She looked even younger than Monika. She wore a black kimono and had her hair in a bob, and she trembled in his grip.

“Ahh, sorry?” Unsure of how to react to pulling a girl out of the ground, Yuichi

decided to apologize, and set her down.

“Are you from this village?” he asked her, but the girl kept trembling, and refused to meet his eyes.

Just as he was wondering what to do, Yuichi heard a voice shouting at him. “Hey! Don’t bully Kureha!”

He turned to see a blond young man in a school uniform, Ibaraki, standing behind him. The label above his head was “Ibaraki-doji,” and as that might imply, he was part of a race of oni that had lived in Japan since ancient times. He’d lost to Yuichi in a fight a while back, but ever since then, he’d been acting close and friendly with him.

“Ibaraki, huh?” Yuichi asked. “Is that the only thing you ever wear? Why don’t you dress more like an oni?”

The moment she heard his voice, the girl named Kureha ran to Ibaraki, hid behind him, and grabbed his leg.

“How do oni dress, exactly?” Ibaraki asked.

“I dunno. Nothing but a loincloth? Naked?”

“Why would I want to be naked at this time of year?!”

“By the way, I can’t sense anyone in this village, human or oni,” Yuichi commented. “Why is that?”

“What, you won’t even have a little conversational sparring with me? Oh, well. They don’t stay here during the day. They only come back at night, to sleep.”

“Yeah, okay, I don’t actually care. Where’s Monika, though? I couldn’t get hold of her on her cell, so I came here to talk to her.”

“What’s with you? Do you hate me or something?” Ibaraki complained.

“Do I have any reason to like you?” Yuichi returned. “Look, where’s Monika?”

“Went off to play somewhere, I guess? I’d get bored hanging out here all the time, too.” Ibaraki seemed angered by Yuichi’s attitude, but he answered lightly enough that he didn’t seem particularly worried.

“You know, I left Monika with you to keep her safe,” Yuichi said. “How can you not know where she is?”

“She’s fine,” said Ibaraki. “I left Kureha to look after her.”

“Isn’t Kureha the little girl clinging to your leg right now?” Yuichi asked.

Yuichi and Ibaraki both looked at Kureha.

“Um... she was... attacked by a yokai...” Kureha said, trembling.

Yuichi went pale at the words. “A yokai?! Where?”

Kureha just seemed even more frightened, and hugged Ibaraki tighter.

“Oh, Kureha can’t fight, so I told her to come back if anything happened...” Ibaraki scratched his head. Despite that, he must not have thought anything would actually happen.

“So where is she?” Yuichi demanded. “Ibaraki! You ask her!”

Whenever Yuichi asked her, Kureha just acted scared.

Ibaraki got her to tell him where Monika was. Hearing the location, Yuichi hurried off to find her.

It was a park at the base of the mountain. It was a compact place, with swings and a slide, a sandbox, and other such equipment. When Yuichi arrived, there were two young girls on the ground, wrestling.

One was a very little girl; she looked to be in about first or second grade. She was wearing a red kimono, and above her head was the label “Hinoenma.” She had to be the yokai in question. You didn’t see many little girls walking around the city dressed in kimonos these days, and the label above her head did refer to a type of yokai.

The other was a slender girl with her hair tied with a scrunchie. Yuichi knew her. Her name was Monika Sakurazaki, and there was no label over her head because she was an Outer.

She looked to be about in fifth grade, but she was apparently the same age as Yuichi. She had stopped aging the moment she became an Outer.

There was another girl there who looked to be about Monika’s age. She was

watching them from afar with a frown.

Yuichi just stared. He'd come running because he'd heard she was being attacked by a yokai, but this didn't look like a big deal at all.

"Hey. What's going on here?" Yuichi asked the little girl who was watching them fight.

"Huh?" The girl didn't seem to know how to react to being approached like this.

Yuichi worked to give her a big smile. Nowadays, you had to be careful when talking to little girls.

Seeming to decide, after a moment, that he wasn't dangerous, the girl slowly began to talk. "Monika was telling love fortunes."

"She does that stuff?" he asked.

He recalled Monika mentioning her worldview being "A Hopelessly Romantic Little World," and proclaiming herself a romance expert. Maybe she did have the ability to predict someone's romantic prospects.

"Are you Monika's big brother?" the girl asked.

"Less her big brother and more her guardian, I guess?"

The girl, seeming to accept that, continued. "Monika's predictions always come true. If you're having a concrete problem, and you do what she tells you, you'll find luck in love. She's become sort of a legend around here."

Yuichi had his doubts that this was really the time for Monika to be doing that sort of thing. Then again, she had to pass the time somehow. "How did her fortune-telling lead to this?"

"She had set up shop here, and that girl showed up and asked her to read hers. Monika told her fortune, but... she said there was no chance, she had zero romantic luck, no potential whatsoever. Then the girl got mad and flew at Monika, and it's been like this ever since."

"Okay. I'll stop them." It was pretty careless of her to be telling love fortunes and starting fights when she was already a target. Yuichi felt a bit exasperated, but still, he couldn't just leave things like this.

Yuichi approached the two girls rolling along the ground in the park. He judged his timing, snatched at both their collars, and lifted them both up.

“Monika... isn’t it a little pathetic for you to be fighting with such a little girl?” he asked.

“Yuichi! Ah, well, that’s... she... she picked the fight with me!” Still dangling from Yuichi’s hand, Monika pointed to the other girl.

The Hinoenma had fallen silent, just looking up at Yuichi.

“I know Monika was probably rude to you, but you can’t just jump on people, okay?” Yuichi asked.

Since they seemed to have calmed down now, Yuichi set them both down.

“Monika,” he said. “You need to lay low at Ibaraki’s place.”

“I was trying, but there’s nothing to do there!” Monika responded, puffing out her cheeks.

“Well... I’ll explain more later, but there won’t be any resonance for a while. You’ll probably be safe for now, but still, keep it on the down low. Go back to Ibaraki’s place, okay?”

Yuichi pointed back at Ibaraki, who had shown up a bit after him. She was reluctant, but she did walk after Ibaraki in the end.

Just as Yuichi was wondering what to do with the other girl, he heard her address him.

“You must bathe me!”

He turned back to see the Hinoenma staring straight at him.

“Why should I?” he asked.

Perhaps because of all the rolling around they’d been doing, the Hinoenma was covered in mud. The ground was still wet from the rain the day before; the park must not have good drainage.

“There is no one else who can,” she said. “I must entreat you to look after my care. Come, take me with you.”

Yuichi looked at the Hinoenma and thought about it. She did seem to be

yokai, but she didn't look dangerous. He didn't like the thought of just leaving her, either, so he decided that giving her a bath was the least he could do.

That was why Yuichi had brought her home with him.

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Hinoenma.

It can be written "flying destiny demon" or "flying fire demon."

There are several explanations behind those names, but we'll discuss one here: the Hinoeuma myth theory.

The Hinoeuma is said to be a woman born in the 43rd year of the sexagenary cycle. They are said to have a wild temperament that would shorten the lifespan of her husband. In other words, a woman born that year would never be able to find a husband.

As a result, people tried to avoid having children during those years. It seems inconceivable by modern standards, but back then, women who could not get married, and thus have no children, were considered worthless.

If you've ever seen a graph of number of Japanese births by year, you may remember some years when the birth rate takes a sudden drop.

For instance, the year 1966 saw a 25% decrease in births from the year before. It wasn't that some terrible incident happened that year: it was the 43rd year of the sexagenary cycle.

People continued believing the superstition into the Showa era, and it became a society-wide phenomenon.

So what's the connection between the Hinoeuma myth and the Hinoenma yokai?

First, the story of the Hinoenma yokai comes from Buddhist sermons. The Hinoenma would use her womanly wiles to bewitch a man and destroy him. It was a story meant to caution against the sin of sexual relations.

Over time, people began to see the Hinoenma and the Hinoeuma — wild women born in the 43rd year of the sexagenary cycle who would eat their husbands — as one and the same. At some point, people began deciding that

women born in those years, after living out their lifespans, were reborn as Hinoenma as a manifestation of their resentment.

These Hinoenma were women of unparalleled beauty, and they'd seduce men only to suck out all of their life force.

Most yokai myths are inspired by something. Perhaps the Hinoenma was born from the guilt of men who rejected the Hinoeuma women.

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"It's like, you know, the story that if a man remains a virgin until he's 30, he can become a wizard!" Mutsuko said proudly, capping off her explanation of the Hinoenma.

"Don't lump me in with that nonsense!" the Hinoenma shouted. "I maintained my chastity to the very end! I will not be conflated with fools who simply failed to find a willing partner!"

"But you couldn't find a willing partner either, right?" Yoriko pointed out coldly.

It was a side of Yoriko rarely seen, one that only showed itself when she was truly angry. Yuichi, who knew her as a cheerful and innocent girl most of the time, found it quite frightening.

"Incidentally, the thing about the Hinoeuma women going mad and killing men is a play on words," said Mutsuko. "'Hi-no-uma' means 'Fire Horse.' They believed horses who saw fire would go mad and eat people, and 'Hinoeuma' sounds like 'Hinouma,' so people just started associating them."

"A play on words? Is the reason I can't get married really something that stupid?" The Hinoenma had apparently never heard that explanation before, and she was clearly surprised by it.

"Well, setting that aside, your big sister can't overlook child kidnapping!" Mutsuko proclaimed.

"Look, she's a yokai, she's not innocent, and I didn't kidnap her! I don't even think she has parents!" Yuichi shot back.

"Where did you even find her?" Mutsuko demanded.

“She was fighting Monika in the park,” he said. “After I broke them up, she insisted that I bathe her.”

“Yu, you know this is the reason your harem keeps growing, right?” Yoriko asked.

“I do not have a harem!” Yuichi fired back.

“Big Sis, he doesn’t even realize it...”

“Yeah, it’s a problem,” said Mutsuko. “I wonder how much bigger it’s gonna get... Poor Noro!”

“So, Hinoenma, what’s your game?” Yoriko seemed to be trying hard to pretend like she was calm, but Yuichi could sense her anger seething below the surface.

“Hmm,” said the Hinoenma. “I am treated like a yokai, but I’m more like a resentful spirit. I think I might be able to move on if I can finish my unfinished business. So I decided I’d get this man to help me. From the minute I saw him, I thought, ‘This is a man I can trust to do what’s right!’”

“I’m going to regret asking this, but could you clarify?” Yoriko said with a bright smile.

“In other words, I regret dying a virgin. I figure if I lose my virginity, I can move on!”

“That’s a felony! You can’t possibly want to do it with this little girl, Yu!” Mutsuko shouted.

“She’s a yokai, right? Can we kill her?” Yoriko asked.

“I’m not gonna do it! And Yori, stop talking about killing.” Yuichi was getting fed up with his henpecking sisters. He felt like the conversation had completely gotten off track.

“Why did you take the form of a little girl, anyway?” Mutsuko demanded. “Hinoenma are supposed to be beautiful women! They’re associated with the most beautiful women in history! Daji and Mo Xi were both believed to be Hinoenma! Of course, they were associated with Nine-Tailed Kitsune, too...”

“Hey! Don’t get off the subject!” It sounded like Mutsuko was about to go on

a tangent about kitsune, so Yuichi nipped that in the bud.

“Well, the point is, if you want to win a man, shouldn’t you have picked a more suitable form?” Mutsuko asked.

“Big Sister, please don’t put ideas into her head,” pleaded Yoriko. “If she becomes an adult, it’s going to make things even worse.”

“Ah, I chose this form because I heard there are more men lately who have a taste for young girls,” said the yokai. “Realizing that my previous strategies may have been mistaken, I made the bold decision to try out this form!”

“That’s too bold a decision!” Yuichi objected. It was turning the spigot all the way from hot to freezing.

“I understand the situation, but we just can’t have you clinging to Yu forever,” said Mutsuko. “Let’s see if we can get you to rest in peace!”

“Will you?” the Hinoenma asked hopefully. “Okay, get out of here, both of you! I’m going to get better acquainted with this man!” She tried to shoo both Mutsuko and Yoriko out.

“No, you’re the one who’s going to be leaving.” Mutsuko and Yoriko worked together to pry the Hinoenma off of Yuichi.

In moments like this, there was no mistaking the fact that they were sisters. They were totally in sync.

“Stay there, Yu,” Mutsuko ordered.

Mutsuko, carrying the Hinoenma, left the room with Yoriko, and they both headed for her room next door.

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“Hey, Big Sister! Why do you have that?!” Yoriko exclaimed.

“Oh, I got it as a sample after helping with some artificial skin research,” said Mutsuko. “It even faithfully recreates the mucous membrane! So this should work, shouldn’t it?”

“Does it... move?”

“It should move when I put a battery in, but it might be a little hard for her

first time. The real question is whether this'll let her rest in peace!"

"S-Stop it! What are you doing? Wh-What is... what are you doing with... s-stop! I don't want to lose my chastity to that! Have mercy! Don't do this! Oww, ow ow ow! S-Stop it! Don't put it in! Stop! Don't you dare put it— ah, no, I didn't mean there instead! I'm begging you... I'm sorry, I'm really sorry! I'm sorry I exist, so stop it! Stop it!"

He could hear her screams of anguish from the next room over.

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"Ugh... I'm sorry I'm alive... I'm really sorry... I won't go after Yuichi anymore... please, have mercy..."

After a while, Mutsuko and Yoriko brought the weeping Hinoenma back to the room where Yuichi was waiting. He didn't even want to think about what they had been doing in there, but it seemed that it had been unsuccessful, whatever it was.

"Hey... it might be a little weird hearing this from me, but... um, you can take on adult form, right? I bet there are plenty of men out there who'd be happy with any woman." It seemed to Yuichi that if she wasn't picky about her partner, she could probably work it out pretty easily.

"N-No way! I need a handsome man! A-And there needs to be love, too!" she cried.

"After all that big talk before..." Yuichi muttered. It seemed the Hinoenma was indeed quite picky, which may have been why she had had so much trouble that she'd ended up a yokai.

"We decided to call it off, since we felt bad for you, but we could reconsider..." Mutsuko tilted her head.

"N-No, don't do it! I'm leaving the house, I swear!" With that, the Hinoenma rushed out of the room.

The next day, Yuichi was on the way back from school when he heard a familiar voice. He stopped, and found himself back at the park.

He immediately recognized the speaker. It was the Hinoenma, who appeared to be playing with some young children.

The Hinoenma came trotting up when she saw him.

“What are you doing?” he asked. If she was looking for a partner in love, playing with children wasn’t going to get her anywhere.

“Oh, well. I decided I’m not in any particular hurry, so for now, I’m blending in,” she said. “If I can get close to a man in his childhood, love will grow from there. Then, once he’s grown, everything will fall into place!”

“I-I see. Good luck, then,” he said.

It was quite a grand plan, indeed.

Chapter 3: Third Week of October: A Challenge From Chiharu Dannoura

“Big Sister characters are cursed! Why are the little sister characters the only popular ones? Why is liking big sisters seen as a weird fetish?!” Big Sister Mutsuko was fuming.

Yuichi had no idea why she wanted to see big sister characters get more popular. “Yeah, yeah, big sisters are so cool and awesome, I can’t stand it...” he muttered perfunctorily as he flipped through a magazine.

They were in the club room, after classes. Yuichi generally stopped by every day if he didn’t have something else to take care of.

“We must make it our special mission to revive the big sister character!” Mutsuko declared.

“Seriously, nobody cares!” Yuichi infused his statement with the most earnest lack-of-caring that he could muster.

Mutsuko stood in front of the whiteboard and started writing the issue for the day. She wrote “The Standing of Big Sister Characters” in big letters.

The topics usually had nothing to do with survival, but this one seemed especially egregious. The survival club was just a venue for Mutsuko to do whatever she wanted.

The only ones who were earnestly listening were Kanako and Aiko. Natsuki was listening quietly, too, but her thoughts were as opaque as ever.

Yuichi definitely wasn’t listening. He checked the time — it was 4:00 — then turned his eyes back to the magazine.

Noticing the action, Aiko asked Yuichi a question. “Hey, isn’t it time?”

“Yeah, it is,” he grumbled. “I’m not going, though...”

Aiko’s statement had been encouraging, yet she seemed somehow relieved

by this response.

“Huh? What happened? Actually, aren’t you acting pretty weird today, Yu? You’ve been totally self-centered this whole time!” Mutsuko declared.

“I don’t want to hear that from someone ranting about the fate of big sister characters...” Yuichi said as he averted his eyes. But she was right: he was feeling anxious.

It had all started with the love letter he’d found in his shoe cubby that morning.

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That morning, Yuichi had walked to school with Aiko like always.

The wolfman Nero, in dog form, walked beside her. His label was “Fenrir.” Apparently this had no direct connection to the giant wolf from Norse mythology, but as Nero had apparently killed gods before, they’d started calling him that after the myth.

Nero had appeared suddenly during Yuichi’s summer training camp. He’d referred to Aiko as “princess,” acted as her servant, and accompanied her to school as a bodyguard, as well. It was unnatural to see a dog walking around without a collar, but Aiko had said she didn’t want to put a collar on a sentient being.

“It’s getting pretty cold, huh?” Aiko commented.

“Not cold enough for coats yet, at least,” Yuichi replied. They’d started wearing their winter uniforms recently, and Yuichi could feel the weather growing more autumn-like.

“It’s about time for the culture festival, huh?” Aiko asked. “What’s the survival club gonna do?”

“No clue,” said Yuichi. “Sis might not have much interest in that kind of thing.”

Aiko looked surprised by that. “Really? I thought she liked big events like that.”

“Hmm, she does like a good party, but she’s also pretty considerate of others, despite everything,” said Yuichi. “She’s aware that she sticks out. Of course, she

still does whatever she wants...”

“I see. It’s a shame that it doesn’t seem like we’re doing much as a class, either, though...” she murmured.

Yuichi’s class had decided to hold a movie screening. It didn’t require much preparation, and it was funded mostly by Yuri Konishi’s money, apparently. That meant there wasn’t much for Yuichi and the others to do.

“The year is a little over half finished,” said Aiko. “Have you started thinking about what you’ll do after graduation?”

It was around the time that the fact that they were in high school was really starting to sink in. It sounded like Aiko was starting to think about her career path.

“I dunno,” said Yuichi. “I was thinking of a doctor or a policeman...”

“Wow, you’ve already thought about it... but why those?” Aiko asked.

“Well... I want to be useful to people, and those seem like the best fields to make use of my talents.” Yuichi felt a little embarrassed to be talking about his future plans.

“You’re strong, so I can see why police,” said Aiko. “But why doctor?”

“It’s hard to explain... I can tell what’s wrong and how to fix it, instinctively. It’s because of the stuff my sister’s made me do.”

Doing old martial arts also came with in-depth knowledge about the human body. It seemed there really were martial artists who could improve people’s lives through their knowledge of healing.

Yuichi had confidence in his huo fa, techniques for helping people live better lives. It was like the other side of the coin from his killing techniques.

“And martial arts seems useful for police on the face of it, right?” he added.

“True... you won’t have to worry about violent criminals with handguns...” Aiko said thoughtfully, as if remembering something.

“I think you should join Precinct 0!” Mutsuko interrupted, having appeared beside them at some point.

“What the heck? I told you I didn’t want to walk to school with you!” Yuichi yelled at Mutsuko. He’d intentionally left the house at a different time, but now it meant nothing.

“They investigate impossible crimes, and they’re given special license to perform warrantless searches! They also have a murder license that lets them kill people!” Mutsuko exclaimed.

“That sounds like an awful place to work!” Of course, Yuichi now knew about all the strange things happened in the world. The existence of such a place sounded all the more plausible.

“Anyway, off I go! Let the third wheel begone!” With that, Mutsuko began running towards the school.

“‘Let the third wheel begone’? What era are you from?” Yuichi muttered. It seemed like she did respect Yuichi’s desire to walk to school without her, though. Maybe she just hadn’t been able to help speaking up after overhearing their talk about police.

“I think being a doctor would be nice,” Aiko said happily. “Yeah, very peaceful. And you could work at our hospital, too! We’d pay you well!”

“Your hospital does seem pretty well off, Noro,” Yuichi agreed.

While they were discussing that, they arrived at school. They walked into the entryway hall and opened up their shoe cubbies to retrieve their indoor slippers.

“Hmm?” Yuichi tilted his head as he noticed something strange in his cubby.

There was a letter inside.

“Hey... isn’t that...” Clearly noticing Yuichi’s strange behavior, Aiko walked up to him and peeked inside.

Yuichi reached in and retrieved the object. It was definitely a letter. It was in a pink envelope sealed with a sticker that looked like a heart.

He turned it over and saw it addressed to “Mr. Yuichi Sakaki,” so there could be no confusion as to whom it was for.

“A love letter!” Aiko shouted, and the eyes of all the other students turned

towards him.

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Yuichi finished telling the story about the shoe cubbies.

“I see,” said Mutsuko. “And the love letter asked to meet you in the courtyard at 4:00 today? So that’s why you seem so on edge!”

“I’m not on edge!” he snapped. Something about her tone was getting on his nerves.

“But why does Noro know what’s in the love letter?” Kanako asked suspiciously.

“Huh? Oh, well... I accidentally opened it...” Aiko said apologetically.

“You call that accidentally?” Yuichi asked.

Aiko had reddened, plunged in, and snatched the love letter away. Then she’d broken the seal and started reading it.

“Well, you know... I was curious, right?” Aiko fumbled. “You don’t see people write love letters very often nowadays, and I wanted to see what they wrote in it, and... sorry...”

She sounded like she was trying to excuse herself at first, then halfway through she’d just realized it wasn’t working and apologized instead.

“Nah, that’s okay,” said Yuichi. “I don’t really feel like going...”

“No, no, no! You need to go and hear them out!” Mutsuko proclaimed as she pounded on the whiteboard.

He had assumed she wouldn’t care about this sort of thing, but she seemed surprisingly invested in it.

“Huh? But...”

“No buts! There are some forms of selfishness that I can’t forgive! It takes courage to send somebody a love letter, and ignoring that is just rude! Now, hurry up and go!”

Yuichi stood up, as if driven out of his seat. He still wasn’t feeling it at all, but now that she’d mentioned it, maybe it *would* be rude to ignore it. If he was

going to turn this person down, he should do it face-to-face.

“Okay. I’ll go.” Grudgingly, Yuichi left the room and headed for the courtyard.

“Why are you coming along, Noro?” he asked.

“Wh-What’s the big deal? I need to make sure you don’t do anything to hurt her feelings,” Aiko said sulkily.

The two walked side by side down the corridor towards the courtyard.

“Well, okay...” If that was all it was, then Yuichi didn’t mind.

To be frank, he wasn’t fully confident he *wouldn’t* hurt the person’s feelings. As pathetic as it was, he thought, it might be nice to have her there to cover for him if he said anything stupid. When he thought about it that way, he was glad to have her with him.

The meeting time had been at 4:00 in the courtyard, but it was already ten minutes past. Part of Yuichi was hoping the love letter’s sender might have gone home already.

“Hey... what’s the person like?” Aiko asked.

“You didn’t see the letter?”

“I-It’s not like I read every single line!”

“They didn’t write their name,” Yuichi said. “Only their initials, C.D.”

“Don’t you think it’s a little fishy?” Aiko asked. “Most people would write their full name, don’t you think?”

“That is true,” he agreed. “It’s a bit strange that they wouldn’t reveal their identity.”

Aiko stopped at the exit to the courtyard.

“You aren’t coming with me?” Yuichi asked, finding it curious. He had assumed she would stick by him the whole time.

“Um, I’m not that rude,” said Aiko. “I’ll just watch quietly from the sidelines.”

“Yeah, I guess it would be weird if two people came to meet them.” And so,

Yuichi entered the courtyard alone.

He headed for the designated spot, a clock tower near the center of the courtyard. Nobody was there waiting for him.

I guess they went home, after all...

Still, it would be a little cruel to just leave right away, so he just sat down on a nearby bench. But after a few minutes of waiting, there was no sign of anybody coming.

I wonder if it was all a prank...

That thought had never entered Yuichi's mind when he was on the way, but now, he fell into vague self-recrimination. He sighed and hung his head. He had thought maybe he was worthy of receiving a love letter, but perhaps he was just being conceited.

Yuichi decided to focus his senses on the surrounding area. If it was a prank, somebody might be watching him, but he was hesitant to just start looking all around.

He sensed two presences nearby. One of them was Aiko, who was still inside the school, watching.

The other was at the entrance to the school on the opposite side. That person seemed to be watching him, too. If this was a prank, this person might be the one behind it.

What should he do now, then? Just as he started thinking that over, the presence began to come closer.

It was heading straight for Yuichi.

As Yuichi looked up, he was shocked by what he saw.

What do you have to eat to look like that?! was Yuichi's first impression upon seeing the approaching girl.

Heavyset people's bodies were often likened to beer barrels, but in this case, the resemblance was uncanny.

She was shorter than Yuichi, and far thicker. To get that heavy, you'd need a

near religious devotion to eating.

Her blazer must have been special order, and even then, seemed like it was on the verge of bursting — which meant that she had gotten even bigger since the uniform had first been made for her.

Did we have someone like her in the school? Yuichi thought. He was sure that if he'd seen someone like this walking around the halls, he would remember, which suggested they must have never crossed paths before.

Yuichi quickly tore his eyes away from the girl's body to look her in the face. Her hair was dyed brown, done up in a short bob with gentle waves, and her eyes were large and clear. By itself, her face seemed like it might be rather attractive, but it was hard to think about anything but her weight.

Maybe she just happens to be passing by... he thought. Just because she was heavyset was no reason to assume she had set him up.

Still, he had an uneasy feeling about this: her walk was the picture of confidence. Mutsuko walked like that, too. It sparked a feeling in his gut that this girl was going to be a real handful. He'd rather not get involved with her if he could avoid it.

Yuichi kept up his vain hopes, right until the moment the girl was standing right in front of him. Then she met his eyes confidently.

"Yuichi Sakaki... it was bold of you to meet my challenge!"

"Huh?" Her dramatic intonation left Yuichi confused.

Huh? So this wasn't about a love confession, or a prank? he thought.

"Truly, my plan was perfect," the girl declared. "To such a shallow man as you, a letter like that would be the perfect bait!"

Is she trying to be "Supreme Ruler of the Century's End"? wondered Yuichi. *Though she looks more like Fudou of the Mountains...*

Yuichi remained seated, staring up at the girl's face in disbelief. Then his eyes strayed a bit higher. The word "Heir" hung above her head.

Heir... that could refer to a lot of things, he thought. *A martial art, maybe?*

Doubts rose up in his mind, though. There were lots of things in Japan that you could be heir to. It wasn't necessarily something violent.

"Uh... so you're the one who asked me out here, huh? What's the deal?" Yuichi would never usually be so informal with a girl he'd just met, but he would feel like a fool responding with polite speech to the kinds of things she was saying.

"The deal, eh?" The girl let out a cocky laugh. "Don't play dumb with me. I've got these eyes, see! Nobody fools my Apocalypse Eyes!"

Suddenly, alarm bells sounded out in Yuichi's mind. Not long ago, he would have just taken that as the mad rantings of middle school syndrome. But now it was different. Now that he had Soul Reader, he knew that things like vampires and supernatural beings really existed. He had also heard that there were people being given strange powers through the Divine Vessels, parts of the Evil God.

"What are you talking about?" Yuichi asked cautiously. Maybe she was just feeling him out; he wouldn't want to give her information she didn't already have by blurting things out carelessly.

"Mine eyes speak to me of thy power!" the girl exclaimed. "Thine is 18,000... ne'er have I seen another higher at this school!"

"Not that I care, but could you keep your speech pattern straight?!" Yuichi blurted out. It was really annoying, the way she kept changing it.

But she merely laughed it off. "Such willpower you show! Impressed am I!"

"Okay, so you're telling me that these 'Apocalypse Eyes' of yours can read someone's battle power level?" he asked. It didn't seem like she was going to spring an attack on him abruptly, so he decided to start with that.

His ability to hold a conversation with such obnoxiousness was thanks to his interactions with Mutsuko. It wasn't something he was proud of.

"But of course!" the girl declared. "I can see ze numbers above a person's head. Zis ability is what proves I am ze chosen one!"

"Okay. So, what's with the threatening name?" he asked. "Why can't you just

call it a Scouter or something?”

Silence fell.

The girl just stood there, an embarrassed expression on her face. Yuichi was starting to feel a little awkward.

“S-Silence, rabble! *We* call our eyes Apocalypse Eyes!” she protested, suddenly.

What was with the royal we?

He sighed. “So, what do you want? And what’s your name, anyway?”

“I have no name for trash like you!” she snapped.

You’re the one who called me *out here...*

This was starting to get ridiculous, Yuichi thought. Maybe if he just walked away, she would turn out to be harmless.

“Oh, hey, Chiharu!” a voice was calling out from the school building. “We’re going out to karaoke. Wanna come?”

There was a group of three girls calling out to the fat girl standing in front of him. Apparently, her name was Chiharu.

“I’ll have to catch up later! Sorry! I’ll email you, ’kay?” Chiharu called back amiably. “Now, as regards my business with you...”

She turned back to Yuichi, her expression becoming theatrically intense.

“What the hell?!” he exploded. “You were talking like a normal person just now!”

“You expect me to speak as friends with one I am about to fight?!” she thundered.

“So it’s Chiharu, huh?” he asked. “What’s your full name?”

She scoffed. “So, with foul tricks, you have revealed my name! Chiharu Dannoura is my name! The name of she who will slaughter you! And when you arrive in hell, you may tell the demons the tale!”

“What did you mean when you said we would fight? Do we even have a

reason to do that?” Yuichi asked.

“A reason, eh? ’Tis little of merit. I can’t see my own power level with my power. Thus, I must test it in deadly combat!”

Yuichi couldn’t use his own power on himself, either, so that made a strange sort of sense. Maybe that was just a general property of magic sight.

“Dannoura,” he said, “if you want to fight, can I assume you practice something?”

There was something unusual in the way Chiharu stood. He had seen it when she’d walked up to him; she had a very stable gait. She wasn’t just some ordinary fat girl.

“My art is Dannoura Archery!” Chiharu declared. “The invincible form of archery founded by Nasu no Yoichi, specialized for close-range combat! Yuichi Sakaki, you are the perfect test target to establish my skill level!”

Yuichi didn’t know much about it, but he did know there were forms of archery that specialized in close combat. It was an Uchine-jutsu technique that allowed the user to use their bow as a spear. This allowed archers to protect themselves on the battlefield after they ran out of arrows. There was a weapon called a hazuyari that involved a spear tip being applied to the nock of the bow.

“Archery, huh?” he asked. “So where’s your bow?”

Chiharu was empty-handed, and it didn’t look like she could have stashed it anywhere.

She laughed again, cockily. “Just as sword arts can evolve to be without sword, so too has my art evolved to be without bow!”

It didn’t make a lot of sense to him, but she sounded very proud of it.

“Um, doesn’t that defeat the point of having ranged weapons?” Yuichi asked. Bows existed to let you attack someone else from afar, with no risk of retaliation. Without that, what was the point? It wasn’t the same thing as losing a sword.

“Are you a fool, Yuichi Sakaki?” she exclaimed. “Battle is ever an unknown quantity! Bows get lost all the time! Are we then to be killed with no method of

resistance? Our founder created methods to survive no matter what the situation! Besides, my bow exists in my heart! It's hidden inside of my soul!" Chiharu thumped her chest. So she really was proud of it.

"Fine," he said. "If you want to fight, let's get it over with!"

Yuichi had no qualms about accepting a challenge from a woman.

"Hold! I spoke to thee the name of my school," the girl said. "In the name of battle etiquette, wilt thou not name thine?"

"I don't have a school!" Yuichi fired back, a bit too quickly. That was the one thing he didn't want to talk about.

The name of the martial arts style his sister had worked out was "Type-Zero Extreme Defense Arts," but if he had to say it out loud, he would lose all will to fight. Thinking back now, he really should have talked with her about the name a little more.

"Oh-ho! Surely you jest," the girl mocked. "Even more inevitable, your certain loss has become."

"How is it certain?" Yuichi asked. "We haven't done anything but talk."

"It was decided the moment I arrived here, for I came later than you! Such has the pattern been since the days of old, the days of Ganryujima! Ever has a late arrival signaled a victory flag! Well? Surely you're annoyed that you didn't think of that! Let that stress shave away at your ability all the more! On top of that, there are no circumstances in which one who does not name his art can ever win!"

"I'm only annoyed by one thing here, and that's the way you talk!" Yuichi exploded. "If you want a fight, bring it on!"

Chiharu laughed again. "Then let it begin!" With that, she turned her back on Yuichi and began running at full tilt.

"Huh?" Yuichi was confused.

Chiharu was faster than her appearance might suggest; she arrived at the school building before he could even get his thoughts together.

If he went after her right away, he could take her out with a single blow from

behind. On the other hand, if he let her run away, maybe he wouldn't have to deal with it... But no, he decided. If he just walked away now, she would probably make trouble later.

This hesitation was Chiharu's salvation... or perhaps it was part of her plan. If it was, he had to hand it to her. Her pompous, swift-talking attitude had shaved away at his enthusiasm and allowed her to get the drop on him.

Yuichi quickly ran to pursue Chiharu. She was out of sight by the time he arrived in the building, so he tracked her using the reverberation of her footsteps. After walking down the hallway for a while, he sensed a presence from one of the downwards staircases. Yuichi had never been there before, but he knew it led to a basement storehouse.

He turned to enter the stairway. Chiharu was already there, standing halfway down. There was an enormous bow in her hand, a compound bow used in Western-style archery.

"I'm not sure what to comment on first... I thought you'd evolved beyond the bow? And why a Western-style bow?" Yuichi couldn't help but ask.

Chiharu cackled. "Got your guard down, didn't I?! Western-style bows got more power, see? And they're cooler!"

"Have a little more respect for your traditions!" Yuichi shouted. Of course Yuichi, who practiced a mish-mash martial art, had no right to lecture her there.

"Martial arts evolve to suit the environment!" Chiharu declared. "If better tools exist, it's only natural to use them!"

Chiharu held the bow parallel to the floor. It would just barely fit in the staircase.

"If we made a drawing of this, archery otakus would lose their minds with criticism..." Yuichi muttered.

She wasn't wearing a yugake — the three-fingered glove used in Japanese archery — or the release used in Western archery. She seemed intent on drawing the string bare-handed.

"Extend!" Chiharu shouted while Yuichi was still lost in thought.

Needle-shaped anchors on both tips of the bow flew out, striking the concrete wall with a tremendous sound. Chiharu nocked the arrow.

There was no head on it, suggesting she wasn't trying to kill him — but still, it was as thick as a steel pipe. A hit from that would definitely be disabling.

Chiharu then grabbed the string and fell backwards, as if she was going to topple down the stairs. Her body leaned back to be parallel with the staircase. (This happened to flip up her skirt to reveal her panties, but he wasn't especially pleased by the sight.) "You think I'm heavy for no reason?" she shouted. "Weight is power! Yes, this is why! It is not at all because I love sweets!"

"Um, shouldn't you have done the preparations for this in advance? Like, before I showed up?" Yuichi asked. If this had been her plan, she should have set it up beforehand and fired the minute Yuichi arrived. He could be doing anything in the time it was taking her to ready and explain it.

"Because it's cool, of course!" she declared. "I wanted to show off the extension!"

Something in the way she talked reminded him of Mutsuko. He was getting a sneaking suspicion that his big sister was involved in this gimmick somehow.

"What's your countermeasure if I just try to walk back into the hall?" he asked.

The bow was fixed in place, so she couldn't change the aim. In other words, if he wanted to avoid the attack, all Yuichi had to do was leave.

"My countermeasure is... well... ah, I know! I'll say you lost because you ran away!" Chiharu stammered, flustered. She hadn't seemed to anticipate what would happen if Yuichi just walked away, or if he hadn't come at all.

"I'm starting to think I wouldn't mind losing at this point..." Yuichi muttered.

Even so, he hated to lose. Now that the challenge had been issued, he didn't want to run away. He anticipated that Chiharu would also declare him the loser if he tried to stop her before she fired. That meant his only choice was to react after she did so.

"Take this!" she shouted. The compound bow, stretched to its limits with her

weight, released its arrow.

As Chiharu tumbled down the stairs, the arrow tore through the air, letting out a howl as it went.

Yuichi snatched it out of the air. The arrow hung there, inches from his face, trembling as if enraged.

“Can we just say I won now?” He had known both the trajectory and the timing, so catching it had been simple.

“Wh-What?” Chiharu looked up at Yuichi, dumbfounded, from the bottom of the stairs. It seemed she had only had the one arrow; she wouldn’t be firing at him again.

“Urk... ah... I just realized I can’t set the bow back to normal!” she exclaimed. “I can’t get it home like this! I’m gonna get yelled at!”



“That’s what you’re worried about?” Yuichi tossed the arrow aside, then descended the stairs. A weapon that couldn’t be reset after it deployed... it was sounding more and more like the work of Mutsuko.

He knew it was none of his business, but Chiharu looked so pathetic that he decided he’d help her clean up.

“Is it okay to break this?” Yuichi asked as he stood in front of the bow. He could probably retrieve it if he broke it in two.

“Yes... inevitable that may be. Such a waste it is, but... yes. I’ll fetch some tools.” With that, Chiharu slipped past Yuichi and ascended the stairs. Once she had reached the top, she whipped back around. “You fell for it, Yuichi Sakaki! This was all part of my plan! You see, clever schemes are a part of the Dannoura School! Now, I have you right where I want you!”

“Plan? You were just panicking about it!” he exclaimed. She must have just thought of her new plan as she’d reached the top of the stairway.

“Shut up! As long as I win, that’s all that matters!” she shouted. “Take this! Dannoura Flying Body Attack!”

Chiharu leaped down at him.

“Give a little more thought to the name!” he shouted.

Her enormous mass — likely more than 100 kg — hovered in the air above him. It was an extremely intimidating sight. Chiharu turned her body horizontal to make his chances of escape all the less likely, and flew at him in a body press.

It was a worrying trajectory. If she kept flying this way, she’d hit him right with her central mass. If he tried to climb down, he’d hit the bow, and even if he reached the bottom, the basement door was closed.

If he was going to run, it would have to be up. He just had to get past her and run up the stairs.

But Yuichi opted to strike back. He could catch her if he wanted to, but he refused to be so kind.

Yuichi dropped his hips, stepped forward with his left leg, and struck up with his left fist.

It was a tontian pao, a move from Bajiquan, more commonly known as an uppercut. It was generally used to hit someone's jaw from below, rather than to counterattack against a fat person jumping down at you. Still, it could be useful in this situation.

Yuichi's fist hit Chiharu's side. He then unleashed his next move, pulling back his left hand and kicking up with his right leg. The recoil of the kick brought his right leg down, and he then kicked up with his left.

It was lian huan tui, another Bajiquan technique. Her fleshy mass finally lost its momentum and went flying back. Chiharu collided with the ceiling, then fell flat against the staircase.

Yuichi had won.

"Ugh... I-I lose... I admit it..." the fallen Chiharu said, looking up at Yuichi. She didn't seem to be too badly hurt; her layers of fat must have absorbed some of the shock.

"You said I'm the strongest here, so it's admirable that you were brave enough to challenge me," Yuichi said. "But if you wanted to test your strength, shouldn't you have started with the weakest and gone up?"

"Ah!" Chiharu's eyes went wide. "I thought that if I beat the strongest person, it would mean my power level was over 18,000! That idea popped into my head, and I soon grew unable to think of anything else! I also thought that resolving things with one battle might save me time!"

Well, she doesn't seem like a bad person... a bit ridiculous, but...

"Okay, whatever, but are you satisfied now?" He was pretty sure she was admitting defeat, but he had to be sure.

"Ngh! Kill me!" she cried.

"What the hell?!"

"The winner has the right to have his way with the loser! K-Kill me! I'm ready! Do as you will!" As she spoke, she tore open her shirt. She had quite an ample bust, but that may have just been due to her overall circumference. It was hard to tell how much of it was breasts and how much was fat.

She thinks I'm gonna molest her because she lost? Yuichi thought incredulously. *She must have been playing too many porn games...*

"Um... sorry, but I'd rather not," Yuichi apologized wearily.

"Very well! Then I'll let you join my reverse harem!" Chiharu seemed undeterred by Yuichi's refusal.

"Did you just demote me?" he burst out. "And *harem*? You're kidding, right?"

"You'll be joining three turtles and one Pomeranian!" she declared.

"Turtles and dogs? Those are just pets!"

"Do not underestimate the Pomeranian! They have what it takes to survive in *Tokyo Jungle*!" she declared.

"They can't actually beat alligators and lions in real life! But I guess I should get something for beating you... Hey, could you answer a few questions for me?" he asked.

"Interrogation, eh? Bring it on! I'll answer even the most embarrassing of questions!" As usual, she was jumping to obnoxious conclusions, but he decided to ignore this and move on. He just had to deal with her the way he dealt with his sister.

"How did you end up with those eyes? You weren't born with them, right?" he asked.

"No," she said. "They awakened in me over summer vacation, without warning."

"Did someone give them to you?"

"No, they did not. If I'd experienced such an incredible event, I should like to replay it now!"

It seemed like she hadn't been given them by an Outer, either. He wasn't sure if this had something to do with the Evil God, but if she was possessed by a God Vessel, she could let them know when resonance was happening.

"That bow you had," he said. "Did you make it yourself?"

"My elder, Sakaki, made it for me," she said.

“Dammit, Sis... why do you have to give dangerous stuff to crazy people?” Yuichi pressed a hand to his forehead and stared at the floor. He’d known it. His sister was the only person he knew who would have made something like that.

“Did you challenge me to a fight knowing I was Mutsuko Sakaki’s little brother?” he asked.

“What?! That’s right, you’re a Sakaki, too! What a fool I have been!” Her surprise was exaggerated, but it didn’t appear to be a lie.

“Oh, come on. You should have realized it...” he sighed.

“I’m afraid it’s not that easy,” she said. “Sakaki is not an unusual name.”

“Compared to Dannoura, I guess it isn’t,” he said. “By the way, I’ve never seen you around before. What class are you in?”

“1-G.”

“Oh, the music curriculum,” he said. Seishin High School had a general curriculum, as well as a music curriculum and an economics curriculum. A through F were general courses, G was music, and H was economics. Since they had different requirements, the general courses and the music courses moved around at different times. That would explain why Yuichi had never seen her before.

“I’m in the choir club, too,” she said. “The ones who called to me earlier are my friends from the choir club.”

“Wh... What?” Yuichi asked, dismayed.

“What? Why do you look so despondent?” she cried.

It was only natural that Chiharu wouldn’t understand his reaction. Yuichi still wanted to join the choir club. But knowing that Chiharu would be there gave him pause.

“Nothing... I was just thinking... that life can be really unfair,” he said morosely. “Anyway, I’m going now. Please, lay off the challenges, okay?”

Yuichi slouched up the stairs and left the basement behind.

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When Yuichi met up with Aiko again, he was acting very strangely.

“So? Did you turn her down? What happened? And why do you look so sad?” Aiko pestered. She was a straightforward girl, so naturally, her first question was about whether or not he’d turned her down. When she’d seen the girl run away and Yuichi run after her, Aiko hadn’t been sure whether she should chase them or not. But, deciding things would get bad if she was seen, she had decided to wait where she was.

The whole time she’d been waiting, she had been utterly restless. It didn’t look like anyone was confessing their love, but that *had* been the person who had sent the love letter. With no idea what was going on, Aiko had spent the entire time on tenterhooks.

“Oh. I won,” Yuichi said.

“Huh?” Aiko asked, unsure of how one could “win” a love confession. “I don’t really get it, but... hey, why are you staring at me?”

Yuichi was staring at Aiko with an expression of simultaneous disbelief and relief. Feeling embarrassed, Aiko reflexively turned her eyes down, and glanced up at him.

“Oh... I was just thinking, you’re so nice and compact, Noro,” he said. “It really makes me feel safe.”

“C-Compact? Safe?” Aiko said hesitantly, unsure if that was a compliment or not.

It wasn’t until some time afterwards that she realized he was basically calling her short.

Chapter 4: Fourth Week of October: The Yokai Fave-Stealer

“Yokai... fave-stealer?” Yuichi tilted his head. Thanks to his sister’s hobbies, Yuichi knew the names of the major yokai, but he’d never heard about this one.

They were in the survival club’s meeting room after class. As usual, Mutsuko was standing in front of the whiteboard, which was currently inscribed with names of yokai he’d never heard of: Blue Screener, Restart-Reroller, Fave-Stealer, Self-Accepter, Wall-Pinner, and so on.

The people in the room were Mutsuko, Kanako, Yuichi, and Aiko. Natsuki hadn’t been showing up for club lately; any time class ended, she just headed right home. Yuichi was getting a little bit worried about her.

The theme of today’s club meeting was yokai.

“Yes! It’s a yokai that’s been causing a lot of trouble for people lately!” Mutsuko declared.

“Yes! It is very terrifying!” Kanako agreed, joining in.

“Judging from the names, they all sound like pretty sad yokai,” Yuichi said. “Like that pillow-turner one.”

“The makura-gaeshi? That’s a very fearsome yokai, actually,” said Mutsuko. “Long ago, it was thought that human souls left their bodies while they were asleep, to travel to the world of dreams. The pillow was the gateway! So if you turned someone’s pillow over while they were sleeping, their soul couldn’t return to their body and they’d die! Of course, all the stuff about the soul has been forgotten, so now turning someone’s pillow over just sounds like a silly prank.”

Yuichi remembered Makina mentioning something about the yokai he had fought during summer vacation being a subset of pillow-turner. That guy had seemed to eat souls, so Yuichi wondered if it had something to do with this legend Mutsuko spoke of.

“But as legends drift and get abandoned, yokai lose their power, too,” said Mutsuko. “It’s believed that now, the pillow-turners don’t have much power left! But not the fave-stealers! They’ve only become more terrifying! There are people who believe yokai exist to explain inexplicable phenomena, so it’s natural we’d see new yokai arrive as civilization progresses! In other words, it’s a new breed of yokai for the internet era!”

“Oh?” Yuichi asked, disinterestedly. “So what interesting things do they do?”

“They undo your Twitter follows!” Mutsuko proclaimed with a terror-stricken expression.

“Uh... so? If you unfollow someone, just follow them again.” Yuichi was dumbstruck by how pointless it sounded.

Aiko, for her part, just looked confused.

“What are you saying?” Mutsuko exclaimed. “You unfollow without realizing it! The person who got unfollowed will be all like, ‘Why did they unfollow me? Do they hate me?’ It undermines human relationships! It hinders communication! It’s a terrible yokai!”

“Um, if you’re really friends, you could probably just say ‘I’m sorry’ and fix it...” Aiko suggested. She didn’t seem to understand the danger of it.

Yuichi felt the same way; it seemed pretty easy for two people to get over something like that.

“But it’s not just that... what they do on Twitter is just a side job,” Kanako said, her tone chilling. “The real horror is when they take away your faves on internet fiction sites! I’ve worked hard to improve my stories to get more faves, and then all of a sudden, they just went down. It’s just terrible...”

When a reader on a fiction site liked a story, and wanted to read more, they’d add it to their favorites. Having your story added to a lot of people’s favorites — in other words, having a large number of “faves” — was proof of your work’s popularity. Rankings were based on faves, too, so increasing those was one of the goals of the amateur author.

“Maybe they just took them off because they started to find the story boring...” Yuichi said thoughtlessly, then immediately regretted it.

Kanako turned her eyes away in shock, then bowed her head forlornly.

“Oh, Yu, you’re so mean! You hurt Orihara’s feelings!” Mutsuko exclaimed.

“Sakaki! That was going way too far!” Aiko burst out.

“Huh? Oh, uh, sorry...” Yuichi apologized sincerely while rebuked by both of them.

He was outnumbered, so making excuses wouldn’t work, and he really was in the wrong this time.

But Mutsuko continued to pursue the matter. “Yu! A mere apology won’t restore Orihara’s smile!”

“U-Um, well, if you would go out with me again to do more research...” Kanako timidly raised her face, suggesting the blow really hadn’t been that great.

“Um, helping you research won’t restore the lost faves, though,” Aiko pointed out. “Besides, your book is already published. Why do you need faves on a website?” Her voice was calm, but she looked a little sour about the whole thing.

“O-Oh, but... oh, that’s right! Internet popularity can affect sales! So I need to do research to get more popular...” Kanako’s voice continued shrinking, probably because the book she was currently writing didn’t require research. In that regard, Kanako was very honest.

Unwilling to remain locked in the awkward atmosphere, Yuichi stood up and made the declaration. “Okay! So I just have to beat up this fave-stealer yokai, right?”

He didn’t really understand it, but if it was the thing removing her faves, then beating it up should solve the problem.

“I’m not sure this is a problem you can solve with punching...” Aiko muttered.

Yuichi pretended not to hear.

After finishing club activities, Yuichi, Mutsuko, and Aiko headed for an internet cafe in the shopping district.

Kanako decided to go home early, saying she shouldn't stay out too late.

"So, does this fave-stealer yokai do its hacking here?" Yuichi asked suspiciously.

It was extremely hard to believe. Why would a yokai hang out in a place like this?

"Yes, I'm sure of it!" Mutsuko declared. "I ran a scrupulous investigation, and I found out that the recent fave-removals have all been done from this cafe!" She pointed boldly at the net cafe.

A "Cheapest in Town!" banner hung streaming in front of the entrance.

When Yuichi had said he'd beat up the fave-stealer, Mutsuko had started running some kind of investigation on the club room's computer. She had apparently found the fave-stealer very quickly.

"Um, how do you know that?" Aiko asked uncertainly. Aiko wasn't particularly internet savvy, so it was natural that she wouldn't understand.

"I hacked into the fiction site's server and checked the personal history of all the users who'd recently removed their faves!" Mutsuko declared. "There, I found a very suspicious pattern! An unnatural number of users were accessing the internet from the net cafe's IP when they removed their faves! It's got to be connected!"

"Sis, could you not proclaim your felonies loud enough for everyone to hear?" Yuichi asked wearily.

The three entered the cafe, checked in, and headed for an open booth. Aiko was looking all around curiously; she must never have been to an internet cafe before.

With drinks in their hands, they took their seats.

"Will that IP thing tell you where they're sitting? And if they're even here or not?" Aiko asked, sounding like she really didn't get it at all.

"No problem," Mutsuko said confidently. "It looks like he's still on the net right now. I planted some spyware into the server which is feeding me information in real time. He seems to be unfaving at tremendous speeds, so we

just need to find someone who looks like they're doing that!"

Mutsuko showed off her smartphone proudly. Incomprehensible lines of letters and numbers streamed across the screen. Yuichi had no idea what she was showing him, but he had a vague inkling that it was probably illegal.

"Even so, would someone like that really do it out in public?" Yuichi asked. "If he got a private room, we can't just barge in..."

Yuichi looked around.

He was there.

There was a person in an open booth in the corner, busy manipulating his computer. Above the person's head were the words "Fave-Stealer."

That removed all doubt. Yuichi didn't know if this person was a yokai or not, but he was clearly messing around on the internet.

"That's him." Yuichi pointed surreptitiously.

"Huh?" Aiko asked. "How'd you... oh, yeah! Of course you'd know."

Yuichi's Soul Reader let him read the label over someone's head and identify what they were. It was an extremely useful talent for a situation like this, though if he ever ended up in a mystery story, he would probably be insufferable.

"Well, now that we've found him, what do we do?" Yuichi asked. He couldn't just attack someone in the middle of an internet cafe.

"Let's drag him home!" Mutsuko declared. "Then we'll interrogate him about removing Orihara's faves!"

"Drag him... I don't know about that..."

"It's okay! He's a yokai! It's okay to abduct and confine them!" Mutsuko announced.

"I'm... not sure I agree with that..."

It seemed wrong to decide a guy messing around on a computer in an internet cafe must be a yokai and abduct him. But just watching him wasn't solving anything, so Yuichi decided to talk to the fave-stealer.

Slowly, Yuichi approached.

The fave-stealer was small in stature, with a hood covering his face. The fact that you couldn't see his face at a glance suggested he was trying to hide it.

"Hello. Could I talk to you?" Yuichi asked.

The fave-stealer failed to respond, too absorbed in his computer. Annoyed, Yuichi reached for the hood.

"What are you doing?!" the person shouted, turning around angrily.

"Huh?" Yuichi paused for a minute.

It was a girl.

The fact that she clearly wasn't human further added to Yuichi's shock: she had round ears on top of her head.

"Ah?!" Realizing he had seen her ears, the girl quickly replaced the hood, and stood up in a panic.

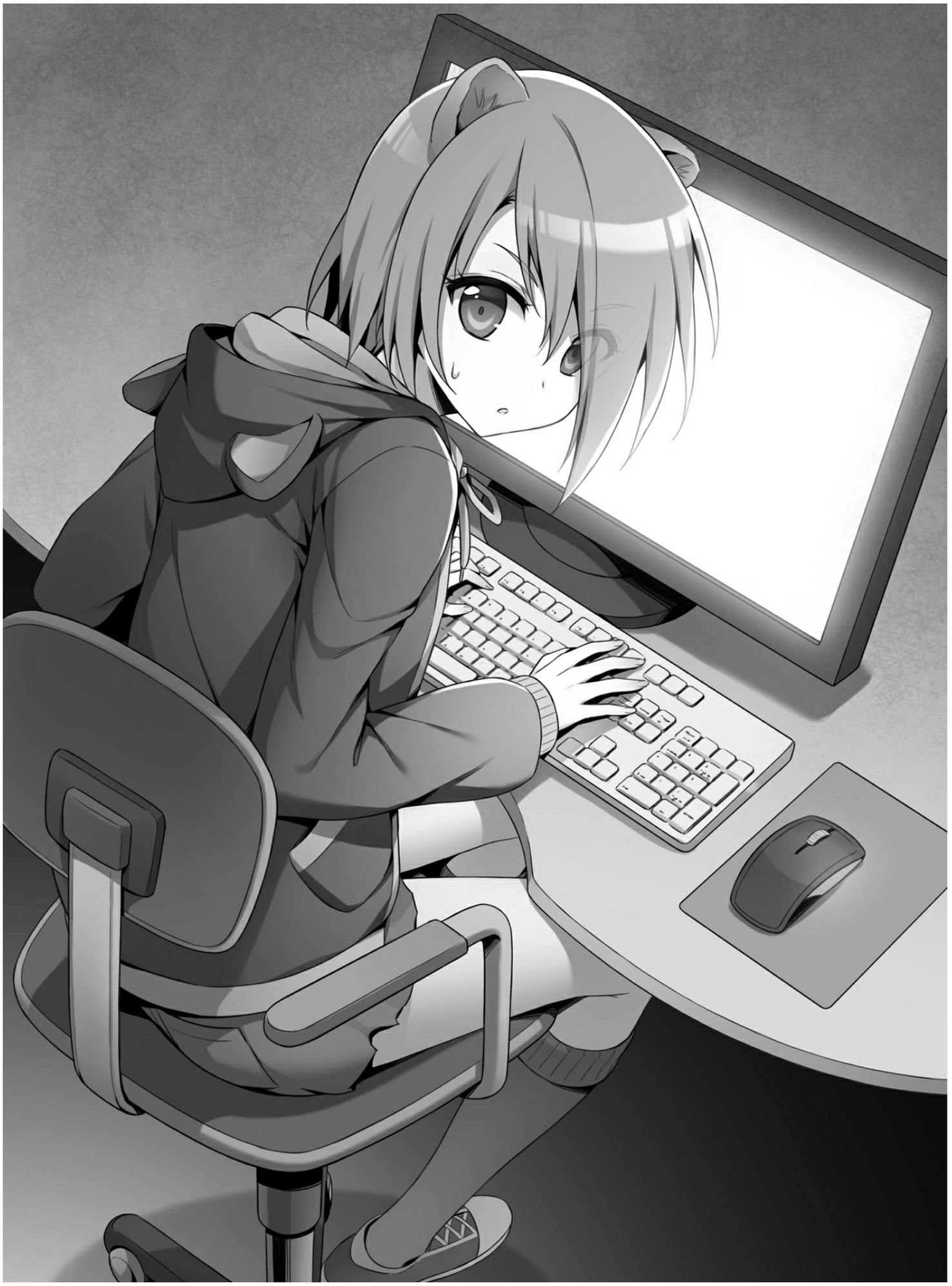
The next thing he knew, she was running for the door to the cafe.

"What should I do?!" Yuichi shouted.

"Chase her, of course!" Mutsuko declared heroically.

Yuichi and the others flew out of the net cafe in pursuit.

"I can't tell which way she went!" Yuichi shouted.



Just outside the cafe was the throng of the shopping district. It would be difficult to find her mixed into all this.

“Sakaki! The labels! Search the labels!” Aiko cried.

“Oh, that’s right!” At Aiko’s prompting, Yuichi started looking around. He could see the label “Fave-Stealer” retreating into the distance.

“This way!” Yuichi pointed in the direction the girl was going.

It was hard to get by with so many people passing through, but the girl was in the same boat. The chase lasted for a while with no change in the distance between them.

It was possible she’d get away, at this rate. But just as Yuichi was starting to panic, the situation changed.

The girl was accosted by someone who led her into a back street.

“What happened?” he wondered.

“They seemed like they knew each other... yokai buddies, maybe?” Aiko asked.

“It looked a little more threatening than that...” he said.

They turned down the alley to pursue the girl.

“Hey! Let me go!” the girl screamed.

“What, don’t I even get a hello? Huh? You forget who’s on top around here?” The person who had grabbed the girl was a tall, gangly man with silver accessories jangling all over his body. Not exactly a respectable person. Above his head was the label “Scythe-Weasel.”

“The scythe-weasel is a yokai, right?” Yuichi asked.

“Huh? No way! That’s what he is?” Mutsuko exclaimed. “That’s a kama-itachi, a seriously major yokai! But he’s so seedy-looking! He looks like just your standard hoodlum!”

He wondered what image she’d had of the kama-itachi that had spurred Mutsuko to criticize a man she’d never met before.

The “scythe-weasel,” or “kama-itachi,” was, as the name suggested, a yokai weasel with scythes for hands. But unlike the fave-stealer, this one appeared human at a glance.

The man released the girl and slammed her roughly against the wall.

The blow had clearly left her staggered. Looking like she was in pain, she met Yuichi’s eyes.

“Run, you guys! This is no time to be chasing me!” the girl cried, clearly at her wits’ end.

“Huh? You were followed by humans?” the scythe-weasel asked. “Pathetic little... Ah, well. Curse your bad fortune and give up, humans...”

The kama-itachi smiled eerily and as it advanced on them.

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The osaki was a yokai said to take the form of a weasel. It existed to explain disparities in wealth.

In the olden days, brokers came to villages to buy up various resources. When these brokers decided on the price for the goods they were buying, they used scales. The yokai known as osaki liked scales, and would sit on top of them whenever they were set out.

Some osaki liked to sit on the plate side of the scale, while others liked to perch on the weight. Therefore, a house that had an osaki living in the plate of their scale would be paid a little more for their goods, while the houses with an osaki living on the weight would be paid a little less.

The reason this yokai was thought up was to avoid discord in these small villages. Two people thought they were doing the same thing, yet they received different results: one house became wealthy, while one house became poor.

In reality, they saw different results because they were doing different things, but there was no way for them to know that. They were just trying to avoid the discrimination and jealousy that came from differences in wealth. By wisely leaving things vague, the villagers had somehow managed to muddle through.

There was no difference in the families themselves, they’d claimed. It all came

down to what kind of osaki lived with you.

That was the reason the osaki yokai was born.

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“And so, the osaki has adapted to the modern internet environment and become the fave-stealer!” Mutsuko declared.

“Y-Yeah,” said the fave-stealer. “It’s not like I’m doing it to be mean. I’m just trying to stave off feelings of unfairness by letting people blame me for their lost faves. I’m basically like... yeah, a scapegoat! A sacrificial lamb!”

“But you’re a weasel,” Mutsuko said.

The round ears on top of her head did look like those of a weasel, but Yuichi didn’t know enough about animals to judge at a glance whether they were weasel ears.

“You seemed to be working pretty hard to me,” Aiko pointed out, her demeanor chilly.

Yuichi, Mutsuko, Aiko, and the fave-stealer were in Yuichi’s room on the second floor of the Sakaki household. Yoriko had said she’d be hanging out with friends before coming home, so she wasn’t here at the moment.

“W-Well, I do like to imagine the faces of the people acting depressed after their faves go down,” the fave-stealer said with a wicked grin.

“But why do you always do it from the same internet cafe?” Yuichi asked. “It would be harder to track you if you changed it up a little.”

“That place is the cheapest in town... but I’ll be more careful from now on,” she said.

“I guess yokai have their worries, too...” Aiko, for some reason, seemed sympathetic.

“But wow, I’m impressed that you beat that scythe-weasel!” the girl exclaimed. “They’re the strongest there are in the weasel biz! I’ve never seen a yokai beaten up that badly! It was really something!”

“What else is there in ‘the weasel biz’?” Yuichi asked.

“I guess you did manage to settle it with punching, Sakaki...” Aiko said with a weary sigh.

Yuichi had taken down the kama-itachi down with a single front-kick. It had been about to do something, but Yuichi had no intention of waiting to see what it was. After he’d taken out the kama-itachi, the fave-stealer had been happy to do whatever he said, and so they’d brought her back to Yuichi’s house.

“Oh! But scythe-weasels are actually a trio,” Mutsuko said. “The remaining two might come back for revenge...”

The yokai kama-itachi existed to explain sudden, inexplicable cuts people got when they were walking around.

They had originally been known as the kamae-tachi (“readied sword”), but that term had been corrupted to “kama-itachi” (“scythe-weasel”). As the name might suggest, it didn’t originally have anything to do with weasels.

There were a lot of legends about the kama-itachi, and one of them was that they acted as trios: one to trip the person, one to cut them, and one to apply medicine so that the wound wouldn’t bleed.

“But I don’t really get the point of it,” Yuichi said. “Why go out of their way to heal the wound after they caused it?”

It was there to explain why the wounds wouldn’t bleed, but it still felt pretty random. He wished people would give a bit more thought to these things.

“I’m not sure,” said the girl. “They’ve never told me. I’m the lowest of the low in the weasel biz, so it’s not like I get to have in-depth chats with the kama-itachi. He mostly just bullies me, like you saw before...”

“Seriously, what is ‘the weasel biz’?” Yuichi asked. “What business do you do?”

The fave-stealer still hadn’t answered his question about that.

“Yu, it’s simple!” Mutsuko declared. “The healing at the end was their goal from the start! They don’t actually care about the tripping and the cutting! The healing is their goal, because they’re testing the medicine’s effectiveness! They’re researching wound salves!”

“The kama-itachi are there to explain sudden wounds, aren’t they?” Yuichi asked. “Don’t you think you’re getting it backwards?” Her explanation raised questions of when their research would finally bear fruit. “Well, we’ve got her back here. What do we do now, Sis?”

“Good question,” said Mutsuko. “We know she’s an osaki now, so the answer is simple! We just need to do an osaki-barai!”

Osaki-barai: a ritual to drive an osaki from the scales it was sitting on. It was said that villagers in the old days took those rituals quite seriously.

“Hey, give me a break!” the fave-stealer said quickly. She probably didn’t want to undergo such a ritual.

“Let’s not,” said Yuichi. “I’d feel bad exorcising her. We just need to do something about Orihara’s faves... so, stop doing things to make Orihara sad, okay?”

“You’re the one who made her sad, Yu,” said Mutsuko.

“Would you give that a rest?” Yuichi couldn’t help but grimace. “I apologized, okay?”

“Very well. I will never again interfere with this Orihara person!” the fave-stealer swore earnestly.

The next day...

“S-Sakaki! I-It’s number one! I’m number one!” Kanako rushed into the club room in a tizzy, cell phone in hand.

Yuichi, Mutsuko, and Aiko all peered at the cell phone’s screen. The fiction publishing site ranking was on it, and Kanako’s story *My Demon Lord Is Too Cute to Kill and Now the World Is in Danger!* was ranked number one for the day.

“Th-This is...” Mutsuko’s eyes opened in surprise. “Orihara! This is the work of the yokai fave-adder!”

“What?! What’s that? Isn’t it good if it adds them?” Kanako seemed purely happy about it, and thus was dubious about Mutsuko’s reaction.

“It’s a new, bad yokai that just appeared recently!” she exclaimed. “It creates

multiple accounts and increases your faves from a single access point, which makes it look like the novel's author is doing something shady! It's more dangerous than the fave-stealer, since accounts accused of skewing rankings could be deleted!"

"Um... Sis... that's really a rude thing to say," Yuichi said. "Maybe she just had a surge in popularity?"

Even so, when he considered what had happened yesterday, Yuichi did find her theory fairly plausible.

"Um... you think it might have been that yokai again?" Aiko asked. "Maybe she was trying to atone..."

Yuichi and Aiko exchanged a look.

"Is she stupid?! What if she gets her account deleted?!" Yuichi hissed.

"Yeah, it's going a little too far..." Aiko agreed in a low voice.

This was likely the work of the fave-stealer; the two were sure of that.

The faves that had increased so suddenly immediately declined. The fiction site must have stepped in and taken measures.

Kanako received no punishment. That was only natural, since she hadn't actually done anything wrong. Besides, if her account had been deleted under false charges, Mutsuko would likely have taken action.

Still, perhaps because she had gotten attention for it, her faves did increase a little in the grand scheme of things. And after that, Kanako never suffered a sudden spike or drop in faves again.

But the Fave-Stealer could still be out there, stealing your faves, follows, and likes...!

What an annoying yokai... Yuichi thought.

Chapter 5: Fifth Week of October: Mika

“I’m Mika, and I’m right behind y— bwaaaaah!”

The moment it appeared behind Yuichi, he lashed out with a backfist.

His senses told him that it hadn’t sneaked up behind him; it had actually appeared out of thin air. That meant it was some sort of supernatural being, which meant he didn’t have to hold back.

A second later, Yuichi turned around, smartphone in hand. The thing he had sent flying had hit the wall, and now sat limply on the floor below.

“What happened?!” Mutsuko cried, arriving in Yuichi’s room in a hurry.

Yoriko, who he assumed had been downstairs watching TV, showed up a moment later.

“Yu... did you bring another little girl here?!” Mutsuko said with theatrical shock.

The person who had hit the wall and then fallen was indeed a little girl.

“Don’t say it like that!” he shot back.

It wasn’t as if it was his fault. He wasn’t bringing the little girls here. They just seemed to keep following him.

Yuichi looked at the unconscious girl.

Calling her a little girl seemed slightly deceptive. She looked about fourth grade age, and was done up exactly like the Dress-up Mika doll. The label “Mika Doll” hung over her head, as well, so that was probably exactly what she was.

“Family conference time!” Mutsuko declared.

“Again?!” Yuichi shouted in frustration.

Yuichi hadn’t personally been involved in what had caused all this, but it had all started a few days back.

They were having their survival club meeting in the usual room, where for once, Mutsuko was actually discussing something relevant to survival.

There were five of them in attendance today: Mutsuko, Kanako, Aiko, Natsuki, and Yuichi.

“Today, we’re gonna learn self defense techniques!” Mutsuko declared.

“Wow, that’s pretty survival club-esque,” Yuichi snarked. He actually still felt it wasn’t quite there, but he swallowed his objection. The club was really just a place for Mutsuko to do whatever she wanted.

“This will be a class for the ladies! Our club is full of cute girls, any one of which would make a tempting target for dangerous weirdos! So I’d like to teach you how to deal with gropers!”

Yuichi glanced over at Natsuki. She certainly was a pretty girl, but he couldn’t imagine that she needed any such countermeasures.

“What?” Natsuki looked back at Yuichi, her cold eyes reflecting their usual unknowable emotion.

“Um, I was just thinking you probably already know how to deal with gropers...”

Natsuki was a skilled fighter. Your everyday pervert wouldn’t stand a chance against her. Even a superhuman one, she could probably handle.

“Really? I was just thinking I’d like to learn how to deal with stalkers,” said Natsuki.

“You let one live in your house!” shouted Yuichi.

There was a man who served as Natsuki’s underling in her serial killings. Yuichi didn’t know the details of their relationship, but it did seem as if they lived together.

“I think stalkers are a bit of a different thing,” said Mutsuko. “That’s not really a self-defense problem... Ah, Yu, you might not have a lot to do this time around.”

“Yeah, guess not,” Yuichi agreed. He didn’t really need self-defense techniques at this point.

“Which means you get to be the groper! Come over here and glare at your sister with your bestial eyes of wanton desire!” cried Mutsuko.

“Can’t you put that some other way?!” Yuichi stomped up to the whiteboard to stand facing Mutsuko. The club room was full of clutter, so this was about the only place where they’d have enough space to move around.

“Okay! Well, I call it self-defense, but to be honest, stopgap self-defense tricks won’t be any help to you at all!” Mutsuko declared.

“Did you really just say that?! What’s the point of the class, then?”

“So, you might think it’s just a matter of having more in-depth knowledge, right?” Mutsuko added. “But you still hear about girls with long years of martial arts experience losing to guys who aren’t anything but strong.”

“Um, so are you saying this is all meaningless?” Aiko asked.

Yuichi agreed. If you could lose even after years of training, it was hard to imagine what the point of learning would be.

“Well — and this isn’t just about women — if you end up freaking out in a real conflict situation, there’s not a technique out there that will do you any good,” said Mutsuko. “So the first thing to learn is presence of mind! That’s what you need! Not to panic! If you don’t learn that, any self-defense technique will be pointless!”

Presence of mind. It was easy to say, but far more difficult to achieve.

How well could you keep your head in a real combat situation? Yuichi had been through quite a few in his time, and even he couldn’t attest to doing that perfectly.

“So, if a pervert attacks you, the first thing you should try to do is run,” said Mutsuko. “Don’t even think about fighting back! The next thing you do is call for help. That’s also something you can only do if you’re calm.”

“This is more sensible advice than I expected from you, Sis...” Yuichi was impressed. He’d assumed she’d be rolling out the killing moves with glee.

“You be quiet! Ah, and when calling for help, it’s better to shout ‘fire’ than ‘help me’!” added Mutsuko. “It increases the chance that someone will come.

Of course, the psychological isolation seen in modern cities suggests that people might not come even then, so it's still good to know at least a few self-defense techniques you can pull out for times like that!"

"May I ask a question, Sakaki?" Kanako raised her hand.

"Yes?"

"What about strength differential between men and women? If men are naturally stronger, is it even possible for a woman to fight back against them? Um, I don't really like saying this, but I've heard there are places where they're taught that it's better not to struggle, since it can get you killed."

"What the heck?" Mutsuko burst out. "That's loser talk! *Never* just roll over for someone! Between playing dead and fighting, you should always fight! Even if casting off your pride *would* save you, what's the point in living after that?!"

"Um, do we really have to make this a life-or-death thing?" Yuichi decided to pour some cold water on Mutsuko's growing fire. If he let her go on, she'd probably take the conversation more and more into the wrong direction.

"Ah, sorry," said Mutsuko. "You're right. Certainly, there is a difference in the strengths of men and women. Individuals differ, naturally, but women on average have less muscle mass than men. That's going to be a disadvantage, but I can also say it doesn't matter too much. Let's say a man's strength is ten, and a woman's strength is five. But if you want to kill someone, you only need a two!"

"Sis, I really don't think this is about killing..." Yuichi said.

"What are you talking about? The potential to kill is a part of deterrence techniques!" Mutsuko declared. "What's the point in just hurting them a little? Well, anyway! Just talking won't get us anywhere, so let's move to the demonstration! Okay, grab your big sister's left wrist and give me your best sweaty panting!"

"I'm not gonna pant!" Yuichi reached out with his right hand and grabbed Mutsuko's left wrist.

"There're a lot of things you can do if you're grabbed, but let's go with the most orthodox one! This is sort of like the yorinuki technique of Shaolin

Kempo!” Mutsuko opened her left hand, and without moving her wrist, dropped her elbow and pushed forward. That slightest of motions was enough to free her. She then used her freed right hand to strike Yuichi in the face.

As it hit him, Mutsuko stepped forward, spread her feet, dropped her hips, and plunged her elbow into his solar plexus.

“You said it was yorinuki! Where’d the elbow strike come from?!” Yuichi said angrily, after the elbow landed.

“This is the yorinuki dingzhou! It’s a combination of Shaolin Kempo and Bajiquan!” she declared.

“Don’t just cram stuff together like that!”

“Aww, but I feel like, ‘I’m right in position! I’ve gotta go for the elbow!’ That’s how well they work together!” Mutsuko seemed very confident about the combination, but it didn’t seem suitable for a self-defense technique.

Just getting your hand away was good enough; a proper dingzhou elbow strike would require a lot more training.

“Um... but Sakaki doesn’t seem too affected. Does that move really work?” Aiko asked dubiously.

It was true that an attack for self-defense wasn’t any good if it couldn’t cause the enemy to flinch.

“Well... Sis’s attacks aren’t that tough,” said Yuichi. It was easy for him to endure an attack he knew was coming.

“Yes, you looked surprised, but you could have dodged that, couldn’t you?” Natsuki asked, speaking as someone well experienced with Yuichi dodging her attacks. She clearly found it strange that he would let Mutsuko’s pitiful-by-comparison attack hit him.

“Uh, yeah, I could’ve dodged, I guess...” Yuichi trailed off. Mutsuko’s martial arts skills were considerable compared to your average girl in high school, but they were nowhere near Yuichi’s.

The reason Yuichi had let her attack land had to do with a certain compulsion in his mind, which told him that if he opposed his big sister, it would spell

trouble later. Even so, he was hesitant to admit that in front of a bunch of girls.

“Now, let’s see what happens if you’re grabbed from behind!” Mutsuko announced. “Noro, want to come up and try?”

“Me?!” Despite her surprise at being named out of the blue, Aiko walked up to the whiteboard obediently.

“Okay, Yu! Grab Noro from behind!”

“Um, are you sure? Maybe you’d better do this, Sis.” Yuichi was hesitant. Even if it was just practice, it would still feel a bit awkward to grab Aiko from behind.

“I-I’ll be fine! Don’t worry!” Aiko said, flustered.

Yuichi timidly approached Aiko from behind, and wrapped his arms around her. He kept just enough distance so that they were only just barely touching. After all, given the difference in their heights, the most natural way for Yuichi to grab her would be her upper chest. That would be really awkward.

“Hold her tighter! And do some sweaty panting!” Mutsuko ordered.

“No way! And what’s with the panting obsession, Sis?!” Yuichi dropped his hips and wrapped his arms around her waist. He didn’t have to be breathing heavily to feel Aiko’s sweet aroma tickling his nose. It was making Yuichi even more tense.

“Both of your arms are locked down in this position, but put simply, the areas you can move are your head, your legs, and your hips,” said Mutsuko. “If you’re close to the groper in height, you can try to break his nose with the back of your head! But in this case, you probably can’t reach. So Noro, drop your hips and spread your legs.”

“Like this?” Aiko did as she was told.

“It can be surprisingly easy to get away if you just go limp and sag, but let’s assume your opponent bears your weight,” said Mutsuko. “You’ll end up slouching forward. See, you might think you can’t move if you’re grabbed, but you can do more than you’d expect. Now, grab Yuichi’s leg from between both of yours. Once you have it, pull forward as much as you can, and when his leg is through... then squat down and break his knee!”

“Okay!” said Aiko.

“Don’t you dare! You too, Sis! This is crazy!” he complained as he restrained Aiko from following Mutsuko’s orders.

“This is one way to make up the man-woman strength differential! Use your weight! Of course, this is only one situation,” Mutsuko added. “You never know how they might grab you, so it’s important to judge your opponent’s posture to find out what you can move and in what directions!”

“So, would this work on Sakaki?” Natsuki asked coldly.

“W-Well... I guess it wouldn’t work,” Mutsuko said awkwardly. “Ah, but you can kick your heel into his crotch! There’s no way to train the... balls...” But Mutsuko trailed off even as she spoke. She was probably remembering that that wouldn’t work on Yuichi, either. “Umm, s-so what about this, then? Yu, this time, try to clamp a hand around Noro’s mouth from behind!”

As she said that, he cast a glance at Aiko. She nodded, so Yuichi did as he was told.

He wrapped his right arm around her waist, and clamped his left hand over her mouth. It really did feel incredibly awkward.

“This one’s much simpler, because your hands are free!” Mutsuko declared. “Noro, try grabbing one of the fingers on the hand covering your mouth, and breaking it!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Hey, Noro, don’t just do whatever she says!” Yuichi shot back.

“H-Huh?! I can’t move it!” Aiko grabbed Yuichi’s index finger with both hands and applied pressure. Even if she wasn’t really trying to break it, it was still probably all the power she could muster. It just wasn’t enough to break a finger that Yuichi could do a handstand on.

“Um, what I’ve observed is that there aren’t any techniques that will work against Yuichi...” Kanako said, in a statement that shook the very foundations of self-defense.

“Which means that if Sakaki ever attacked a girl, she would be completely at

his mercy?” Natsuki continued, delivering its finishing blow.

“Oh, how can this be? I’ve created a monster!” Mutsuko cried.

“You’re only realizing that now, Sis?!” Yuichi shouted.

The self-defense class came to its end with the entire club feeling dispirited.

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“Personally, Lady Aiko, I feel you require no self defense,” Nero said as he walked at her feet, in dog form.

They were in the forest on Aiko’s family property, walking the long road from the gate to her mansion.

“I guess not,” she said. “I just thought it would be cool if it worked.”

“They say that ‘a little learning is a dangerous thing.’ And you have me to protect you, Lady Aiko.”

“You know a lot about our local sayings...” Aiko had thought Nero came from another country. But if he spoke their language fluently, maybe it was natural that he would know the proverbs, too.

After walking for a while, Aiko caught sight of some commotion going down in front of the mansion. There were a large number of people there, coming and going. Aiko walked in the front door cautiously, finding it all very suspicious.

“Welcome home, my lady.” The maid, Akiko, bowed reverently as she arrived.

“Akiko, what’s going on?” Aiko asked.

“Well... the mistress decided abruptly to throw out all the trash lying around...” Even the usually level-headed Akiko seemed a bit out of sorts.

Aiko looked at the people coming and going. They were dressed in work clothes, and looked more or less like sanitation workers.

“Did we have that much trash here?” she asked.

“Well, ah... your mother seems to be considering anything she bought and left lying around to be trash.”

Aiko’s mother, Mariko was a shut-in who did nothing all day but watch TV in

her room. Home shopping programs were a particular favorite of hers, and anything she saw that she liked, she immediately bought.

Those were the things Akiko was referring to. She had more health and beauty items gathering dust than Aiko could count. But while Aiko certainly thought they were useless, Mariko had always been stubborn about keeping them. It was a tremendous surprise to see her mother suddenly decide to throw them out.

“Hmm, I think I’ll go talk to her.” Aiko climbed to the second floor, but instead of going to her own room, she headed to her mother’s.

She opened the door without knocking and peeked inside.

She was surprised.

The windowless room, for once, was brightly illuminated. That allowed her to ascertain, immediately, that the room was almost completely empty. Even her mother’s beloved TV was missing.

Standing at the center was Mariko, in a track suit, looking around the room with a satisfied smile.

Mariko Noro was a pure vampire. Because of that, she couldn’t be out in the sun, so she spent the daylight hours locked up in her room. That might be why her skin had always looked so unhealthily pale, but today, she seemed very energetic.

“Mom! What on earth is going on?” Aiko exclaimed.

“Oh, Aiko! I’m decluttering! Decluttering! I’m bidding goodbye to my attachment to simple possessions! I never realized how good it would feel to throw everything out and tidy up!”

“Um... well, I guess that’s okay... I mean, since it’s your own stuff you’re throwing out...” It still seemed a bit excessive, but when Aiko thought back to the cluttered state the room had been in before, she thought maybe it was fine, after all.

“Huh?” Mariko looked at Aiko in confusion.

“Uh?” Aiko tilted her head. She had a bad feeling about this.

“Um... well, I ran out of things to throw away, so I thought I might throw out things *you* didn’t seem to need anymore, either...” her mother said.

“Mom! Don’t do stuff like that without asking me!” Aiko flew out of her mother’s room, and ran to her own in a panic.

It was safe.

Now that she thought about it, it was locked, so it wouldn’t have been possible for her mother to just barge in and start throwing things away.

Next, Aiko hurried to the basement. That was usually where the family put things they weren’t using. Aiko’s possessions were among them.

She normally found the basement creepy and tried to avoid it, but this was no time for such reticence. She arrived at the basement door just as the cleaning men were about to move in.

“Um, excuse me. Please let me through,” she said as she went deeper in.

Once she arrived, she found herself surrounded by her old toys and dolls from childhood.

“Um, we were told to throw out everything in the storage room here. Is that not all right?” the worker man asked.

“Huh? Was this all that was in there?” Aiko had come down in a flurry, but now that she had arrived, what she found there didn’t seem to be anything much. It was just the toys she and her brother had played with, long ago.

Hm, well, I guess I don’t really need them anymore... Aiko thought, as she glanced around at all the weathered old toys. She’d never given these a second thought since they’d been placed here, and she probably never would again. Maybe there really was no point in just keeping them around.

“Okay, you can take them away,” she said at last. If it would make her mother feel better, it was a small price to pay.

Aiko started to turn back, but stopped. She had a feeling that someone was watching her.

But that can’t be the case... she thought.

The basement was full of boxes, with lots of dark places where the light didn't reach. But she could see just at a glance that there was no one around. There was nothing there but toys she never played with anymore.

Soon after that, Aiko began receiving phone calls.

At first she thought it was a prank, but they just wouldn't stop. Even when she blocked the number, they continued, as if mocking her. It was clear they were no ordinary phone calls.

It got bad enough that she couldn't even get a full night's sleep. The calls would continue all through the night.

It was just like that old ghost story. The place they were calling from kept getting closer and closer. It wouldn't be long now until they reached Aiko's house.

"Hmm... and you say this Dannoura person abruptly began seeing numbers over people's heads?" Makina asked.

"Yeah," said Yuichi. "She said it started during summer vacation, but she didn't get them from anyone. You really think it has nothing to do with Outers?"

They were in the student guidance room. Makina and Yuichi were talking, and Aiko was listening, half asleep.

It seemed the one who had sent him the love letter recently was Chiharu Dannoura. Chiharu also had special eyes, like Yuichi's, that let her see things most people couldn't. Yuichi had come to ask Makina if it had anything to do with the Evil God War.

"If there was no contact — assuming Dannoura isn't lying — then it's probably not connected to Outers," said Makina. "Outers are dramatic. We like our flashy appearances. If an Outer bestowed a Divine Vessel on someone, they'd do it in a way that would leave an impression."

"So it's not a Divine Vessel?" Yuichi asked.

"Well, there's nothing inherent connecting Divine Vessels and Outers," she

said. “Divine Vessels choose their hosts randomly, or at least, that’s how it was originally. So there’s a chance that Dannoura is a carrier.”

“If she is a carrier, could she detect the resonance?” Yuichi asked.

“Yes. So you may want to enlist her aid, if you can.”

The conversation seemed to be drifting further and further away from Aiko. The next thing Aiko knew, she was slumped against Yuichi. She must have fallen asleep.

“Hey, what’s wrong, Noro?” Yuichi was looking at her in concern. “Are you okay?”

“Ah? Um, sorry. I just...” Aiko’s words were groggy. She wondered if it would be appropriate to tell him that she was worried about something as trivial as crank phone calls. Besides, they *were* only phone calls. It wasn’t as if Yuichi could do anything to stop them.

“Have you been having trouble sleeping lately?” Yuichi asked. “I wasn’t sure if I should say something, but if there’s something bothering you, you can let me know, okay?”

“No, it’s really nothing...”

“You’re lying,” Makina shot back. “I may not be Sakaki, but I can identify a lie or two. There’s something deeply bothering you, isn’t there?”

“Well...” Aiko hesitated.

“Just tell us. Whatever it is, I’m sure my sister can handle it,” Yuichi said, partly joking.

That did make Aiko feel better.

She decided to confide in them.

Half mumbling, Aiko began do describe the strange thing that was happening to her.

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An urban legend: the Mika Doll Phone Call.

Perhaps it would be fastest to start with the Mary Doll Phone Call, since the

Mika doll was just one variation on that.

One day, a girl who had thrown away her doll began receiving phone calls.

“I’m Mary, and I’m in the junkyard.”

Then, the next day:

“I’m Mary, and I’m in the park on the corner.”

Over the course of a few days, the calls would start to get closer and closer. Eventually...

“I’m Mary, and I’m right behind you.”

And then she appeared behind her. It was that kind of ghost story.

The Mika Doll Phone Call was more or less the same thing, except the doll was Mika, instead of Mary.

The main difference was that the Mika doll had an official voice chosen by the manufacturers, so you immediately knew that Mika was the one making the calls.

In other words, unbelievable as it might seem, it was obvious from the start that you were being called by a doll.

In the old days, people used to believe that dolls had souls. Even now, doll funerals were a regular occurrence.

For the Japanese, it was a ghost story that hit close to home.

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It was another siblings-only family conference.

It was just around 8:00 PM. Mutsuko and Yoriko sat around the table in Yuichi’s room.

The girl who had been sent flying was there, too, with an annoyed scowl on her face.

Mika’s official backstory was that she was in fourth grade. The girl did look to be about that age, and besides that, she looked exactly like Mika.

“Yu, even if she is an urban legend, she’s still a little girl, you know,” said

Mutsuko. “Maybe you should have held back a little more?”

“I did hold back... but I had to make contact, so...” Yuichi had sensed something amiss, so despite not looking back, he had still restrained his power.

Yuichi could grasp a person’s sex and age more or less by touch, another fact which Natsuki would probably label “creepy” if she heard about it.

“How was that holding back?!” Mika, the one who’d taken the hit, objected angrily.

“You managed to get off with just a few bruises, right?” Yuichi asked.

“Oh, I guess that’s true! You’re lucky,” Mutsuko said. “If Yu had been serious, you might have lost your eyes, your nose, and your ears!”

“I get to lose most of my five senses just for standing behind a person?! Look at my face! It’s really swelled up!” Mika pointed to her cheek as she leaned forward, her tone almost boasting.

“You brought it on yourself, didn’t you?” Yoriko replied frostily.

Yori can be pretty cold from time to time... Yuichi thought. He was starting to get a little worried about her.

“Anyway, isn’t she a pretty dangerous yokai?” Yuichi asked. “They keep calling you and coming closer, and in the end, they attack you, right?” The ability to appear behind someone certainly felt like an ideal assassin’s power.

“W-Wait a minute! I’m not dangerous!” the girl cried. “I was just playing the role to scare her a little bit! Come on, don’t you know how the story ends?!”

“How it ends? Actually, yeah, what does happen after Mika arrives?” Yuichi knew the story, more or less, but was pretty vague on the ending.

“Good question,” said Mutsuko. “There are a lot of variations, but generally, the story ends right after she appears behind the person. The rest is left up to your imagination, to play upon your own fears.” Mutsuko was quite well-educated on urban legends, ghost stories, and other tales of mystery.

“R-Right! It’s just to scare them!” the girl cried. “I wasn’t planning on hurting anyone! It’s just a warning against throwing your dolls in the trash!”

“You say, ‘It’s just to scare them!’ but you’re still breaking and entering, so...” Yuichi said. Explaining the law to a yokai might be a little pointless, but breaking into someone’s house just to offer a warning felt extremely unacceptable.

“That reminds me, Yu,” said Mutsuko. “Why did Mika come after you?”



“Oh, I was holding Noro’s smartphone.” Yuichi said, showing the smartphone in his hand. “She said she’d been receiving strange phone calls and it was freaking her out, so I decided to help her.”

“So you were answering the calls in her place. But what if she had still come to Noro, and not you? It’s not like you to leave her all alone!”

“Well, uh, actually...” Yuichi said.

“G-Good evening...” The closet opened, and Aiko peeked out, looking rather awkward about it all.

“Oh! Noro, you’re so compact and cute! I can’t believe you were in the closet!” Mutsuko cried.

“So, that’s that,” Yuichi said. He’d had Aiko wait in the closet, under the assumption that she couldn’t be attacked from behind in there.

“Good show, Yu! Sneaking Noro into your room without us knowing!” Mutsuko approved.

“I’m impressed you got that past me while I was in the living room, Big Brother,” said Yoriko.

Embarrassed, Aiko walked from the closet to take a seat at the table.

“But you really should have consulted with me!” Mutsuko added. She looked unhappy, but also faintly amused.

“I like to avoid relying on you when I can,” said Yuichi. “Besides, I thought it was just a crank call. Of course, I wanted to be safe, too, just in case.”

Yuichi was getting fairly used to strange phenomena like these, which was why he hadn’t just dismissed the phone calls as a prank offhand. But even though he didn’t want to rely on her, he had brought the phone into their house just in case he might have to.

“Which means that Noro is the reason Mika came out,” Mutsuko mused.

“That’s right,” said Yoriko. “These things always start when someone throws out a doll.”

It was exactly that, Yuichi thought. Noro’s own expression suggested that that

was true.

“Yes! It’s outrageous to just throw a doll in the trash! That’s why people like me punish people like her!” Mika banged a fist on the table as she spoke.

“I think it’s okay to put dolls you don’t want anymore in the combustibles, personally,” said Yuichi. There was nothing wrong with throwing out toys that were broken or unwanted, as far as he could see. Yuichi couldn’t understand why dolls deserved special treatment.

“I see,” said Mutsuko. From what you’re saying, it’s less like the urban legend and more like a ghost of wastefulness. A type of tsukumo-gami, perhaps?”

Tsukumo-gami were a class of yokai: objects that took on spirits as they aged.

“But why does this only happen with Noro’s dolls? It surely can’t happen to everyone who’s ever thrown out a doll...” Mutsuko tilted her head.

“Maybe because I’m a vampire?” Aiko asked. She didn’t seem to have any other ideas, but it was hard to imagine that your doll would take on a spirit just because you were a vampire.

It seemed much more likely that Yuichi was the cause. Worlds were getting mixed together because of Soul Reader, and it was causing more and more strange things to start happening in his vicinity.

“You know, too much is too much!” Mika declared. “Your house threw out so many dolls, of course they’re going to start haunting you! It’s a lesson, you know? You’re rich, so I thought if I threatened you, you might hold a big funeral! Why didn’t you hold a doll funeral? Then we could have struck a deal!”

Mika got up in Aiko’s face as she spoke. She did seem to have a fourth grader’s mentality.

“Aren’t those doll funeral things kind of a pain to deal with?” Yuichi asked. He wondered if there was even a temple nearby that would take them in. It seemed like an awful lot of effort to find a temple that would hold a doll funeral and then pay for it.

“Doesn’t throwing away a doll you played with as a child make you feel even *slightly* guilty?” Mika thrust a finger at Aiko.

“Actually, I never played with Mika very much, so I don’t have many memories of her... I was more of a Sylvanian Families person...”

“Wh-What did you say?!” Mika’s eyes burst open.

“Oh yeah, you’ve got the Sylvanian Families displayed in your room,” said Yuichi.

“What?! This is doll discrimination! What do you like so much about rabbit-people holding a kappa prisoner?!” cried Mika.

“Ah! Those ones weren’t for sale,” said Aiko. “I did want them, though.”

It seemed there had been a line of kappa in the Sylvanian Families. Yuichi remembered her describing it to him once, very happily.

“But if you don’t even remember being played with, why would you take on a spirit?” Yuichi asked. If that was the case, it seemed to Yuichi that this had nothing to do with Aiko.

“Besides, it was my mother’s idea to throw out the dolls,” said Aiko. “I don’t see why I’m getting blamed for it. Why didn’t you go after my mother?”

“Everyone always blames the mother! It’s ridiculous! It’s still the child who played with the doll!” Mika cried.

“It was my brother who played mama to Mika, so why didn’t you go to him?” Aiko asked, rather cruelly. Kyoya probably wouldn’t want to have his doll-playing past revealed in a place like this, nor to have an urban legend yokai sicced on him.

“I wonder if she’s not the real Mika doll,” Yuichi commented. She did seem Mika-like, but she was a real little girl. She wasn’t a doll at all.

“Right,” the girl said. “I’m more like the guardian of Mika dolls. Their avatar? I’m the representative of all the poor sad Mika dolls who got thrown away!”

“So where’s the actual Mika doll that Noro threw away?” Yuichi asked.

“It’s being burned up somewhere, obviously!”

“Um, if you’re the guardian of Mika dolls, shouldn’t you be saving that one first?” In this situation, Yuichi thought, most people would want to save the

person on fire before anything else.

“Wh-Whatever! Just stop being so careless with your dolls! Now, I’m busy with my doll preservation awareness program, so I’ll be going now!” With that, Mika disappeared, just as abruptly as when she had first arrived.

“Is it... resolved, then?” Aiko asked uncertainly.

“I have no idea...” Yuichi said.

He seemed to be dealing with a lot more yokai lately. The idea that this might keep happening was a wearying thought.

“I’m Mary, and I’m right behind you!”

“I’m Jessie, and I’m right behind you!”

“Ruff, ruff! I’m Yoshiko, and I’m right behind you!”

“I. Am. Robot. R1845A952. Standard. Time. 215678. Sixty-eight. Centimeters. Behind. Your. Present. Coordinates!”

“I’m Sgt. Drake! Right behind you, soldier!”

Holding the smartphone in one hand, Yuichi kicked back at each new arrival. He had grown very accustomed to it by now. He felt like he’d been doing nothing else these last few days.

And today, once more, Yuichi’s room was filling up with personifications of arriving dolls.

“Hey, Noro?” he asked. “Tell your mother to stop throwing away dolls. This is starting to feel less like a ghost story, and more like *Toy Story*.”

Aiko sat on the bottom bunk — Yuichi’s bed — watching. “I know. I’m really sorry... Mom’s gotten really into decluttering lately, and we’ve got dolls lying around all over the place...”

Upon hearing the commotion, Mutsuko came to Yuichi’s room. “Yu... did you bring Noro here for more personal time together?”

“It’s not personal time! And Yori’s here, too!” he shouted.

Yoriko, having grown accustomed to the commotion of the past few days, was

sleeping soundly in the top bunk. She was surprisingly tough.

“Oh! Well, if Yori weren’t here, you’d probably be doing it, right?” Mutsuko asked.

“Doing what? And of course not!” he shot back.

Just as he was saying that, the smartphone rang again.

“I’m Booh! I love honey in my tummy!”

Yuichi kicked the yellow bear across the room with an air of annoyance. “Can’t these things come here without calling first?!”

“Monsters like them are governed by rules,” said Mutsuko. “They have to follow them!”

“Sakaki, I’m really sorry,” said Aiko. “I didn’t know it would turn out like this...”

“It’s not your fault, Noro,” he said. “But how many of these things did you throw out?!”

“Um... about two trucks’ worth...” Aiko said apologetically.

“And it was all toys?! Rich people, I swear!” Yuichi was honestly kind of impressed.

In the end, he smacked down every one of the thrown away dolls, stuffed animals, and robots that haunted him, strong-arming the situation to a resolution.

Chapter 6: First Week of November: Yori's So Popular

Yoriko Sakaki was known as the younger of the Beautiful Sakaki Sisters.

It was hard to say which of the two was more beautiful, but the younger sister, Yoriko, was definitely the more popular with men. She held that position, in effect, by default, since the elder sister was not popular at all.

That wasn't to say that there weren't quite a few men who had showed an interest in the older sister's beauty, but that interest lasted only until they learned about her personality. Now that Mutsuko's eccentricities were known to the world at large, men left her alone completely.

All that aside, though, Yoriko really was popular, and she was often propositioned by older men.

Younger men mostly stayed away; only a few in her current year (second year in middle school) ever approached her, and a few more in third year, but they were a small percentage of the total.

The vast majority of the men who approached her were high schoolers. She had been approached by college students, too, but it was hard to tell how serious those were.

As the fact that she was often approached by boys in high school might suggest, Yoriko's beauty was quite well known around the city. She never ran with high school social groups, yet they would still come to ask her out just based on having caught a glimpse of her, or having seen a picture of her.

In other words, they either didn't care about her personality, or they just imagined a personality for her based on what they saw.

Yoriko saw this as something to be expected. She was aware that she was beautiful, and it wasn't all natural beauty. She worked hard every day to enhance that beauty, and even earnestly studied fashion to bring it out even further. If she wasn't beautiful enough to charm men by the dozens, there was

no way she could get the man she wanted.

But even knowing this was inevitable, Yoriko still found it a dreadful nuisance. She saw the process of turning down all these men as nothing but work. No matter who it was, there was never any need to think it over.

She didn't bother evaluating their looks, feeling out their personalities, considering their compatibility, or testing the strength of their feelings. She just dealt with each in a completely mechanical manner. None of them even stood a chance.

So when she dumped the most recent hopeful, she was really just dealing with things the way she always did.

It happened at a modern-style cafe near the station. Two female middle school students, dressed in sailor-style uniforms, sat at a table by the window.

The long-haired girl sitting by the window was Yoriko Sakaki. The short-haired girl sitting by the aisle was Karen Hanagasumi. They were both in their second year of middle school. They were in the same class, and they were best friends.

"That boy you turned down recently. I hear he started dating Otori from Class Two, and got dumped after three days," said Karen.

Yoriko wasn't really listening to her best friend. She was gazing absentmindedly out the window, thinking about how she'd like to get home soon to see her big brother, Yuichi. Still, even that frivolous behavior would just make her look like a melancholy beauty to anyone around her.

Karen was quite attractive herself, but she paled before Yoriko. Naturally, anyone who would get jealous about every little thing like that would never be able to stand Yoriko's presence, so Karen was more the type to see their friendship as something to boast about.

"They say Otori is rich, but she keeps dating guys and dumping them," commented Karen. "It's kinda fishy, huh? You wouldn't think a rich girl could get away with that, would you?"

At last, Karen's words permeated Yoriko's distant thoughts. Her friend was talking about a third-year boy that she had blown off, but there was something

slightly off in what she had said.

The girl in question had actually dumped one man after a day, and another after two days.

“I hear that she’ll give a chance to any man as long as he’s good-looking,” said Yoriko. “Then she’ll always dump him, saying something like, ‘Sorry, it’s just not working.’”

“Huh? You knew?” Her friend looked surprised. “You know a lot about Otori, by the way...”

“She’s the one who tells me...”

Akane Otori had transferred to their school recently, and in the blink of an eye, she had seized leadership of Class Two. Yoriko knew these things because Otori herself had told her personally; the girl had apparently decided to forge a rivalry with her for some reason.

I don’t care if men like me or not, personally... Yoriko thought. But apparently that was what Otori was concerned about. She didn’t like the fact that the men always went after Yoriko first. And the fact that she came all the way to tell her about such things suggested an extremely brazen attitude.

“Like a leadership conference?” Karen asked. “That’s the queen for you!”

“Please stop calling me that,” Yoriko said wearily.

The hierarchy that her class in elementary school had only been vaguely aware of had become quite clear by the time they were in middle school. No one specifically said it out loud, but there was a tacit understanding about who was on what level, and what level you fit in yourself.

Yoriko hadn’t intended it at all, but at some point, she had ended up venerated as the head of the class. Everyone seemed to acknowledge that, and Yoriko had decided she wouldn’t argue, as long as it kept the class at peace.

“So, why come to me for romantic advice, anyway?” Yoriko added. “I really don’t think I can be any help.”

Apparently a friend of Karen’s wanted to ask Yoriko for some advice. That’s why they were going to meet up at the cafe on the way home.

Yoriko had blown off any number of guys, but that was always when the men came after her. She didn't know much about romance, and she wasn't especially good at managing it. If this person wanted to know how to get a guy she liked to notice her, well, that was something Yoriko wanted to learn herself.

"I'm sorry, they were just so insistent on it..."

Karen seemed so apologetic, Yoriko couldn't really fault her. Besides, it was a favor for a friend, so she'd decided she might as well play along. Once this friend told her the situation, it was entirely possible that she might be able to offer some advice. And if she didn't know what to do, she could just say that.

"Well, that's fine." Yoriko checked her wristwatch. It was just the time they'd scheduled.

"Karen, sorry I'm late!"

Yoriko looked up to see two men in blazer uniforms standing beside the table they were sitting at.

In confusion, she looked over to Karen, but the girl was just smiling brightly, waving to the two men. Before Yoriko could sort out her confusion, the two men sat down across from them.

"Karen? What's going on?" Yoriko found her gaze turning into a glare. This hadn't been what she was told.

"Huh? He needs romantic advice, like I told you," said Karen. "Oh, the one on the right is Takuma. He's my boyfriend. The one on the left is Subaru, the guy who wants advice."

Yoriko didn't recognize the uniform, but he seemed to be a high school student. Takuma was attractive enough, but seemed like a rather frivolous sort. Subaru's uniform was rumpled, and he had a slovenly air about him. He was blessed with an attractive face, but his dyed brown hair lent him a rather wild air.

"As a middle school student, I doubt I am capable of giving romantic advice to someone in high school. May I go now?" Yoriko said quickly, realizing she had fallen into a trap. She wanted to believe that Karen hadn't done this maliciously. It was likely the high school boy in front of her who had come up

with the plan, then manipulated Karen to get what he wanted.

“Wait a minute,” the high school boy protested. “The thing I want advice about, only you can help me with.”

Subaru’s attitude was completely inappropriate for someone he had just met. Yoriko made up her mind: this was an enemy.

“I want you to date me,” the guy added.

Yoriko had to deal with these from time to time. Punks like this thought that if they could come on strong, that would be enough. They thought they could get anything they wanted as long as they took the initiative.

Yoriko stood up. “I’m sorry; I will not date you. I will not change my mind on the matter later, either.”

Yoriko made herself clear in the way she always did. She sometimes changed how she said it based on what the person was like, but she had to leave no room for argument when she turned someone down someone.

“Karen, move. I’m leaving.”

Karen quickly stood up.

Yoriko knew she was perhaps being a bit too harsh, but she really was angry, and she couldn’t hide that. She picked up her bag and tried to leave the table.

But as she passed by, Subaru grabbed her right hand. “Wait!”

Yoriko felt a shot of annoyance. Why did he have to prolong their embarrassment? Why couldn’t he just let her go?

Yoriko turned back and lightly twisted her wrist. That alone was enough to free her hand, but she wasn’t satisfied with just that. She then grabbed his own wrist and pulled him downwards. Surprised by her power, perhaps, Subaru pitched forward into the aisle.

Then Yoriko thrust her knee right in Subaru’s face. Subaru tumbled into the aisle, bleeding spectacularly from his nose.

Yoriko walked leisurely through the ensuing commotion.

She knew she had gone too far. There would have been many more peaceful

ways to settle things.

And sure enough, the incident that was about to unfold would be caused entirely by Yoriko's short temper.

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"And that's what happened!" Yoriko exclaimed. "Isn't Karen awful?"

"Huh? Wait a minute. What happened to that Subaru guy?" Yuichi asked.

Yoriko was trying to paint herself as the victim in the story, but Yuichi had his doubts. This Subaru guy had clearly acted like a jerk, but she hadn't had to go that hard on him.

"Who cares! It's his own fault for just grabbing my arm like that!" Yoriko snapped.

Mutsuko, Yoriko, and Yuichi were seated around the dinner table at the Sakaki home. Their mother was nearby, too.

Their mother's name was Tamako Sakaki. The label above her head read "Mom." For now, as far as Yuichi could tell, his family's labels didn't mean anything but what they said. His father's label was "Dad," as well.

They were having yakiniku for dinner that night, so there was a large pile of meat on a plate.

"Oh dear, that sounds terrible." Their mother listened to the story with a shocking lack of concern, considering the scene being described, as she tirelessly stacked meat onto the hot plate.

"But Yori, you can't inflict violence on people in broad daylight! You need to do it like Yu does, secretly, where no one can ever see!" Mutsuko announced as she gobbled down a strip of meat.

"Don't say 'like I do'!" Yuichi protested. "Still, Sis is right. The person you beat up has their pride, too, you know? Some guys might never be able to show their face in public after getting beaten up by a middle schooler in front of so many people."

Yuichi wasn't really worried about that, though. If you lost your head over something a middle schooler did, you'd usually just end up looking worse. He

was pretty sure this Subaru guy wasn't that stupid.

"But what's up with middle schoolers these days?" he added. "This Karen friend of yours really has a boyfriend in high school?"

"Seems like it," Yoriko said as she ate her meat. "I only just heard about him today. But there are quite a few girls like her."

"Wow... middle schoolers these days are really something," Yuichi said.

Middle schoolers are still kids, Yuichi added silently as he dipped his meat in sauce.

The children of the Sakaki family ate a lot. Despite that, they never seemed to put on weight, probably because they all had active hobbies. Yoriko didn't get extreme combat training like Yuichi did, but she still received some martial arts lessons.

"But were things awkward for that Karen girl afterwards?" he added. Her boyfriend's friend had gotten laid out, after all. Yuichi would be at a loss after something like that.

"Well, the boyfriend didn't really seem like the loyal type," said Yoriko. "They'll probably break up in no time anyway. I'm sure it'll be fine."

As a romance traditionalist, Yuichi found himself rather shocked by this behavior. "You date people and break up with them just like that?"

"But, Big Brother! What if he doesn't really back off? What if comes after me again?" Yoriko asked suddenly, as if she'd just come up with a brilliant idea.

"I guess he could."

"Yeah! And I'm scared! Could you walk me to school for a while?"

"Huh? Why should I?"

"What if he comes after me for revenge?!"

"Well... you beat him once before. Couldn't you do it again?" Yuichi couldn't see why anything more would be necessary. As far as he'd heard, the boy Subaru was quarrelsome, but not much else. Yoriko was probably strong enough to take care of him, especially if she had her L-wrench for protection.

“What if he brings a group? I can’t fight a group!” Yoriko protested.

“A group? Would they really send a group against one middle school girl?” Yuichi asked skeptically.

Even so, when she put it that way, he did worry. Yuichi hadn’t seen the guy, so he didn’t know how persistent he might be.

“Yu, you have my permission to skip club! Just stick with Yori for a while!” Mutsuko broke in, reflecting Yoriko’s insistence.

Yuichi still felt like Yoriko had brought this on herself, but he couldn’t help but be soft when it came to his little sister. He’d be walking Yoriko home from school for a while.

When Yuichi walked up to the gate of her middle school, he found Yoriko standing there, looking dissatisfied.

He thought maybe something had happened at school, but her sour expression hadn’t appeared until Yuichi showed up. That meant he was the one she was mad at.

Standing next to Yoriko was a short girl with short hair — her friend Karen, most likely. He’d been worried things might have gotten awkward between them, but apparently they hadn’t. The girl’s label was “Middle School Student,” so she seemed innocent enough.

“Yori, you asked me to come,” he said. “What’s with the sulking?”

“Yes! That’s right! I thought this might happen!” Yoriko burst out, glaring.

The focus of Yoriko’s glare was Aiko, who was standing beside Yuichi. He’d told her about what happened to Yoriko at school, and she’d ended up coming along.

“Ah... um, I thought having more people around might be a better deterrent against the weirdos,” Aiko said, wincing at Yoriko’s glare.

“I don’t need more people! I just need my brother! *You’ll* just trip us up! I know you, Noro, and you’ll just get taken hostage!” Yoriko shouted.

“Um, I won’t get taken hostage...” Aiko said, flustered.

Karen interrupted. “Greetings. Thank you for taking care of Yoriko. I’m Karen Hanagasumi.” She gave them a low bow. She seemed good-natured and polite; certainly more responsible than Yoriko’s description had made her sound.

“Oh, thank you,” Yuichi said. “And I hear you’ve taken care of her for us, as well.”

“Not at all,” said Karen. “She’s the one who takes care of me. Ah, and is this your girlfriend?”

“Karen! Don’t make eyes at him while my back is turned!” Yoriko had been digging into Aiko, but now it was Karen who’d earned her ire.

“What’s the big deal?” Karen asked. “I broke up with Takuma.”

Really, what’s with middle schoolers these days... Yuichi had also worried that Yoriko’s little rampage might cause strain on that relationship, but Karen seemed truly indifferent to it.

“Um, do you want to walk with us too, Karen?” Yuichi asked.

“Yes! We always walk home together.”

And so the four of them walked together.

Despite asking him to escort her home, it was really only a ten-minute walk from the middle school to their home. It was very likely nothing would happen. Yuichi thought they were probably just worrying too much.

“I get it!” Karen said suddenly. “So this is your big brother. I thought you were exaggerating, but he’s pretty hot. He looks a lot like you, too.”

“Karen... do you know what happens to people when I fight them seriously?” Yoriko asked darkly.

“They end up with a bloody nose like Subaru?”

Most of the walk home was through residential neighborhoods. The roads were narrow, making it difficult for even two cars to pass each other. During some times of day, the roads could be flooded with people. But Yuichi couldn’t let his guard down just because it was a residential district.

“Sakaki, I don’t think anything’s going to happen,” Aiko spoke up. “Did you

just want to dote on Yoriko a little?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Yuichi said. “But it looks like he was more persistent than I expected.”

Yuichi had sensed someone following them for a while. He was keeping his focus squared on that presence, and it was clear their group was the target.

I doubt he just wants to have a talk, either... Yuichi was detecting a clear aura of malice that was definitely targeted towards Yoriko.

“Yori. I’m turning left there,” he whispered.

Yuichi got out front and turned down a road. Yoriko and the others followed naturally.

After a while, they arrived on a vacant lot that was for sale.

“Sakaki, what’s going on?” Aiko asked in confusion. Even if there was nobody there, she seemed to feel guilty about the thought of stepping onto someone else’s property without permission. Yoriko’s expression was indifferent, suggesting she had intuited what was going on, while Karen didn’t seem to find anything strange about it.

“Let’s wait for a minute,” Yuichi said. “If he’s just sniffing us out, he might ignore us for today.”

And if he’s even more dangerous, he might already know where our house is, and our usual route to school...

In that case, their stalker might have already realized they had strayed from their path. How would he react, then?

Just as Yuichi was wondering, their pursuer appeared before them.

He wasn’t alone. Another two men came from the direction opposite the one they had arrived from.

The main person tailing them was probably Subaru, the man whom Yoriko had humiliated. He was wearing a blazer uniform, as were the two men with him. The uniforms suggested they were from a local prep school, but all three had “Delinquent” written over their heads. Their uniforms looked fairly rumpled, but not enough that you would assume they were thugs at a glance.

There's something odd about this... Yuichi thought.

If they had had the foresight to tail them and prepare force of numbers, why would they wear uniforms that would make it easy to uncover their identities? Then again, maybe they really hadn't thought it through.

"You're Yuichi Sakaki, right?" one of the men said. "Lucky you, having all these girls around, huh?"

"Huh? Why me? And how do you even know me?" Yuichi asked. He hadn't expected the subject to turn to himself so abruptly. But if they were delinquents, there was a chance they knew him. He just wasn't sure which route they knew him by.

"Huh? You think pretty highly of yourself, huh?" the man demanded. "We don't care about you. We found out about you when we were researching Yoriko."

It was hard to deal with sudden belligerence like this.

Subaru stood at the head of the group, with the other two behind him. By contrast, the girls with Yuichi moved to hide behind him. But of course, all three couldn't hide at once, which resulted in a rather strange image.

"Look, I'm sorry my sister went overboard on you," said Yuichi. "She should apologize for that. But I'm pretty sure she's not gonna go out with you at this point. Besides, she's in middle school. She's still a kid. Why are high school students threatening her? It's bizarre." Yuichi had been solving a lot of problems with violence lately, but he'd still rather talk things out where possible.

"Huh? Why should I apologize?!" Yori exclaimed.

"Quiet down for a few minutes, Yori," Yuichi reprimanded.

"Do you not understand the situation you're in?" Subaru asked smugly.

"What situation?" Yuichi genuinely didn't understand what the man meant. His only opinion about the situation was that they looked pretty foolish.

"We have three guys on our side who know how to fight," said Subaru. "You're all alone."

He didn’t seem to be counting the girls. Maybe he had forgotten what Yoriko had done to him, or he was pretending like it had never happened.

He seemed like he’d be a hard person to deal with; the kind of guy who’d gotten his way for a long time based on being “pretty tough.” The degree to which he underestimated Yuichi suggested he was unlikely to listen to reason.

“Um, listen. Let’s say, hypothetically, that you three beat me up,” Yuichi said. “What would you do then? Kidnap the three girls? This isn’t manga, you know. Doing that in real life causes huge problems. Even if you’re protected by juvenile laws, the world takes a harsh view of that kind of thing nowadays. There’s not going to be a lot of leniency for your crime. You’re in a prep school, right? Don’t you realize it would ruin your lives?”

Yuichi was hoping that reasoning would convince them. But instead, they seemed to interpret it as mockery.

Subaru was furious. He stepped out with his left leg and threw a straight punch at Yuichi’s face with his right fist. This must be what he’d been talking about when he’d said he knew how to fight — that he wasn’t just a newbie flailing around with his arms. But to Yuichi, the motion looked slow as molasses.

Famous martial artists often had anecdotes about times when they’d managed to talk their way around fighting completely. Yuichi’s attempt at talking had angered his opponent and gotten him to lash out, which suggested that he still needed more training. The fact that Yuichi was capable of reflecting on that idea in full was a sign of how slow Subaru’s attack was.

Yuichi batted the hand away, without even bothering to dodge, then struck Subaru’s chin with his extended finger. Though he’d attacked second, his blow landed first, and Subaru dropped like a sack of potatoes.

“Um, look, that was a reflex, okay?” Yuichi said, flustered. “I was honestly trying to talk things out.”

“Sakaki, who are you trying to make excuses to?” Aiko asked. Her voice pulled Yuichi back to earth.

Subaru’s two cronies ran off, leaving their leader a heap on the ground. Yuichi dragged him to a corner of the abandoned lot and left him there.

“Okay!” Yuichi said.

“What’s ‘okay’? After all your big talk about ‘teaching Yori that cyclical violence solves nothing’...” Aiko said, sounding honestly disappointed.

“Your brother really is something...” Karen said, impressed, as if she’d only just realized what had happened.

“That’s my magnificent elder brother! Magni-brother!” Yoriko said, complimenting Yuichi with a term he’d never heard her use before.

But Yuichi suspected that his actions would end up making things even worse than before. He had finished Subaru off too easily. Subaru wouldn’t feel like he had lost. If Yuichi had really wanted to settle things, he should have beaten him badly enough that he would never think of opposing him again.

But while it was easy to bring force against armed yakuza, Yuichi was hesitant to go that far against a mere high school student.

So instead, he’d just have to deal with things as they happened.

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The man was known as “King.”

It was a nickname that could be used for mockery, but in his case, it was a sign of respect. Since there was no ridiculing intent in it, King himself accepted it.

Subaru never thought he’d get to speak to King face to face.

King was a legend.

No one knew his age for sure, but Subaru had heard he was a young man. There were even rumors that he was still in high school. Yet despite his youth, he commanded over a thousand men, and had even gone toe-to-toe with the yakuza. He had his hand in many shady activities, and by investing his accumulated savings, he had built quite a fortune.

That same legend stood in front of Subaru right now. They were in a room in a new, modern building: an office building with all the latest facilities. King was sitting cross-legged on an expensive-looking desk.

As the rumors said, King looked like a young man. He seemed to be about

Subaru's age, and was a bit on the short side, but the aura of violence that hung around him mitigated any difference in their heights.

King was surrounded by men standing at attention. They were all dressed differently: some were in suits, while others were dressed in sleeveless shirts despite the season. The pockets of the suits looked strangely swollen, and any visibly exposed skin was covered in tattoos.

Subaru found himself bowing instinctively. The man in front of him seemed to be a natural-born leader. It was clear just looking at him that he was someone special.

How had things turned out like this?

Even after everything, Subaru hadn't been able to give up on Yoriko Sakaki. But he knew that if he tried to go after the Sakaki siblings without a plan, he'd probably end up the same way as before.

He needed a plan, so he'd decided to talk to one of the older boys he used to hang out with in middle school. Rather than going to high school, this one had joined the criminal underworld.

If given the choice, Subaru would have preferred to sever ties with this man. Subaru's delinquent appearance was merely fashion; it was a handy way to give him mystique at his prep school, but it didn't mean he really wanted to get involved with the criminal underworld.

Nevertheless, Subaru had decided to ask this guy for help. He'd told him all about what had happened, and even shown him a picture of Yoriko.

That picture had made the rounds until apparently, at last, it had reached King. Then, for some reason, King had called Subaru to see him.

Silence hung over the room.

Subaru's body remained locked in its bow as he wondered what he should do. Surely, in a situation like this, it would be inappropriate for him to speak first. His friend had made sure he understood that if he made King unhappy, he'd be dead (literally) on the spot. He had a feeling that was true. He absolutely could not afford to say the wrong thing.

“Subaru Wakei, was it?” King asked. The young man’s voice was higher pitched and reedier than he had imagined. “Well, stand up straight. You’re making it hard to talk to you.”

“Y-Yes, sir!” Subaru snapped back upright.

“The reason I called you here... well, I wanted to go through the proper channels,” said King.

“The... proper channels?” Subaru echoed, not understanding.

“Yoriko Sakaki. I like her. I really like her. I want her, and I’ll have her, but since you’re the one who brought her to my attention, I figured I owed you a thank you.”

Subaru had had a vague idea that this might be the case when he had been called. This absolutely wasn’t what he wanted, but it was out of his hands now. King would do everything in his power to get what he wanted, and there was nothing Subaru could do to stand in his way.

“Of course, words are a pretty poor way of expressing gratitude. Let’s see... how about if you get her fifth? You’ll still get some decent enjoyment out of her then.” King nodded to himself, as if feeling he had offered him a very generous deal.

Subaru couldn’t possibly object, and to be honest, he mainly felt relieved that King wasn’t going to do anything to him. At the same time, a dark, vulgar feeling like joy began to rear its head inside him. A terribly selfish, self-serving thought ran through his mind.

You brought this on yourself, Yoriko Sakaki...

⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂

A white van screeched to a halt, blocking Yuichi’s way.

Yuichi didn’t want to have to punch out every single attacker who came after him, so instead he raced up to the van in an instant and kicked the sliding door in the back.

The door caved inwards, which was enough to keep it from opening. That was the only way in or out of the back seat, which meant the four or five guys there

were trapped inside. They could still try to come out the window, but they'd be slowed down enough that Yuichi could just punch them as they came.

He suspected the driver would stay in the car, in the interest of a quick getaway, so he also hit the passenger side door. That left only the driver's side door capable of opening.

Yuichi waited a few moments, and then the van squealed off, just as he had expected it would.

Yoriko's path to school went through a quiet residential district. Knowing now that their enemies were getting organized, he'd asked Karen and Aiko to take other routes, which left brother and sister alone together.

"Big Brother... I'm sorry," Yoriko said. "I, um... not that I think they'll ever beat you, but I handled the initial confrontation wrong. I regret what I did."

Usually when they were all alone together, Yoriko always seemed to be enjoying herself for some reason, but here, she apologized to him with a genuinely repentant air.

"Well, I handled things badly, too." Yuichi patted her head softly. "Don't worry about it, okay?"

The people who were after Yoriko had been acting in this organized manner for a while now. Yuichi didn't know why this was happening, but he had more or less identified the group he was dealing with. That was the reason he had let the van go. He'd affixed it with a transmitter just in case, but they were likely from the same organization.

It was a nasty gang of delinquents. They were made up primarily of young people, and apparently criminals who were willing to kill had joined their ranks, too.

"I wasn't expecting them to organize to this degree." Yuichi couldn't understand why they would go this far for a single middle school girl.

"But what should we do?" his sister pleaded.

"You don't have to worry, Yori. I can just beat them all if I have to, and Sis is taking moves, too."

“Okay! I won’t worry!” Seeming genuinely not worried at all, Yoriko latched on to Yuichi, returning to her usual attitude.

Even so... what’s going on here? Yuichi wondered.

The people he was dealing with didn’t seem to think twice about resorting to criminal activity. He had managed to work things out so far, but he hadn’t really settled anything. They might still send more.

If they realized they couldn’t do anything to Yuichi, they might start going after the people in his life.

Yuichi was starting to think he’d better take measures of his own, and quickly.

⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂

King hadn’t expected a single girl in middle school to be giving him this much trouble. He’d thought that he could just send a few men after her, shove her into the back of a car, and that would be that.

At first, he had thought his subordinates’ reports were a joke, but he also knew that they were aware of what would happen if they joked around with him. His subordinates had reported that all their attack squads had been defeated. They had all been repelled by the big brother, Yuichi, who was always at Yoriko’s side.

The men he’d sent had had no martial arts experience, of course, but they were accustomed to fighting. They’d have no hesitation to employ violence, and they were sufficiently expert in that. It was unthinkable that they could lose to a single high school student.

Still, it was the truth, and questioning it wouldn’t get him anywhere. So King called on more powerful subordinates.

On the way to school, on the way back, at home...

Even if they were strong, they were just kids. They had to let their guard down at some point. And yet, each time, the attacks were repelled. It made no sense.

Every attack they had mounted on their way to school had failed.

The squad he had sent to attack the Sakaki household had been completely

wiped out en route to their destination.

Success was looking unlikely. He'd had the failed subordinates executed, but even when their successors knew they were fighting for their lives, it didn't change the results.

Like the yakuza, for them, reputation was everything. They couldn't let anyone underestimate them. People knew they'd happily break the law or kill if they had to. That knowledge inspired fear, and that fear was a tool that they could use. The Sakaki siblings weren't afraid, though; to the contrary, they apparently weren't bothered in the slightest.

It was as if they had kicked mud in King's face.

Things had now escalated to the point that there could be no turning back.

King's inability to kidnap one young girl would be seen by the denizens of the underworld as a crack in his iron foundation. He had to get Yoriko Sakaki, no matter what it took. For King, it was now a matter of life or death.

There could be no more half-measures.

It would be the height of idiocy to just keep sending men after them. But because King underestimated the Sakaki siblings, he acted like an idiot.

He had to use everything he had. Small teams weren't getting the job done. It wasn't enough to reassure himself that things would work out.

He had to send out the entire army.

⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂

Seishin City had a large, centralized exercise park that had been designated an evacuation site in case of natural disaster.

When Yuichi and Monika had been attacked by the truck, Yuichi had sent Aiko there to safety. In other words, if one had to consider the most wide open space in Seishin, this park was the first thing that would come to mind.

The largest open space in the park was the running track. It served a dual purpose, with a 400 meter track ringed around two soccer fields. In other words, it was huge.

Despite the late hour, the track was currently lit up and lined with people. There must have been a thousand of them, all of them King's personal henchmen.

It was said that King could mobilize a thousand men with one word, and it seemed the rumors were true. They were all dressed in different outfits, and held a variety of weapons in hand: from wooden swords, metal pipes, bats with nails in them, and other easily improvised weapons to katanas, crossbows, and pistols.

They had all assembled in this park at the same time, with weapons in hand. Unbelievably, their goal was a raid on a residential home owned by the Sakaki family.

Yuichi sat in the spectator seats, watching them. Beside him sat his big sister Mutsuko, and his little sister Yoriko.

It was hard to know what might happen against an enemy force of this size, so he had told Yoriko not to come along, but she had grumbled about it until he'd finally brought her.

The lights in the stands were out, so as long as they remained where they were, they probably wouldn't be seen. He could likely ensure the safety of his sisters.

"I'm impressed they all came out here at this time of day," Yuichi commented.

It was so late at night that it was almost time for sunrise. It was Saturday, so maybe it didn't matter, but if it had been a weekday, it surely would have been impossible.

"Raids have always been a break-of-dawn thing!" Mutsuko declared. "But if he's gonna stop with the little raids and go for the big gathering, you think he's not much of a strategist?"

"Strategist or not, he's really gone too far..." Yuichi wasn't sure what the man thought of him, but a force of this size could easily take over a city. "And how'd they get those spotlights on?" Yuichi wondered, even though it didn't matter.

"Good question," said Mutsuko. "Maybe they took over the control room? There'd probably be security there in the middle of the night, but they probably

just took them out?”

“But why gather a thousand armed men? A civil war? Terrorism?”

Not even the yakuza would muster this many people in one place for a war — nor could they, most likely. Perhaps it was because they were fools not thinking of the consequences that they could do something so drastic.

“But we’re in luck!” Mutsuko declared. “There are so many of them all united in purpose! You don’t usually see enemies raring to go that often!”

“And you’re sure they’ll swarm our house if we just let them go?” The thought of it made Yuichi feel exhausted.

“It really does give you chills... I never thought it would lead to something like this...” Yoriko said in a low voice. She’d never imagined her momentary loss of temper would result in trouble this serious.

“I don’t think anyone could have ever imagined this...” Yuichi muttered.

Mutsuko had deduced in advance that they would gather here like this. He wasn’t sure how she’d done it, but maybe she had sources of some kind.

“Obviously, when a group like this starts marching through the streets, it’s gonna start a little chaos!” Mutsuko declared.

“Just a little? Hey... I don’t suppose we could sic some yokai or monster on them?” Yuichi was starting to think he’d rather resort to drastic measures than deal with all of this himself.

“That would be interesting, but people might also die... Not that I would mind, personally,” Mutsuko said.

Yuichi sighed and scratched his head. “Yeah, I guess...” They might be criminals — and really bad ones, if they would attack someone’s innocent family members — but that didn’t mean they deserved to die. “But I really don’t think they need to send this many people...”

Yuichi didn’t know how well-respected this boss of theirs was, but he couldn’t imagine it would be easy to bring this many people together. He had a feeling that he wouldn’t be able to control them in the end, and they’d probably run wild.

“I bet he doesn’t care what happens in the end,” Yuichi said. “He wants to make it clear what he’s capable of.”

“That’s true,” said Yoriko. “If a crowd this huge came by, you’d know right away, which would make it easier for me to escape.”

“It’s crazy... well, if this is all of them, then I know what you’re going to say, but... any orders?” Yuichi asked.

“Beat down every single one of them!” Mutsuko announced.

“Roger. But after I beat a certain number, won’t they start to run?” That had been Yuichi’s experience; no matter how big a force he was facing, if he defeated about half, their ranks would collapse, and they’d split up and flee.

“Don’t worry about that,” said Mutsuko. “That King guy’s got real leadership qualities. It’s almost in the realm of brainwashing. So they’ll come after you to the last man, all ready to die for their cause. Good luck!”

“Big Brother, do your best for me!” Yoriko cried.

It was hard to tell in the darkness around them, but he was pretty sure the eyes of both girls were sparkling.

“Easy for you guys to say...” Yuichi picked up the staff lying at his feet and stood up. It was a spear made from the wood of the white wax tree, 3.2 meters long in total, and about five centimeters in diameter around the grip. Of course, since he wasn’t trying to kill anyone, it didn’t have a spear tip.

“I’ve gotta say, taking out a thousand people barehanded would be a lot more appealing...” Mutsuko said lamentatively.

“Why should I have to do that?” Yuichi didn’t have any reason to fight to start with. If they reported it to the police, they could get them all rounded up on charges of assembling with dangerous weapons.

The only reason they hadn’t was because of Mutsuko’s philosophy: She had a rule about letting things develop on their own until it became necessary to do otherwise. She probably thought this would be useful for Yuichi’s training. As usual, she was utterly reckless.

“Well, okay. I’ll let you have a weapon this time!” Mutsuko said.

“This time, huh?” Yuichi was hoping he wouldn’t have to face a thousand enemies a second time. But he set aside thoughts of the future and leaped from the seats with the spear in hand.

He then slung it over his shoulder and started heading for the middle of the field.

Part of King’s army must have been handling lookout duties, because a few of them noticed him immediately. But the knowledge of his arrival didn’t immediately carry to all of thousand of them.

“Good evening! I’m Yuichi Sakaki!” Yuichi screamed with a slight air of desperation.

Now the thousand men noticed him, and turned their eyes to him en masse.

For this fight, Mutsuko had given him two conditions. One was to give them his name. He had thought it might end up sounding stupid if he did it in the traditional warrior way she’d intended, so he’d tried just introducing himself like he normally would, but that had just ended up making it sound more stupid.

“I heard you were gonna come to my house, so I came to you instead!” Yuichi shouted. “Bring it, okay?!”

The second condition had been not to be the one to initiate the fight. The ideal strategy would have been to try to shave down their numbers as much as possible before they realized what was going on; even better would have been to search out King and pick him off first. That, however, would not be permitted.

They didn’t move immediately. It seemed they weren’t going to rise to simple provocations. King’s hold over them must be a strong one.

They all had intercoms on their heads. Maybe King was giving them orders through those — indeed, such a system would be necessary in order to unite and control a thousand men at once.

How serious is he about this? Yuichi wondered. *Is he trying to start a war?* If he was giving his orders through such high-tech means, that meant King would know the minute Yuichi arrived.

After a minute, a murmur raced through the thousand men. It lasted only for a second before calm fell on them again.

Kill Yuichi Sakaki... Was that the order that they had been given?

With an angry roar, the thousand men moved into action as one. They charged at him like berserkers, each hoping to be the first in line.

Yuichi remained calm, picking off each man as he got within range of his spear. Aiming for the solar plexus of each charging man, he struck out again and again, disabling one after another.

The spear's range was incredible; the men with pipes and nail-bats were no competition, while those with crossbows and handguns were easy to dodge, since he already knew where they were.

Those who realized they couldn't make progress from the front tried to moved around behind Yuichi, or attack him from the side. Without turning to look, Yuichi swung his spear behind him, and smacked away the enemies he felt were there. When Yuichi was focused on combat, he had no blind spots; as long as the enemies were in the range of his spear, he could easily tell where they were.

The fact that they had Yuichi surrounded actually worked to his benefit. It made it harder for them to use their projectile weapons, and even made friendly fire a likelihood.

Yuichi whipped his spear around and around, striking and thrusting at whoever got in range.

Even though he was surrounded, only about five or six of them could actually attack at once. That fundamental principle wouldn't change even with a thousand men around him. He just had to be able to deal with them efficiently as they came.

Yuichi had established a defense line with about a four-meter radius. No one who entered that zone could ever make it out unharmed. Past that, it was just an issue of stamina, which also wasn't a problem for Yuichi. Fighting a thousand men was well within the scope of what his sister had trained him for.

There were screams and shouts. Bones were broken, flesh rent, and blood

sprayed as man after man fell.

“Bloodbath” was the only way to describe what had just occurred. But from Yuichi’s point of view, it had all been boring, dispassionate work.

Yuichi now walked, illuminated by the early morning sun. He approached the last man standing, King himself. There was no question of who he was, since the label above his head read “King.”

King turned his gun to Yuichi and fired it without hesitation.

Yuichi dodged the three rapid shots without slowing down, then whacked the gun away the moment it was in the spear’s range. “It’s easy to rely on violence because it’s simple and efficient, but its simplicity means it can be surpassed through greater violence. We’re civilized people, aren’t we? We have more intelligent ways of doing things. Can’t we find some sort of compromise?”

“That’s rich, coming from you, Yuichi Sakaki,” King said, rubbing his hand. He didn’t seem to be carrying any other firearms.

“Yeah, I’m aware I’m in no position to talk,” Yuichi agreed. “I had to make it clear that using any more violence against my little sister wouldn’t do you any good.”

Yuichi was covered in a light sheen of sweat. Against opponents as minor as these, he could still go a while longer.

“So you’ve realized that you can’t possibly get revenge at this point, right?” he asked. “Anything you try will just lead to greater tragedy.”

King laughed. “Greater tragedy? I don’t even want to think about that... I’ll keep away. You’ve made it clear that anything I try is pointless. Painfully clear.”

King was gazing at his fallen subordinates. After losing all of his pawns, he would know there was no point of honor or pride that would make continuing these attacks have any meaning.

“I’m getting pretty sick of it all myself,” said Yuichi. “I’m glad to hear you’re ready to back off.”

“But this right here is a different matter,” King told him. “You know I can’t just walk away from this, right?”

King took a step forward. He widened his stance, put up his arms, and leaned forward. He probably knew he couldn't win now, yet still he had his pride.

Yuichi tossed his spear away.

"What's the matter? Why not just whack me over the head with that thing?" King demanded.

"The spear's on its last legs," said Yuichi. "I guess I still need more training..."

The spear's white wax wood composition made it extremely flexible and pliant, but even it couldn't hold up against a thousand men. It was cracked, warped, and on the verge of breaking. Pacing out your weapon's endurance was a necessary technique when fighting a large number of opponents. It seemed he still had a lot to learn.

"Incredible," King muttered. "You plan to get even stronger?"

"Yeah. Just beating up a thousand baddies won't be enough to satisfy my sister. She says it's not good for a person to decide their limits for themselves."

"*Just* a thousand?" King let out a sigh. He could probably tell that Yuichi was serious.

Then King emptied his lungs, took in a deep breath, and held it. Reeling his fist back, he flew towards Yuichi.

Yuichi moved to match him. He made it into his personal space before King could lash out, grabbed his arm, and threw him.

King hit the ground on his back and lay still, the wind knocked out of him.

Yuichi was the last man standing on the exercise course. He had completely dominated the field.

Mutsuko and Yoriko picked that moment to run up to him, probably after determining that it was safe.

"Hmm, it may be traditional, but white wax wood is a bit lacking in endurance! I guess we really oughta go with carbon fiber, huh?" Mutsuko said with a frown as she looked at the splintered spear. She didn't offer up a word of praise to Yuichi, as if she had taken it for granted that he would win.

“Ah... my big brother took on a thousand men, and beat them all, for me!” Yoriko’s eyes were dewy with emotion.

It was indeed technically true that he had done it for her, but something about the line seemed a bit off. It was as if she hadn’t been worried about Yuichi at all, either.

“It’s all over now, right?” he asked, then suddenly remembered something. “Hey, that’s right. What happened to the guy who started all this?”

That meant Subaru, the boy who had started all this by going after Yoriko. Of course, Yuichi hadn’t been able to check the face of every man he’d beaten that morning, but he couldn’t remember seeing him among them.

Maybe he was too minor to matter after things had reached this scale, yet Yuichi couldn’t fully dismiss his concern.

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Subaru quietly watched Yuichi fight. He had been in the spectator seats opposite the ones Mutsuko and Yoriko were sitting in, with neither noticing the other’s presence.

The trend of the fight had been clear the minute it had begun.

Yuichi Sakaki was a monster.

The ones who had sworn loyalty to King, in their fervor, might not have realized it, but from the sidelines, the outcome had been plain to see from the start. It was hard to believe Yuichi Sakaki was in high school like him. That he was even human like him.

Not a single attack on him had landed. They’d attacked from the side, or behind, but it had all been the same. It was as if he could see everything before it happened.

No matter how many men you threw against him, you couldn’t possibly win.

Subaru left the field behind.

If he couldn’t beat Yuichi Sakaki in a fight, that just meant he shouldn’t fight. There were plenty of other ways to get at him.

Subaru didn’t care about Yoriko Sakaki any longer; he just had to find some way to expel the darkness that coiled around inside him.

As the sun rose, Subaru headed for the Sakaki home.

This would be very simple. Yuichi wouldn’t be there right now. He was carried a plastic bottle full of gasoline in one hand and a lighter in the other.

If he couldn’t beat him in a fight, he’d could still make him miserable, Subaru thought. It didn’t matter if arson was a serious crime.

Subaru was the one responsible for driving King’s gang to the verge of destruction, so it was possible that one of King’s gang might want to eliminate him. Even if the gang was destroyed, King was a beloved leader, and the remnants of the gang might come after Subaru for revenge.

In other words, Subaru was at the end of his rope. He was dead no matter what. One more crime wouldn’t make a difference.

After a while, Subaru arrived at the Sakaki home. He passed through the gate into the yard. Even though it was early in the morning, there was a woman at work there, gaily watering the plants.

She was the mother of the Sakaki siblings, a young-looking, beautiful woman who resembled Yoriko in some aspects.

Subaru had gone mad by this point. He would usually never think of anything like what he was thinking now. The bestial, swirling dark desire inside of him awakened, and he surrendered his body to it.

If he was finished either way, there was nothing he couldn’t do.

Subaru took a step forward to attack the Sakaki siblings’ mother.

*****

Tamako Sakaki was known as a beautiful woman with a laid-back personality and an always-gentle air about her.

She was warm and gregarious, so everyone loved her, and she got along well with the neighbors. If anyone in town asked her for a favor, she accepted it without question, no matter how imposing, which meant people relied on her often.

She was deeply knowledgeable in both interior and exterior design, and even made house decorating a hobby of hers. This extended to the Sakaki home itself, about which she was quite fastidious, to the point that she had imported many things from overseas.

Handicrafts was another of her hobbies, and she excelled in this field, as well. The interior of their house was casually littered with handmade ornaments.

She was also obsessed with gardening, meaning that her house received praise by the neighbors for its exterior as well as interior. When Christmas arrived, she even set up light displays.

But what Tamako prized even more than any of that was her three children. Tamako loved her children deeply, and if forced to choose, she would always put her children over her hobbies.

She seemed to be the kind of person who didn't have a care in the world. But in truth, she did have worries.

One was that her children didn't seem to care much about the house. Her eldest son and daughter often played rough, even inside, and frequently broke things when they did. When that happened, she always admonished them, but not too strongly. She didn't want her children to stagnate, either; she wanted them to grow up comfortable with who they were. That was Tamako's parenting philosophy.

She had a nagging suspicion that they were growing up a bit oddly as a result, but that was better than them growing up always concerned about what others thought about them.

Yuichi was especially inconsiderate when it came to the lawn. Once he had even completely trampled down the whole lawn doing some kind of martial arts training, killing all the grass and prevented new growth. But rather than being angry, she had been sad. Even Yuichi must have felt sorry about that, and afterwards, they had more or less kept their horseplay out of the yard.

It was early in the morning. Tamako was the only one home. All three of her children had gone off somewhere, it seemed, but they were all responsible young people, so she wasn't tremendously concerned about them.

Her husband was spending the night at work, due to the release of a new system, or something like that. Her husband worked in IT, so he was often busy with such things.

It wasn't unusual for her to find herself all alone, so for now, she was simply watering her lawn, as she usually did.

She heard a rustle behind her.

Another feline visitor? Those had left her in quite a bind, because the local cats had been messing up the garden lately, but she also felt bad just driving them off.

She just had to make sure to scold them thoroughly. Even a cat would be reasonable if you talked to it properly. Tamako turned around, ready to do just that, only to find nothing there at all.

*****

Mutsuko said their home alarm system had been tripped, so the three of them raced back to the house.

They passed through the gate into the yard, and saw their mother Tamako leisurely tending to the garden.

"Sis, I don't see anything..." Yuichi began.

Mutsuko silently pointed to the side of the gate.

A humanoid creature made of logs was standing there.

It was a wooden man, a life-sized puppet that Mutsuko had created after watching an old kung-fu movie.

It looked a bit silly, but it was unbelievably strong, and it had even pounded Ibaraki when he had tried peeping on the girls at the bath during their summer training camp.

Their mother Tamako had been very strict about not wanting it in the garden, but Mutsuko had still put it up the day before, saying that it would scare cats away.

Mutsuko then pointed to the ground below the wooden man.

It was standing on something that had sunken into the soft earth of the flower bed. Yuichi squinted and saw that it was Subaru, the man who had tried to come on to Yoriko. He must have tried to attack the house while no one was home, and this was the result.

“Why’s it got him pinned down like that?” Yuichi asked.

“It’s in capture mode,” said Mutsuko. “It’s holding him down so he can’t escape.”

Yuichi decided not to ask what other modes it had. They couldn’t be anything good.

“Did Mom not even notice?” he whispered after a pause.

“Looks like it, yeah...”

“What sort of programming does it even run on? Isn’t it a little dangerous?” he whispered.

“It’s got a bleeding-edge facial recognition system installed, so don’t worry,” Mutsuko said quietly. “It won’t attack the family.”

“What if it wasn’t someone suspicious, but just a regular visitor?”

“Oops.”

“Don’t ‘oops’ that!”

“I-It’ll be fine,” Mutsuko whispered. “It can make fuzzy judgments about malice through things like heart rate and body heat...”

“Look, no more wooden men, okay?” Yuichi hissed back.

The two of them kept on whispering to each other. Tamako didn’t seem to realize that the wooden man had moved at all, so they wanted to make sure she kept on not noticing it.

Yuichi ran up to Tamako to try to distract her. “We’re back, Mom. Um, I heard a strange noise. Did anything strange happen?”

“Oh, welcome home.” Tamako tilted her head in an almost girlish manner. “‘Anything strange’?”

“Did anyone, you know... come by?” he asked.

“Actually, I thought I might have had a feline visitor, but I looked and there was no one there. I must have just imagined it.”

“A cat, huh? Yeah. It probably was a cat. If you say so, Mom.”

While Yuichi was drawing Tamako’s attention, Mutsuko returned the wooden man to its usual spot. But if they dug up the person buried beneath, it would probably be noticed.

“Oh? Mutsi, Yori, you’re both with him? I don’t know where you’ve been, but I wish you would call if you were going to be out late.”

“Ah, um, sorry,” Mutsuko said. “I’ll call in the future.”

“And I really don’t think that wooden doll looks good in the garden,” said their mother. “I know Mutsi meant well, but I wish you would take it down.”

She wasn’t angry, but Yuichi found it impossible to argue when she looked at her like that. Mutsuko was the same way, and so walked up to stand beside him with an apologetic expression.

Just as they were feeling at a loss as to what to do next, Yoriko approached. “Mom, I’m hungry. Is breakfast finished yet?”

“Oh! I haven’t even started on breakfast yet! Really, it’s because you didn’t tell me you were coming home! I’ll make it right away.”

Yoriko’s question seemed to have turned Tamako’s attention completely to the subject of breakfast.

“I’ll help, Mom. Let’s get going.” Yoriko took Tamako’s hand and pulled her along. Tamako giggled in delight and let herself be pulled. She must have thought Yoriko was very hungry.

Tamako and Yoriko entered the house. Mutsuko followed right after, calculatingly.

“Uh... so what, do I have to clean up everything by myself?” Yuichi let out a sigh.

He pulled the buried Subaru out of the flower bed. Thanks to the softness of the ground there, he didn’t seem to be particularly hurt, but all he could do was stare out into space. It must have been a tremendous shock to the system.

Yuichi pulled Subaru to his feet and dusted him off, then guided him off of the lawn. Subaru followed obediently.

“Um... leave Yori alone from now on, okay?” Yuichi said. “What you went through is ‘easy mode.’ If you try to come after us again, it’ll get worse.”

Subaru nodded obediently, but Yuichi felt uneasy. He was clearly just reacting instinctively. The boy’s mind appeared blank.

Still, the horrible treatment he had suffered would probably linger somewhere in his memory. Hoping that would be the case, at least, Yuichi sent Subaru on his way.

“So.... am I supposed to straighten up the garden all by myself?” Yuichi asked, gazing in bemusement at the human-shaped hole in the flower bed.

Chapter 7: Second Week of November: Spirit

“Yuichi Sakaki, you are possessed,” a girl announced.

The person who said that to him was his classmate, Reiko Takasugi. She had never really talked to him before, so it mainly had Yuichi feeling confused. He had just been about to enter the classroom on his way back from a bathroom break between classes. For some reason, there was a crowd of girls in front of the classroom, as if they had been waiting for Yuichi.

“Huh? I don’t think I was doing anything out of line...” Yuichi said, gazing at Reiko in disbelief.

She was a rather plain-looking girl with short hair. He couldn’t remember much about her personality, since they weren’t in their seats. He had no idea what was going on.

It was baffling to have something so strange said to him so abruptly, and he didn’t recognize the four girls standing behind Reiko, either. The sight of a whole five girls staring right at him was extremely unsettling, too.

“She doesn’t mean ‘possessed’ as in being somebody’s property,” said one of the girls standing behind Reiko. “She means that you’re possessed by a spirit.”

Is this the start of another annoying damned incident? Yuichi concentrated and looked over the girls’ heads.

Reiko Takasugi’s label read “Liar.” Behind her were “Four-Eyes,” “Fujoshi,” “Medium,” “High School Student,” and “Spirit.”

Everyone except for Reiko and “Fujoshi” Misa Akagi must have been from other classes, since Yuichi didn’t recognize them at all.

Hmm? Suddenly, Yuichi realized: there were five people standing in front of him, but there were six labels.

The label “Spirit” wasn’t attached to anybody. It was just a word, hanging there in midair.

“Um, what’s going on here?” Yuichi asked, wondering if it was actually Reiko who was possessed.

“Yuichi Sakaki,” the girl intoned. “There is an evil spirit behind you. It’s fighting your guardian spirit. Your guardian spirit is holding out for now, but it’s not looking good. You’ll need some help.”

Yuichi turned around. There was nothing behind him, and no label there, either.

“I don’t... see anything.”

“You idiot. Obviously normal people can’t see them. Only people who have a sixth sense, like Reiko, can,” the “Medium” girl said in exasperated tones. She was the one who had spoken for Reiko before, too.

“Um, so can you see it?” Yuichi asked.

“Uh, I told you? Normal people can’t see them?” the girl responded in an even more patronizing tone.

He had no idea if “Medium” counted as a normal person or not, but it sounded like she couldn’t see the ghost.

“Okay, so I have an invisible spirit or something behind me,” he said. “I’m pretty clueless about this kind of thing, so what happens if my guardian spirit loses?”

“You die,” Reiko said simply.

“I die?” he repeated, startled. It was in poor taste, even for a joke.

“If you don’t want to die, meet me on the roof after class,” Reiko said, then marched into the classroom as if the conversation was over.

Misa Akagi followed her, and the others gave Yuichi a piteous glance before returning to their own classes.

“Sheesh, what a pain in the neck...” If she’d just been a self-professed oracle, Yuichi could have just brushed the incident off. But he was worried about the labels that Soul Reader had revealed.

In the end, despite finding it all a huge pain in the neck, Yuichi decided to join

them on the roof.

He headed there immediately after class ended, carrying his large school bag so he could go right to club after it was done.

Aiko walked alongside him; Yuichi had asked her to come.

Reiko and her friends hadn't seemed to have arrived yet, so, leaning against the fence, Yuichi explained the situation to Aiko.

"What the heck?" was Aiko's response upon hearing the details of what had happened.

Yuichi felt exactly the same way. "It was a surprise to me, too. I've never even talked to Takasugi before. Do you know anything about her?"

"Not much," Aiko said. "The girls she hangs out with apparently all went to the same middle school, so they're good friends." Maybe that was why she rarely interacted with her own classmates.

"Still... I'm not sure about this 'spirit sight' of hers..."

It wasn't that Yuichi didn't believe in spirits. Vampires and oni and gods existed, after all, so the existence of spirits wasn't out of line at all. It was just her story that he was skeptical about.

He added, "It would be one thing if 'Medium' was saying it, but since it was 'Liar'..."

In elementary school, you often saw children claiming they could see spirits in order to get attention, but it was rare to see someone keeping up the act well into high school.

"Are you sure it's okay for me to be here?" Aiko asked nervously.

"She didn't tell me to come alone, so I guess so?" Yuichi said. "And if the same five girls come again, I'd feel uncomfortable if it was just me and them..."

Reiko's retinue acted like disciples. They were likely fully convinced about her abilities.

It was a little while before Reiko finally arrived.

As expected, her groupies filed in along behind her. The lineup was the same

as before.

“What’s Noro doing here?” Reiko asked as she approached him, glaring at Aiko.

“Oh, am I in your way? We were going to walk to club afterwards,” Aiko responded curtly. She was more strong-willed than Yuichi’d thought.

“Do whatever you like,” Reiko said dismissively. “There was something I wanted to say to you, Sakaki.”

“Is it about the spirit possessing me? Because I still don’t know what you’re talking about,” Yuichi said, scratching his head.

“What?! Are you saying you don’t believe her?” one of the girls cried.

“Reiko is incredible! You don’t know how many people she’s saved through the spirits she’s exorcised!” her groupies shouted, one after another.

“W-Wait a minute! I never said I didn’t believe her!”

“Calm down. He’ll hear you out.” Aiko’s intercession calmed the groupies down a little.

“Leave him be,” Reiko ordered. “Of course Sakaki would have his doubts, hearing something like this out of the blue. I’m going to explain things now.”

Reiko’s words shut the groupies up completely. They seemed to do whatever she told them. It seemed that Reiko was their leader, a fact that seemed based entirely on Reiko’s spiritual abilities.

“I’d certainly appreciate an explanation,” said Yuichi. “It’s a pretty big shock to hear ‘you’re going to die’ out of nowhere.”

“It’s true that you will die, but that’s only if nothing changes,” she said. “Don’t worry, I’ll fix everything. Let me explain: You’re possessed by what’s known as a ga-rei. It’s a very dangerous evil spirit.”

“Um, so why did it possess me?” Yuichi was pretty mindful about his daily behavior. He couldn’t remember doing anything wicked enough to warrant possession by an evil spirit.

“It’s just a matter of bad luck,” Reiko explained. “After this spirit destroys and

kills someone, it possesses new prey. This one just happened to choose you."

"Bad luck, huh? I guess I'm not exactly the lucky type..." Yuichi certainly had plenty experience with bad luck in his chance encounters.

"The ga-rei is in the middle of devouring your guardian spirit."

"It's eating it right now?!"

"Ga-rei are always hungry," she said. "It's munching down on it as we speak."

"I don't even want to think about that..."

"Your guardian spirit is a fallen soldier of the Heike," she said. "It was of low rank, so it probably won't last long."

A rude thing to say about the Heike, Yuichi thought.

"After it finishes eating it, then it's your turn."

"Huh... so, what do I do?" he asked.

"It's simple: Just stick with me. It will eventually get sick of being in the presence of my power and leave you. S-So... we should date," Reiko said, suddenly fidgety.

"Huh?" Yuichi and Aiko spoke at the same time.

"Hold it! Where did that bizarre request come from?" Aiko shouted angrily.

Was this whole thing about finding a way to ask him out? he wondered. If it was, it seemed like an underhanded way to go about it.

"It's not bizarre!" the girl insisted. "Reiko is doing this to help him!"

"Yeah! He'll die if this keeps up! Reiko's selflessly offering to date him because it's the only way!" the groupies sounded off again.

Yuichi decided the best thing to do was just to turn her down flat. It was more awkward to do it with her lackeys along, but letting things drag on wouldn't be good for anyone involved.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm glad you want to save me, but I'd prefer to work things out on my own."

"On your own? You'll die!"

“If I die, that’s my business. You don’t need to go out of your way to help me,” Yuichi said simply.

“You’re saying you don’t want to date me? Is it because I’m not pretty?”

“I think that’s a little off the point...”

If forced to choose one or the other, Yuichi would probably say that Reiko was pretty, though she couldn’t compare to the girls he hung out with normally.

This is trouble...

It was looking like this had nothing to do with spirits, after all.

“Noro, are you going out with him?” Reiko demanded.

“Huh? Me? Um, not really...” Aiko stammered as she abruptly became the target of ire.

“Yeah. We’re not dating, but I have asked her out, and she’s thinking it over,” Yuichi said, deciding to roll with it.

“Huh?” Aiko asked, gaping at him.

Yuichi kept up the cover. “So I can’t go out with you. Sorry.”

It was all rather pathetic, after he had made up his mind to turn her down directly.

“I see... I understand.” Reiko must have realized it was pointless to discuss any further. She left the roof, her groupies tailing behind her.

Only the “Medium” and “Spirit” labels remained.

“Was there something else you wanted?” he asked the medium girl.

She smiled back at him confidently, as if she could see right through him. “You are going to want Reiko’s help soon enough. You’d better hope that her feelings haven’t changed by then.” And with that, the medium girl left.

“Sakaki! What the heck was that?!” Aiko started pressing him the minute everyone left.

“I’m sorry for dragging you into it like that,” Yuichi said. “If I’d said we were dating, it would have caused problems later, so I said that instead. See? We can

avoid future trouble by just saying you turned me down later.”

“Idiot!” she shouted.

“I said I was sorry!”

“How thoughtless can a person be?!”

“Sorry. I didn’t think you’d get so mad.”

“And what’s Konishi going to think when she hears you turned her down like that?” Aiko demanded.

She was likely referring to the recent incident when Yuri Konishi had asked him out and he’d turned her down flat. It was true that he had employed a much more underhanded method this time.

“Well, she just came on so strong, it scared me... hey, Noro!” Yuichi suddenly pulled Aiko by the hand, wrapped his arms around her and jumped to the side.

“Huh?!” Aiko let out a cry of surprise. A moment later, the fence behind them shook.

“Wh-What?”

“It’s still here!”

“What is?!”

“The spirit!”

He’d thought that all the members of Reiko’s retinue had gone, but it seemed “Spirit” was back on the roof.

“You’re not just trying to change the subject, are you?!” Aiko shouted suspiciously.

“I’m not,” he said. “I think it just attacked us!”

“So what do we do?”

“I don’t know!” he cried. “I’ve never fought a spirit before!”

Fortunately, the presence didn’t seem tremendously powerful. All the previous attack had done was shake the fence a little bit.

“Let’s get out of here!” Aiko cried.

“Good idea.” Yuichi took Aiko’s hand and ran for the entrance to the roof, but the door wouldn’t open.

It hadn’t been locked when they came, and the girls who had left before them surely didn’t have the key.

Yuichi felt an unsettling presence and looked upwards.

The color of the sky had changed. The sun remained white, but the rest of the sky had gone an inky black.

“What the heck!” he shouted.

“I’ve seen this before...” Aiko murmured.

It was like the barrier the “Apprentice Monster Hunter” boy had used to trap Aiko in the courtyard months ago. He’d said it was used to seal monsters in, so this one might technically be a bit different, but it was clearly a similar phenomenon.

“I’m sorry,” Aiko said. “I just assumed you were running around to distract me...”

That was only natural. She couldn’t see the spirit, so she couldn’t have known.

Yuichi turned around. The “Spirit” label was coming closer.

Yuichi glared at the air below the label, concentrating.

He remembered what had happened in the courtyard. He had seen the label “Vampire” there, and then after focusing, he’d been able to make out Aiko’s silhouette.

He convinced himself there was a person under the label. As he did, a human form gradually came into view.

“I think I can see it...” he murmured.

“What’s up with your eyes?” Aiko asked, dumbstruck.

“How should I know? She’s wearing a uniform... I think she goes to this school.”

The spirit was female and wearing a girls’ Seishin High uniform. Her face was hidden by her long hair, though, so it was hard to tell any more about her

appearance.

The spirit was walking towards them slowly, hands stretched in front of her. There was a chain wrapped around her neck that extended under their feet and underneath the door to the roof.

“Hey! Didn’t your sister teach you anything about fighting spirits?” Aiko cried.

“Yeah... she said Febreze was really effective.” Yuichi had his doubts, of course. He couldn’t see how an air freshener could help drive away a spirit.

“Do you happen to have some of that on you?” Aiko asked with faint hope.

“I do, as a matter of fact, but I left my bag over there,” he said, pointing.

In his hurry to escape, he’d forgotten to take his bag. Mutsuko had included air freshener in it, though, almost as if she’d anticipated something like this.

“Could we jump down?” Aiko asked.

“In the worst case scenario, sure. But I wasn’t expecting you to be the one to suggest it...” He had assumed that would be a traumatic memory for her, but maybe it hadn’t been as bad as he’d supposed. “Okay, let’s see... There’s another thing my sister said about fighting spirits that I’d like to try.”

Yuichi stepped forward protectively in front of Aiko. It might not mean anything if the spirit couldn’t be blocked by physical means, but he couldn’t just leave Aiko in front of the enemy unguarded.

He stood facing the spirit.

The spirit’s manner didn’t change. It continued walking towards them at the same pace as before, hands outstretched.

Yuichi took a step forward.

He slapped down the ghost’s outstretched left palm and pulled her down, simultaneously striking up with his right fist from below.

The fist slammed right into the spirit’s jaw and sent her flying.

The color of the sky immediately returned to normal, and they could hear sounds from the athletic fields below — the barrier-like thing must have been cutting off sounds, too.

“Huh? What happened? What did you do?” Aiko asked in confusion.

“I punched it,” he replied.

“You can punch it?!” she shouted back.

Mutsuko’s method for fighting spirits was known in martial arts as tan shou, “Seeking Fist.”

“It’s a training method where you paint a detailed picture in your mind of a hypothetical enemy — how they’ll move and react to your movements — and work out the optimal solution for fighting them,” Yuichi explained. “Apparently it applies here, too.”

He’d painted a detailed image in his mind of his enemy going flying after he punched them. A ghost was an unreal thing, little more than an illusion, so if you imagined something hard enough, the ghost could get sucked into your fantasy. This was the totally reckless logic that Mutsuko had advocated, but it seemed to have worked in this case.

“And if they can be punched, there’s not much to be afraid of,” Yuichi added.

“That’s all pretty reckless...” Aiko sighed. Yuichi found he couldn’t blame her.

He approached the fallen spirit, which, seeming to notice his presence, tried to crawl away. Its manner had completely changed now; perhaps before it had assumed it was invulnerable. Right now, it seemed to be in total hysterics.

Yuichi picked up the chain around the ghost and pulled. Unable to resist Yuichi’s strength, the ghost was easily dragged to the ground at his feet.

“Pantomime?” Aiko asked.

“I bet it looks that way, yeah,” he said. From Aiko’s perspective, it probably looked like he was just miming pulling a chain.

“Hey,” Yuichi said to the spirit.

“H-Help me!” the spirit exclaimed.

“Oh! I think I can hear it...” Aiko said, not sounding particularly scared.

“Help you?” Yuichi asked. “But you’re the one who attacked us...”

“No! I didn’t want to do it! This chain made me do it!”

“This?” Yuichi picked up a length of chain in both hands and pulled. Just as he had imagined, the chain snapped.

“Huh?” the spirit said.

“That should do it, right? Can you explain the situation, now?”

“Thank you,” the spirit said, then stood up and began staggering towards the fence.


SPIRIT

“Hey! Where are you going?”

“Now that I’m free, there’s something I have to do.” The spirit latched on to the fence with both hands and started climbing. Yuichi just watched, dumbstruck, as the ghost ascended to the top of the fence.

Before he could object, she pitched over the top and began to plummet head-first towards the ground below.

“Huh?!”

The ghost was gone. She had jumped off the roof.

“What was that all about? None of this makes any sense...” Aiko looked puzzled, and Yuichi was equally in the dark.

“She jumped off...” Yuichi climbed the fence and looked down at the ground, but there was no sign of the ghost.

“Cut that out! Someone might see you!” Aiko’s panicked voice shouted.

Obediently, Yuichi returned to the roof.

Later that night, Yuichi visited Mutsuko in her room.

As usual, Mutsuko was awake into the wee hours, and she let Yuichi in. The two were currently sitting across the low table from each other.

“I see! I’ve heard that location-bound spirits often repeat actions they performed in life,” Mutsuko announced, brimming with confidence as always. She wasn’t at all shocked by the sudden talk of ghosts, and showed no sign of doubting him.

“So you’re saying... she died by falling from the roof?” Yuichi asked skeptically. Despite the fact that he was the one who had come to her for advice, he was the most dubious about it all.

“It’s possible, but I haven’t heard about anything like that at school, so it must have happened a while ago. Hold on a sec!”

Mutsuko stood up and walked to her computer desk, then came back a few minutes later. She set some printed sheets on the table for Yuichi to see.

“Here. It’s from about ten years ago, but this is an article about a girl student who fell off the roof and died.”

Wherever Mutsuko had gotten the information from, it included pictures of the girl, too. Her name was Nami Eto.

“Hmm, her face was covered by her hair, so I couldn’t really see what she looked like...” Yuichi couldn’t say for sure if this was the same person as the ghost.

“Apparently it caused quite a stir on the internet,” Mutsuko said.

“Was there something strange about how it happened? This feels odd to say, but I wouldn’t think someone jumping off the roof would cause that much of a stir.” It might be a conversation topic at the school where it happened, but he couldn’t imagine it filtering out into the world at large.

“There was a bit of a mystery surrounding it, actually,” Mutsuko explained. “Two girls had a fight and ended up falling off the roof. There was a witness to that, but see... only one of them was found dead on the ground. The other one went missing.”

“Well, there was probably some trick behind it.” Yuichi imagined the scene in the back of his mind. Two people fell off the roof; only one hit the ground. The answer was simple. “She must have jumped into an open window while she was falling, right? Or she broke her fall and ran off.” He was confident that that would work out.

In a rare turnabout, Mutsuko seemed dumbstruck by Yuichi. “Yu... you know most people can’t do that stuff, right? Just because you can doesn’t mean you should expect everyone else to.” Yuichi felt a genuine twinge of pain at having his typically ridiculous sister informing him of common sense concepts. “Just so you know, most people can’t kill someone through a wall with fa jin, either.”

“I’ve never done that, and I wasn’t thinking of doing it, either!” He didn’t understand why she was bringing that up all of a sudden. “Anyway, moving on... What do you think of the evil spirit possession story that kicked this off?”

“It doesn’t sound like anything to worry about,” Mutsuko said. “You can see spirits with Soul Reader, but you don’t see anything behind you, right?”

“Yeah.” Yuichi could see labels even in a mirror, but as far as he could see, there was nothing behind him.

“And you were able to punch her, right? That means all of your techniques will work on spirits, and if they work, then you can beat them, so even if there were an evil spirit behind you, you could handle yourself.”

“The evil spirit thing sounded bogus from the start,” he said. “But I’m worried about the spirit that attacked me.”

“Yeah, the part about the chain around her is strange. You think she was being controlled by that ‘Medium’ girl you mentioned?”

Yuichi remembered the eerie words the “medium” had said. Perhaps she did have the power to manipulate ghosts, and she was siccing them on Yuichi.

“Anyway, I guess we should just watch for now,” Mutsuko said. “If things get weirder, let me know!”

And so ended their consultation for that day.

Yuichi unleashed a backfist.

He was in the hall around lunchtime, so naturally there were people everywhere, but he did it so quickly that nobody noticed.

His strike broke the neck of a spirit wearing a suit crying tears of blood. The head ended up bending backwards unnaturally on its neck, which actually made him look even more like a ghost.

A boy running across the wall on all fours spotted Yuichi and stuck his long tongue out at him. He may have intended to wrap it around him, but Yuichi just grabbed the tongue, flicked his wrist, and snapped it like a whip. The boy slammed into the floor, and Yuichi entered the bathroom.

Inside the bathroom he found a chubby girl carrying her own head in a shopping bag, which she was using to try to catch a peek at Yuichi’s crotch. Yuichi sent the bag flying with a kick, and finished his business while the chubby girl was rushing around searching for her head.

He went to the basin to wash his hands, looked up, and saw a girl covered in

blood in the mirror. That spirit wasn't doing anything in particular, so he just ignored it.

What the heck is going on here? Even going to the bathroom had become a chore.

It was the day after Reiko Takasugi had first confronted him about his "evil spirit."

When Yuichi had arrived at school, he had been swarmed by "Spirit"s in large numbers. They disappeared if he hit them, so for now, it was more of an annoyance than anything... but as far as annoyances went, it was severe. It was especially bad during class, when he had to be subtle about it so as not to attract attention.

Yuichi left the bathroom and decided to track the chains to their source. The fact that every ghost he'd seen had a chain wrapped around their neck suggested that the chains must be significant.

The chains led him to Classroom 1-B.

He cast a surreptitious glance through the window and saw them all leading to a specific person. It was the "Medium" girl, who was sitting there eating lunch, the chains coiled around her waist.

So she is *the one behind it?*

The whole group of girls who had threatened him the other day were sitting there together, eating boxed lunches, laughing and chatting. Reiko Takasugi was there, too.

"Oh, Sakaki. Such a passionate gaze. Are you looking for someone to cheat with?"

Yuichi turned to see a bespectacled girl with the label "Fake" above her head.

It was Tomomi Hamasaki.

He still had no idea what "Fake" meant, and he wasn't inclined to ask, either. If he did, it would probably just get him involved in something else annoying.

"Hey, do you know who she is?" He pointed to the medium girl. Tomomi was strangely informed in a lot of unexpected places, so maybe she would know

something.

“Just blew me right off, huh?” Tomomi asked. “Hmm, but you usually try not to get involved with other people, so showing interest in a girl might indicate a change in the wind...”

“You don’t know anything about me,” Yuichi said flatly.

“Uh huh, right. Anyway, you mean her? I think her name’s Misaki Gokumon. Why do you ask?”

“Their group accosted me yesterday, and things have been strange ever since,” he said. “It’s nothing you need to worry about, though.”

“Hey, hey, you can’t ask me for info and then blow me off again!” Tomomi protested. “Don’t forget, I’m a member of the Monika Army, too.”

The “Monika Army” referred to the group Monika had assembled to help her gather Divine Vessels. Tomomi had strongarmed her way in, and was now technically a member of the gang.

“I don’t think this has to do with the Divine Vessels,” Yuichi said, though he realized he couldn’t be sure. It was possible that her control of spirits did have something to do with the power of a Divine Vessel.

“Could you at least tell me the situation?” Tomomi asked. “I might be able to help.”

“Fine. Let’s go somewhere else.”

It was lunchtime, so there were people all around them now. She and Yuichi moved to a corner of the hall.

He explained the events of the day before to her in brief.

“Spirits, huh?” she said. “You don’t sound all that bothered about this, but it could get pretty serious.”

“Really?” he asked.

“When I explained about worldview, I said that the more people who believe in a something, the more persistent that worldview becomes. And a whole lot of people believe in spirits and wandering souls... At least, more people find

them feasible than tengu and oni and such. That means spirits have a lot of power, though I don't know if they're actually the manifestation of the souls of dead people."

"But I've never seen spirits before now," he said. "I never even saw the labels."

"That's because they weren't part of your world until now. By getting involved with those girls who are convinced that spirits exist, they've probably had an effect on your worldview."

"I see... so? Do you know how to exorcise spirits?" he asked.

"Huh? Why would I?"

"You're Nihao the China's daughter, right? Didn't you learn any Taoist teachings or anything?" Yuichi was thinking about an old Chinese horror movie about hopping vampires. It was a long shot, but he wouldn't be surprised if Nihao the China knew some esoteric spirit-purging techniques.

"I'm not his real daughter, and he hasn't taught me his techniques," Tomomi said.

"Huh? Really?"

"Oh, are you interested in my story all of a sudden?" she asked.

"No, and don't start telling it to me," Yuichi replied curtly.

"Hey! Why are you so determined not to learn anything about me?"

"Because I have this deep and abiding feeling it's gonna get me wrapped up in something really annoying. And the fact that you have 'Fake' written above your head is really unsettling to start with." Yuichi waved lightly and walked away.

Tomomi looked unhappy, but she didn't seem inclined to push things on him any further.

Yuichi returned to the classroom and was swarmed by spirits as usual. As he absentmindedly banished the random spirits that attacked him on his way back to his desk, his mind turned things over.

There were spirits attacking him. They didn't seem to be attacking anyone else.

The only place they were attacking him was at school.

There was a chain linking "Medium" Misaki Gokumon to the spirits.

There were chains wrapped around the spirits — usually around the neck, but if they didn't have a head, it would be wrapped somewhere close to it.

When the spirits' chains were cut, they stopped attacking Yuichi.

There were some spirits that seemed communicative, but only a select few; most of them just let out incomprehensible moans.

Some spirits could form barriers, but they wouldn't use them in well-populated places, and the barrier disappeared if the spirit was attacked.

The spirits disappeared if they got too far away.

What's does it all mean? he thought.

Misaki Gokumon had to be the one behind it. The fact that they only attacked him at school suggested a limit to the length of the chains, and considering the timing when they started attacking, his rejection of Reiko Takasugi seemed to be the cause. But he didn't know why spirits would attack him just because he rejected her.

He considered talking things over with Misaki Gokumon, but it would come off as saying he believed Reiko Takasugi and wanted her help, which would just end with more talk of him dating her.

Well, I'll just wait for class to be over, I guess, Yuichi thought, holding the neck of a ghost that was glaring bitterly at him.

After class, Yuichi and Aiko went up to the roof.

"So, that's the story," he said. "I want to do something about the situation."

"Hmm, not sure what I can do to help..." Aiko wrinkled her nose.

Well, he hadn't expected her to be able to do much.

"That's where she comes in." Yuichi raised his left hand.

Aiko looked at him, puzzled.

Aiko couldn't see it, but Yuichi was holding a spirit wearing a student uniform by the neck. It was the student who had fallen from the roof the day before. He'd asked her name and learned that she really was Nami Eto.

"Um... I was really hoping you could let me go..." Nami's voice sounded out.

"If I let you go, you're gonna jump off the roof again, aren't you?" Yuichi asked.

"Of course," she said. "What do you expect? That's my routine."

He had already cut her chain, since there was no talking to her while she was bound up in it.

"If you answer my questions, I'll let you go," he said. "Why are you attacking me?"

"I don't know! I was being controlled! You should ask the person who was controlling me."

"He destroyed the chain before, right? So why were you attacking him again?" Aiko asked. Maybe it was boring for her to just listen to it all.

"The chain got me again," the spirit said. "I bet it's caught all the spirits in the area. Look, I answered your question, right? So let me go. I promise I'll hold back on falling."

Yuichi did feel pretty awkward holding her by the neck while they were talking, so he released her.

Nami ran away from his hand and stretched. Apparently even spirits got stiff holding the same posture for a long time. "So, who is that, anyway? She's got an amazing aura, so I've been wondering..."

"Isn't that the person who sent you the love letter?" Aiko asked.

Nami was pointing to a very wide female student who was standing nearby: Chiharu Dannoura. Indeed, it was the girl who had challenged Yuichi before and taken a beating for her trouble.

Chiharu stood with her hands on her hips, carrying an aura of confidence

around her. There was an instrument case on her back — judging from the size, probably a cello. She had said she was in the choir club, so maybe she played accompaniment.

She was a little taller than Aiko, but wider in all directions. To put it bluntly, she was fat.

“That wasn’t a love letter. It was a letter of challenge. She’s Dannoura, by the way.” Yuichi normally spoke more respectfully about women he barely knew, and only be more casual when he got to know them better. In this case, though, his lack of deference wasn’t an indicator of closeness.

Chiharu just laughed. “For what purpose do you call me here? You wish to surrender to me? If so, I welcome it!” The fat girl gestured boldly.

“Oh, did you settle on a speech pattern?” Yuichi asked.

“Yes. Even I realized I had sounded a bit strange. I worked hard to choose this one!”

“You shouldn’t need to work hard just for that... Ah, well. I called you here because I have a favor to ask you.”

Yuichi had gotten Chiharu’s contact information from Mutsuko. Apparently they knew each other; she and Mutsuko had worked together to develop some bizarre weapons.

“Oh? A request for me? But after all, I am in your debt,” she said. “I do not mind hearing you out... but if I may ask, who is that girl?”

Chiharu pointed a pudgy finger at Aiko.

“That’s Noro,” he said. “She’s from my class.”

As he introduced Aiko, Chiharu began inspecting her up and down. “Ah-ha... in appearance, she is perhaps neither above nor below my level...”

“No, Noro’s way cuter,” Yuichi said, surprisingly comfortable with the insult.

“C-Cuter...” Aiko stammered.

“Ah, well,” said Chiharu. “My nature is one of magnanimity. Though you are a part of my harem, I shall permit you a harem of your own!”

“It’s a club, actually,” said Yuichi.

Aiko seemed to recover from her shock enough to draw closer to Yuichi and speak to him in hushed tones. “So... who is this person? Why did you bring her here?”

“As for who she is, that’s a little hard to explain... but as you can see, she’s got a pretty unfortunate personality, so don’t worry about it too much,” Yuichi said. “The reason I called her here, though, is her eyes. She has eyes that see weird stuff, too.”

“Weird stuff? How rude! My eyes are the Apocalypse Eyes!” Chiharu exclaimed.

Chiharu had apparently walked up to them at some point and joined in with Aiko and Yuichi’s huddle.

“Hey! Aiko and I are having a private conversation here!” Yuichi shouted.

“If you do not wish me to hear, do not speak in front of me!” Chiharu declared. “Well, regardless, I shall show you my power! You there! Noro, was it? Why don’t I give you my appraisal?”

“Wh-What?” Aiko drew back, afraid.

“Hm... a love interest rating of only 5? Trash...” Chiharu said disdainfully.

“Hey!” Aiko looked at Yuichi, jaw dropping. It was the face of someone who wanted to speak, but couldn’t find the words.

“She says she can see numbers,” Yuichi said. “Though we don’t actually know what the numbers mean.” Yuichi remembered her saying before that it was something like battle power. “The one I want you to look at isn’t Noro, it’s her. You see?” Yuichi pointed at Nami.

“Hmm? Mm? I see merely numbers floating in space. Minus 30... but I have never before seen a negative value. What does it mean?”

“Apparently she’s a spirit.”

“Eek!” Chiharu let out a cry of fright and flew at Yuichi.

Yuichi sidestepped.

Chiharu hit the floor with a dull thud.

“Why did you dodge? A beautiful girl leaped at you for fear of a ghost! Your job is to catch her gently!” Chiharu complained as she hopped back up with a sour expression.

“That looked more like a body press to me,” he said. If he’d been hit by that, he would have been hurt pretty badly. Such mass couldn’t be underestimated.

“Um...” Aiko said, hesitantly. She’d probably never seen a high school girl leap into a body press like that.

“Anyway, we know she can see spirits too, now, so she might be useful,” Yuichi said. The reason Yuichi had called Chiharu was to evaluate the threat level of the spirits. It was easy for him to appraise the strength of a fellow human, but with a spirit it was that much harder.

“But will knowing those numbers actually help you in solving it at all?” Chiharu asked.

“Hmm, that’s a good point...” Yuichi had thought it might be handy to have someone besides him who could see spirits, but he hadn’t thought it out any further than that. “So, is the number all you can see of the spirit?”

“What is this? You say that you can see it?”

“Yeah, faintly.”

“Hmm,” Chiharu said. “It is not logical that you should see it, yet I cannot. I shall practice slightly greater exertion!”

Chiharu opened her eyes wide. Yuichi found it a bit scary.

“Oh-ho... I can see her now,” Chiharu continued. “In appearance, she is neither above nor below my level...”

“You keep saying that, but your level’s pretty low!” Yuichi burst out.

“Hey, I wonder if I can see her,” Aiko said, apparently feeling left out.

“I don’t know... try to focus, I guess?” Yuichi said vaguely, uncertain of how else to answer her.

“Okay. I’ll try.” Aiko, seeming to take his words seriously, began to focus. She

knit her brows together, narrowed her eyes and gazed at the area where the spirit was. “Oh, I think I can see something...”

“Seriously?!” Yuichi looked at Aiko, partly in disbelief, then suddenly startled. “Noro! Your eyes! Your eyes turned red!”

“Huh?” she cried. “No way! What do I do?”

Her eyes turned red when she was using her vampiric powers. They’d done that once when she was injured, but seeing them turn red over something like this was totally unexpected. He was in a panic trying to figure out what to do about it.

He quickly looked over at Chiharu, but fortunately, she was fully focused on inspecting Nami, and hadn’t noticed Aiko’s change yet.

Yuichi pulled a pair of goggles out of his bag. (Naturally, Mutsuko had stuck them in there on a whim.) “Here! Put these on!”

“O-Okay!” Apparently also a bit panicked, Aiko did just as she was told, pulling the massive goggles down over her eyes. Being night-vision goggles, they covered almost the entire top half of her face.

“Ah! What are those? How impressive! Is that why her love interest power has ascended to 3,000?” Chiharu asked as she turned back to them, apparently having grown bored with inspecting Nami.

That was a close call.

“Why would goggles increase her love interest power?” Yuichi demanded. It must have been her vampiric abilities increasing her power level. Chiharu had said that Yuichi’s level was 18,000, which meant Aiko’s was one-sixth of his. This might sound like a brag, but Yuichi was thinking that Aiko must be quite strong in her current form.

“So, now we can all see them. What do we do n—”

“Hey! Why are you always on the roof? Do you love the roof that much, Yu? You should marry the roof!”

Yuichi turned to face the sudden interruption.

Mutsuko was standing at the entrance to the roof. For some reason, she was

wearing the outfit of a miko, with a white “kosode” kimono and red hakama, and she was holding a large bag in one hand. “I told you to tell me if things got weirder, and if you’re skulking around here, they obviously did! So what happened? What’s the weirdness?”

“The only weirdness here is you as a miko, Sis...”

“What was that?!” she demanded.

“Ah, nothing. Sorry. I wasn’t sure what to do next, actually, so this is good timing. Please help us, Sis.”

“Okay!” Mutsuko smiled brightly. That one little request seemed to have been enough to completely restore her mood.

“Ah! It is you, Sage Mutsuko!” Chiharu said with an exaggerated air of surprise.

Yuichi had known that they knew each other, but not that their relationship was such that she would address her as “Sage.”

“Hey, Dannoura, are you here, too?” Mutsuko asked. “That’s great! What’s the heck’s going on here?”

Yuichi proceeded to sum up to Mutsuko exactly what had happened.

“I think I get it! The Misaki Gokumon girl is controlling the spirits so that her friend can pretend to have a sixth sense!” Mutsuko cried.

“Gokumon didn’t seem to be aware of it herself, though,” Yuichi said. Perhaps this had happened before. The result, then, was that Reiko had become more arrogant, and picked up even more followers.

“There are three ways to resolve this!” Mutsuko declared.

“If you’re giving us choices, it means most of them are going to be bad... but let’s hear them out, I guess,” Yuichi said, without getting his hopes high.

“One: Defeat Misaki Gokumon, the medium!”

“You mean beat the hell out of her, right? I’m not gonna beat up an ordinary girl my age!” Yuichi shouted. He couldn’t beat someone up just because she controlled spirits.

“Two: Placate Misaki Gokumon by dating Reiko Takasugi!”

“If I was gonna do that, I’d have done it already,” Yuichi griped.

“Three: Hold an exorcism at the school! If the spirits she’s enslaved go away, she won’t be able to do anything to you!”

“I guess we’ll have to go with the last one... and judging by your outfit, you knew that, right?” Yuichi glared at Mutsuko through narrowed eyes. Why hadn’t she just said so from the start?

“Th-That’s not true! It’s just a coincidence that I happened to be wearing this...” Mutsuko said even as she began rummaging through her bag to pull things out.

“What is that?” Yuichi demanded.

It was a pot. There was also a gas burner, a bamboo steaming basket, and a bottle of water, as well as bags of rice and salt. Was she going to cook? Yuichi suddenly grew nervous.

“It’s a pot and a resonator,” Mutsuko said with supreme confidence. “The rice has been washed and dried out in the sun over the course of several days. With this, we can perform a kamanari ritual and exorcise the ghosts!”

Mutsuko swiftly began the preparations. She unrolled a cloth as big as two tatami mats out over the roof, revealing a large octagonal pattern painted on it. Each direction had a different label, like “Gate of the Living” and “Gate of the Dead” — a Dun Jia chart used in Chinese divination.

Mutsuko set the burner at the center of the diagram, placed the pot atop it, and filled it with water. She then added a handful of salt, put the steaming basket-like “resonator” on top and lit the burner.

“What, do we have to wait for it to boil?” Yuichi asked. The pot was large, with quite a lot of water inside. It seemed like it was going to take a while to heat up.

“Good point,” Mutsuko said. “So, I’ll recite the Longer Sukha Vativyuha Sutra until it boils. If-these-vows-I-have-made-should-not-bring-me-to-the-un-sur-pass-ed-way...” Mutsuko began chanting with a leisurely sutra rhythm.

Aiko began to tremble, then wilted into Yuichi's arms.

"That's right, you can't stand sutras, can you?" Yuichi said. He had completely forgotten about that.

"I forgot, too... I'm not sure if I can make it through an exorcism..."

"Sis, we're gonna get some distance!" Yuichi called. He pulled Aiko to the edge of the roof. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I was shocked since it came out of nowhere, but once I know it's happening, I think I can deal with it."

Nami the ghost and Chiharu arrived a few moments later.

"What should I do? If I'm exorcised, I might move on..." the former moaned.

"What's wrong with moving on?" Yuichi asked. "Or is there a reason you don't want to do that?"

"I have unfinished business. That's why I'm still here."

"Then keep your distance for a while," he said. "Though I don't know how wide that pot's range of influence is..."

"Okay, I'll do that." With that, the ghost climbed the fence — it seemed she couldn't phase through it despite her incorporeal nature — and leaped off the roof.

"Incidentally, Yuichi Sakaki," Chiharu said. "Do there not appear to be more spirits than before?"

"Ah?!" he exclaimed.

Just as Chiharu'd said, crowds of spirits had appeared out of thin air. They had chains around them, so they must have been slaves of Misaki Gokumon.

"It doesn't seem like they're coming after me..." he said slowly. "You think they're trying to stop Sis's ritual?"

Yuichi quickly tried to return to Mutsuko's side.

But Chiharu stopped him. "Fear not, Yuichi Sakaki. I prepared for this eventuality!"

She set down the instrument case she was wearing on her back, and opened the lid. Within it lay a Western archery-style bow, which Chiharu pulled out, slowly and theatrically.

“Heh heh! Dannoura style has an archery technique for destroying fell influences! Its name, the Dannoura-style Azusa Yumi, Meigen-no-Tsuru-uchi!”

“I’ve got a whole lot to say about that, but first: Why do you carry your bow in a musical instrument case?” he asked.

“Is there a purpose to instrument cases besides holding weapons?!” she demanded.

“Apologize! Apologize to the instrument case-makers of the world!”

Chiharu ignored Yuichi and began to draw the bow. There was no arrow nocked in it, which was typical for Azusa Yumi... though Yuichi had never heard of using a Western-style bow for this Shinto ritual act.

“Purge!” Chiharu shouted as she released the bowstring.

Nothing happened.

The string trembled, and nothing more... or so it might have seemed, if he hadn’t seen the effect it had on the spirits themselves.

Holes appeared in several spirits in a line, as if an invisible arrow had torn through them. Those spirits dispersed a second later.

“Ah... hmm,” said Chiharu. “W-Well? Amazing, isn’t it?!”

“You seemed pretty surprised by it yourself...” Yuichi muttered. Maybe she hadn’t expected it to have so much power. She had only seen spirits for the first time today, so she’d probably had no idea what would happen.

“Ah! The Dun Jia chart is a barrier, so spirits can’t get in! No need to panic!” Mutsuko called.

“You could have mentioned that earlier! And if that’s the case, let us in, too!” Yuichi snapped.

He returned to Mutsuko’s side and stepped into the bounds of the Dun Jia diagram. Just as she had said, it seemed the spirits couldn’t get inside.

Mutsuko began to add rice to the resonator and stir, suggesting the preparations were complete. Then she began to chant the misogi-harai prayer of purification: “I ask with utmost humility and submission, of the myriad gods of heaven and earth, that the great gods of purification — given form by the will of the gods and goddesses that dwell in high heaven at the time of our honored father Izanagi-no-Mikoto’s purification at Tsukushi-no-Himuka-no-Tachibana-no-Odo-no-Agihara — might purify and cleanse me of my failings, sins, and filth.”

“Your sister has a pretty good memory, huh?” Aiko said, standing beside Yuichi, apparently impressed that Mutsuko was chanting the complicated prayer from memory.

“Noro, are you okay?” Yuichi asked.

“Yeah, looks like I can handle this.”

He’d be hard-pressed to understand the reason why, but apparently she could handle Shinto chants.

Now that he thought about it, Mutsuko had a Confucian diagram, a Buddhist sutra, and a Shinto ritual and prayer. He wondered if it was okay to jumble it all together like this.

Mutsuko spoke the prayer several times, and at last, there was a ring from the pot. That was enough to cause the swarming spirits to writhe in pain.

Mutsuko lifted the lid of the resonator, then bowed, clapped twice, added more rice, and bowed again. The ringing sounds from the pot began to echo even louder.

“Okay! Everyone else do the same thing!” she cried.

“Huh? You never mentioned this!” Yuichi had assumed Mutsuko would take care of the whole thing.

“Participation is mandatory!” Mutsuko ordered. “Now, snap to it!”

Urged on by his big sister, Yuichi joined in on the ritual. Aiko followed, and the ringing from the pot grew even more violent.

The next thing they knew, all the spirits had vanished from the roof. The pot

was ringing with an incredible sound now.

“Okay, Yu, pick up the pot!” Mutsuko declared.

“Huh? You can’t mean...”

“Yep! We’ve gotta take the pot around the school to exorcise all the spirits!”

Just as he’d thought.

In the end, it took until night to purge the whole school of spirits.

Yuichi felt extremely embarrassed walking all around the school carrying the loudly clanging pot, but when Mutsuko told him to do something, he couldn’t go against her. He got quite a few side glances from teachers, but Mutsuko managed to excuse her way around it.

According to Mutsuko, the Narikama ritual was quite a powerful exorcism method. It could completely restore any space to its pristine state. Yuichi tended to think of these kinds of things as scams, but it seemed all lingering signs in the space had been completely washed away. That meant it must work on quite powerful spirits, too.

Yuichi came to school the next day and indeed, he didn’t see any spirits. Thanks to the Narikama ritual, the school was at peace once more, which both eliminated the danger of Yuichi being attacked by spirits, and meant that he wouldn’t have to date Reiko Takasugi.

He went to see Misaki Gokumon at lunch, but she wasn’t acting like anything had changed. She really must not have realized what she had been doing.

That should clear up the whole spirit mess, Yuichi thought. Still, he returned to the roof once more.

As expected, he found Nami there.

“So you didn’t move on, huh?” he said.

“Yeah. After I fall, I think I go somewhere else for a while... then the next thing I know, I’m in the school. I go to the roof and fall off, then do it all again. So I guess I was unaffected by the exorcism in the time I was gone after falling? Well, I guess not having the others around might make things a little easier for me...”

It seemed the pot only had any effect while the ritual was still in progress.

“What about the chains?” Yuichi asked.

“I haven’t seen any yet today,” she said. “But why are you doing here, Sakaki? You don’t have to interact with me anymore.”

“Unlike the others who only moaned, I could actually talk to you,” Yuichi said. “I can’t just leave a sentient being who seems to be suffering on her own.”

“Ah, do I seem to be suffering? Well, I suppose I do have a regret... I can’t stop wondering about how things came to this.”

“Yeah, I heard the circumstances around that were a bit odd,” Yuichi said. “Could you tell me more?”

Two had fallen. One had died, and the other had gone missing. According to the article, the girl who’d died was Nami Eto, and the one who’d gone missing was Chie Amatsu.

“It was an accident,” Nami said. “We did have a fight, but I wasn’t trying to kill her. I don’t think Chie was trying to kill me, either. There’s a fence here now, but at the time it was only a railing, and it broke in the scuffle.”

“So what happened after you fell together? That’s the mystery.”

“Chie was falling a little before me, but she disappeared before my eyes. That’s the last thing I remember. After that, I probably just hit the ground.”

“She disappeared?” Yuichi asked.

“Yeah,” Nami said. “I think that’s what I can’t stop thinking about. I really want to know where Chie went.”

That meant Nami wouldn’t be able to escape her cycle until the mystery was solved.

“I’m going to look into the incident a little more,” Yuichi said. “Maybe if I find other mysterious disappearances, I might learn something.” And if he told his sister about this, she might get some inspiration.

“Really? Well, I’ll wait, though my hopes aren’t high.”

“You’re gonna jump again?” he asked.

“Yeah. But I won’t do it in front of you again.”

It was true that he didn’t want to watch someone jump off a building, so he left Nami behind on the roof.

*****

It was automatic.

It existed only to capture the spirits in the surrounding area.

It did not do so by the will of its master, Misaki Gokumon; it just took control of every spirit within a certain range, and then when she went out of range, it released them. That was all it did.

It had some will of its own, but that will was not connected to Misaki’s. It simply needed it to capture spirits. The chains would wrap around the spirits and make them slaves, but if it just attacked them, they would get away. So it had arrived at this sort of pseudo-consciousness, out of necessity.

It now felt uncertain.

There was no prey.

The usually plentiful spirits were all gone without a trace.

But the instinct to ensnare spirits was almost like a hunger. It wouldn’t give up just because there weren’t any nearby.

It extended its chains throughout the school, but there were no spirits anywhere.

Nevertheless, it searched tenaciously for its prey.

Then at last, it arrived at the roof where it found a single spirit.

The chain reached for the spirit, but before it could catch her, the spirit fell.

The chain followed it from the roof to the ground. The spirit struck the ground and disappeared.

Its hard-fought prey was gone, but undeterred, it resumed searching for others.

That was when it noticed them.

There were spirits nearby — a nest of spirits filled with evil.

If it hadn't pursued that spirit, it never would have noticed them. If it'd had feelings, it would have rejoiced.

But it did not, and so all it did was extend its chains towards its new prey, and drag them out from the darkness in which they were bound.

✻✻✻✻✻

It was the morning two days after the exorcism. The weather looked bad. Dark gray clouds covered the sky, and it felt like it might rain at any moment.

As usual, Yuichi was walking to school with Aiko. The minute he entered the school, he realized something was strange.

"What is... this?" he asked.

There was a man's torso crawling along the floor. He had no bottom half, and something like that looked like reddish-black rope trailed out behind his stomach — probably his intestines. There was no sign of pain in his expression, only overwhelming hatred.

There was a woman crawling around on four strangely elongated limbs. She moved like a spider, her head turning around and around as if searching for something.

There was an inhuman thing with legs growing from its head left that blood behind wherever it stepped.

Above each hung the label "Specter." Indeed, they did seem far more wicked and monstrous than the "Spirits" he had seen before.

Aiko clung to Yuichi.

"Can you see them?" he asked, although Aiko's eyes were still black.

"Yeah, I asked Akiko and she had some contacts that would hide the red. I'm wearing them right now," she said.

"Akiko's pretty incredible, huh?" he commented. Akiko was the maid who worked in Aiko's house. Yuichi was impressed by the idea, but then realized it might have just been a traditional way for vampires to disguise their eyes.

“But does this mean the exorcism didn’t work?” he asked.

The “Specter”s weren’t wearing any chains, which may have been why they weren’t attacking Yuichi directly. But while they were just wandering around for now, it was hard to believe they should just be left at large.

Even so, Yuichi and Aiko couldn’t afford to be late to class, so they headed for their classroom.

Another specter arrived in the middle of class, a pale, tall, slender women that slipped in through the hallway-side window. She had no eyes, only blank eye sockets that served as the one dark spot on her pale body.

The lack of eyes didn’t seem to matter to her, though, as she bent over as if to peer into a student’s face with great concentration.

“Not you.” She then moved to the next student, and leaned in again. “Not you.”

She came up to Yuichi.

“Not—”

Yuichi formed a spear hand and plunged it through the woman’s neck. She spat up blood and then fell onto the ground, writhing and rolling. Of course, hardly anyone in the class noticed.

This isn’t good... he thought. The specters seemed to be growing more active.

During lunch break, Yuichi decided to check the 1-B classroom, but Misaki Gokumon wasn’t there. It seemed she was absent that day, which suggested she wasn’t connected to the specters’ appearance.

Yuichi waited until after class to head up to the roof with Aiko.

They had contacted Mutsuko in advance, so she was already there before them. She had her miko garb on and had already started the Narikama ritual. She added the rice and began the chant, but unlike before, it didn’t begin ringing.

“What’s wrong?” Yuichi asked. Knowing Mutsuko, it was unlikely that she had made a mistake in the execution.

“It’s no use. It won’t ring out in a place that’s too impure.” Mutsuko furrowed her brow.

Which meant they’d need to find a new way of purging the spirits.

“What’s going on here, anyway?” Yuichi asked.

Black clouds had covered the sky. It was hard to believe the presence of specters would even affect the weather, but there was still something deeply ominous about it.

“Hmm, I guess the purging of all the spirits created a spiritual vacuum here, so other spirits came to take their place! Naturally!” Mutsuko said.

“Naturally?! Why did we do the exorcism at all then?”

Nami approached them, the pot seeming to have no power over her when it wasn’t ringing. “You mentioned other spirits, but... I saw someone who looked like Chie earlier. She seemed strange... like there was a shadow over her face...”

“Were you able to talk to her?” Yuichi asked.

“Actually... she seemed really dangerous... so I ran away...”

“Well, I guess I’ve gotta go around beating them all...” he sighed. Maybe that would just end up summoning new specters, but it was the only thing Yuichi could think of.

Yuichi was just about to go out and start punching specters when Chiharu appeared.

“I have completed my errand!” Chiharu declared. “As you surmised, Sage Mutsuko, I detected an unusual presence on a second floor classroom! It is packed full of evil creatures with power levels ranging from minus 2,000 to minus 30,000!” She was spouting seemingly random numbers as usual. There was an enormous compound bow in her hand, which she was probably using to attack the specters and protect herself.

“Ah-ha! Thanks, Dannoura!” Mutsuko exclaimed.

“What’s she talking about?” Yuichi asked. He didn’t understand at all. They must have been plotting something before Yuichi arrived.

“I thought back on the story up till now and realized there must be something strange going on in this school, so I had Dannoura watch Eto’s fall from the athletic fields,” Mutsuko explained.

“But the specters can’t really be in the classroom like she said, right?” he asked. It was had to believe they could have all been there and never hurt anyone before.

“Actually, I think you have to go in through the window to get there,” Mutsuko said. “In other words, it’s all a matter of direction. Maybe it’s a type of katatagae, lucky and unlucky directions. Just the smallest slip-up can take you to another dimension!”

Katatagae was a ritual where you avoided traveling directly in certain directions, based on an old idea that traveling in certain directions would put you in contact with evil gods and get you cursed. Yuichi had a feeling it had nothing to do with katatagae directly, but more that you needed a certain process to get there.

“That means, Yu, you have to enter the second floor classroom by jumping off the roof!” Mutsuko declared. “Then you can find the nest of evil spirits and beat them all at once!”

“I wonder if there’s a high school student out there who’s jumped off more roofs than me...” Yuichi whispered.

Of course, he couldn’t defy Mutsuko.

Yuichi stood facing the fence as the evening sunlight streamed over the roof.

He was jumping from the side facing the athletic fields, so there was a good chance he might be seen. He had to plan the timing just right.

“You can go now!” Mutsuko called.

Mutsuko must have been making her decision based on watching the athletic field. Yuichi heard her voice through the glasses he was wearing.

The glasses were the same wearable computer that he had worn during the incident involving Aiko’s big brother Kyoya. They contained a transmitter that

let Mutsuko see and hear whatever Yuichi did. He wasn't sure if she had brought them for this purpose, but she'd had them in her bag.

Yuichi jumped straight up, grabbed the top of the fence, and jumped over. Then he plunged down at top speed.

He could see Chiharu on the athletic field, bow at the ready. He could hear the string sounding out just as he jumped. It was her Azusa Yumi support fire driving away the specters near the entrance.

He reached the second floor window in an instant, grabbed the upper frame, and changed his trajectory to leap into the classroom.

He rolled over once to slow his momentum, then stood up immediately. He didn't have time to lie around — he was probably in the middle of an enemy hive.

Despite the evening sun shining outside, it was very dark in the classroom. It was like the outside light couldn't make it in.

The interior of the classroom was different from what Yuichi knew. Like the old school building, it was made of wood. It had also been badly weathered by time: most of the chairs and desks had half rotted away. It felt like a place that had been abandoned for decades.

There was a thick layer of dust on the floor, like ash, and a quick look around revealed notable traces of old burn marks in the classroom.

Is this another dimension, then? Yuichi wondered. This place looked nothing like the Seishin High School he was used to.

The place was swarming with pallid human figures. They didn't move right away, as if uncertain as to how to respond. Maybe they hadn't expected anyone to come in here that hadn't been dragged.

"Specter." Yuichi saw the labels above the heads of all the figures at once. They were identifiable as human, but just barely — they were all twisted in some way. Some had no limbs, some were bleeding from their eyes. Some were giant; some were tiny; some were mostly intact aside from huge swollen portions.

Yuichi looked around the classroom.

He'd come in here to destroy them all, but he'd been asked for one more thing: Chie Amatsu.

If Chie had been pulled into this world, then she might be here somewhere. Nami had wanted him to save her if possible.

Of course, I doubt she's still alive... he thought. Nami likely knew that, too.

The only label he saw around him was "Specter," which meant Chie might be a specter already. If she was, then unfortunately, he'd be forced to take her out.

"Chie Amatsu! Are you in here?" Yuichi called out.

"Gruuuuuh!" In response, the specters let out a choir of moans. Then they began to shuffle towards Yuichi.

"I wasn't asking for you guys!" he shouted.

A nearby specter attacked, attempting to grab him. Yuichi launched a fist at the part that looked most like a face. He felt it impact, and the specter went flying.

"You're not scary if I can punch you!" he added.

He mowed down the specters with kicks. He grabbed heads and plunged knees into faces. He snatched hands, broke elbows, twisted bodies, and tossed them against the floor.

And as he drove away the attacking specters, all the while he looked for Chie.

⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂

"What on earth? This is crazy..." Aiko said in disbelief.

She was used to seeing Yuichi in brawls, but watching him pound the hell out of those specter things with his bare fists had still spurred her to comment.

They were watching the battle on the screen of Mutsuko's tablet on one corner of the roof.

"Yeah! It's a shame I can't see it. I can see the weird ruined parallel world, but not the specters!" Mutsuko cried in chagrin.

Aiko's eyes could see the specters, though, even through the display, so she explained to Mutsuko what she was seeing.

"The key is imagination," Mutsuko said. "In other words, you picture your opponent in your mind and imagine punching them and twisting them and sending them flying! If you can do this, you can even fight spirits, no problem. And generally speaking, living beings will be stronger than incorporeal ones."

"So it's all about the mindset?" Aiko asked.

"Yes! It's a battle of wills, and Yu can never lose a battle of wills! He might look flighty, but he hates to lose, and he's overconfident, and cocky, too! The thought of losing never enters his mind!"

It was a horrible thing for his own sister to say, but Aiko sympathized a bit.

"Um, I understand why he can punch them, but why do the ghosts' attacks just pass through him in return?" Aiko wondered. She could see that Yuichi's attacks were effective, but not why the specters' attacks weren't.

"That's an imagination thing, too," explained Mutsuko. "In other words, you've gotta think, 'These attacks won't hurt me! There's no such thing as ghosts!' Then they won't hurt you."

"Um, am I the only one who thinks that's... kind of cheating?" Aiko said.

In other words, in the instant Yuichi hit them, he was imagining that the ghost existed, but when the ghost attacked him, he negated the attack by denying its existence.

"Well, it's usually the other way around!" Mutsuko declared. "I think it's good for the ghosts to get a taste of their own medicine!"

Mutsuko was right that this was the reverse of the way Aiko usually imagined it going. Most people believed that ghosts could harm people, but not the other way around.

"The question is, where is Chie? Eto, do you see her?" Mutsuko asked to a random part of thin air.

Aiko could see Nami, though, who was pointing to a corner of the screen.

"Sakaki! To the right, at the end there! Chie's in the seat on the rightmost

side, second desk from the front!” Aiko said, talking to the tablet.

*****

But Yuichi didn’t even need Aiko’s direction.

He had already defeated all the specters, and the seat furthest to the right, second from the front, contained a girl who had been there the whole time without budging an inch.

The label “Specter” hung over her head, but she was wearing a Seishin High girls’ uniform. There was no one else who looked like that, which meant this must be Chie. Nami had said she seemed different, but Yuichi didn’t notice anything strange about her other than a slightly hazy silhouette.

Yuichi walked up to Chie. “Are you Amatsu?”

“Who are you?” Chie asked in an empty voice, not even looking at him. Her eyes remained where they were, pointed to the front of the room.

“My name’s Yuichi Sakaki,” he said. “Nami Eto asked me to come here and save you.”

“Nami... Eto... Nami...”

“Yeah. You remember her?”

Chie muttered absently, and Yuichi began to wonder if she still had any right mind left. Would she still have any memories of her old life after becoming a specter?

“Nami... Yes... because of her... I was killed, and then...”

“Amatsu?” he asked.

Chie looked at Yuichi for the first time. There was a smile on her face: an emotionless, pasted-on smile that caused Yuichi to jump back from fright.

The attack that came from the side a second later grazed his face. Chie’s arms were still on the desk. But there was a third arm reaching out to grab Yuichi. Then, there was a fourth, and then a fifth.

The label above her head had changed to “Superficial Bodhisattva.”

“She feels less like a Bodhisattva and more like an Ashura, to me...” he

muttered.

A few months ago, he might not have been able to dodge this, but his experience fighting monsters had helped him to mature. The growth of a few arms wouldn't be enough to throw him off.

"Let me see... I don't know who you are, but perhaps I'll send your head to Nami," Chie said, her smile unwavering.

She still had her mind, it seemed... but that mind was a prisoner to madness.

⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂

Aiko and the others were heading for the athletics field.

"No matter what monster you face, don't be afraid, don't feel despair, and don't freeze up in horror," Mutsuko said. "I wanted to train Yu so that his first thought would always be, 'How do I beat it?' And he's finally getting there!"

As usual, the things Mutsuko said felt utterly inhumane, but Aiko had gotten used to that, too.

"If he keeps this up, he should make it in time," Mutsuko added in a whisper that Aiko couldn't quite make out.

They arrived on the field and met up with Chiharu. "How are things going? Most of the numbers within have vanished, so I assume that Yuichi Sakaki is winning. N-Not that I was worried! It's just that I wish to be the one to defeat him, myself!"

"Are you a tsundere-slash-rival now?" Aiko objected mildly.

"Yeah, I guess he's fighting the final boss?" Mutsuko said. "Though I sure hope he's not making Chie the final boss... wasn't he supposed to save her?"

"Um... well, in the state she's in, she's probably not capable of asking to be saved..." Nami said in a low voice, suddenly beside them.

They watched Yuichi fight through the tablet screen.

"Uh, am I the only one who feels bad for the specters?" Aiko asked.

"Yeah, this *is* a little off-putting..." Mutsuko mused.

Yuichi had pulled off Chie's arms and was beating her with them. Chie's

archaic smile remained, yet there was something strained about it now.

Chie continued growing more arms to attack Yuichi, but Yuichi dealt with them head-on. When an arm struck out at him, he struck back and caused it to vanish, or tore it off and threw it away. As this happened over and over again, Chie started to recoil in fear.

Yuichi had her on the ropes.

As they arrived at the window's edge, he mercilessly kicked Chie in the solar plexus, a hard enough blow to likely kill a human.

"Ah." Aiko looked up at the second floor classroom.

The window glass broke and Chie fell out. Yuichi fell after, to stomp her on the ground.

"Graaaagh!" Chie let out a desperate scream of a sort rarely heard from a girl. Her pasted-on smile disappeared, her face becoming tormented by fear and despair.

"Chie!" Unable to just sit back and watch this, Nami ran up and covered Chie protectively. Then she glared up at Yuichi, and cried, "Stop it!"

"Um... I got Amatsu out of there?" Yuichi said, brow furrowed.

"Sakaki... did you totally forget until now that you'd gone there to save her?" Aiko shouted.

"Yuichi Sakaki... this seems a bit excessive, even for you," Chiharu added.

Both of them were dumbstruck.

"Nami... why... you killed me... why save me?" the specter murmured.

"I didn't! I fell and died, too! It was an accident! No one was at fault!"

"Nami..." Chie responded weakly. Her form had grown dim and started to disappear.

"Chie, I'm sorry," Nami sobbed. "I'm sorry we fell! I'm sorry I couldn't save you!"

"No, I'm the one who's sorry," Chie murmured. "The grudge I held against you is the reason I ended up in this form..."

“Hey! Why is Chie disappearing?” Nami cried.

“I don’t really know...” Yuichi frowned, unsure of how to answer her.

She was likely disappearing because of Yuichi’s attacks, but it had been the only way to get her to listen to reason. Thus, Nami wouldn’t have been able to work things out with her if he hadn’t, so maybe things had worked out for the best.

“Maybe she’s trying to move on?” Mutsuko suggested. “She had turned into a specter, but if her grudge against Nami has disappeared, maybe she’s starting to disappear because she’s free.”

“Chie... I’ll go with you, then. My regret about you was the only thing keeping me here...” Nami’s form began to fade, as well.

As the two wrapped their arms around each other, they disappeared together.

*****

By the next day, Seishin High School was totally back to normal. Of course, hardly anyone had noticed anything strange to begin with, so most of the students were acting the same as ever. Even Reiko Takasugi, who was venerated for her sixth sense, didn’t seem to be acting any differently. She hadn’t seemed to notice the specter invasion in the school the day before, either.

“Sakaki, how have you been feeling? You don’t have much time left...” Reiko warned.

“Hmm, I feel pretty good. I don’t think you have to go out of your way to help me,” he replied. He had been walking with Aiko after class when he happened upon Reiko Takasugi in the hall.

Reiko had her groupies with her, as always. Misaki Gokumon, who had been absent the day before, was now present. Her face was rather pale, and she seemed unsteady on her feet. It seemed she had taken the day off yesterday because she was feeling sick, and it looked like she hadn’t fully recovered yet.

“I see. If you say so,” Reiko replied, brimming with confidence. Perhaps she

still expected him to give in to her in the end, as others had all done before.

As the group passed by, Yuichi unleashed a backfist. He hooked his fingers and struck Misaki's back with the back of his hand.

The head of the "Specter" went flying and dispersed, and the chain leading out from Misaki's waist vanished at the same time. It seemed Yuichi couldn't see the chains unless they were holding a spirit in them.

It was the specter that was causing Misaki's illness. Even if she caught them with chains, she couldn't control them, and it seemed the specter had possessed her.

That should do it for now, but the same thing could still happen again... he thought.

Misaki had to find a way to control her "Medium" ability. It might mean parting ways with Reiko, but that part wasn't any of Yuichi's business.

"Hey. Do you think I can banish specters, too?" Aiko suddenly asked, with eyes filled with hope.

"Hmm, you probably shouldn't try," Yuichi said after a moment's thought. "You can see them, and you probably could beat them, but I think it would make you vulnerable to spirit influences."

To acknowledge the existence of specters meant acknowledging the power they could have over you. Unless you had a firm belief that you could beat them, it seemed better not to get involved.

While they discussed the subject, they eventually arrived at the school's exit.

"Well, well! If it isn't Yuichi Sakaki!" Chiharu called out, her instrument case on her back.

"Don't act like we just happened to run into each other! We agreed to meet here!" he shot back. They had decided to patrol the school just to be safe, so she had been waiting for him there.

The three of them walked around the school together, but they found nothing amiss. At the end, they decided to stop by the roof.

There would no longer be a sad spirit there throwing herself off of it... or so

they thought when they came, but they were surprised by what they saw: Chie Amatsu, “Specter.”

“What are you doing here?” Yuichi demanded.

“Uh, I guess you could say I’d built up too much bad karma to move on,” she admitted. “Or maybe I ended up with new unfinished business?”

“Did Eto move on?” Yuichi asked.

“Yeah. I don’t know if it’s Heaven or the Pure Land, but she definitely went ‘upstairs.’ She hadn’t really done anything wrong. I got denied, though.”

“Does that mean the specters I beat up didn’t move on, either?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “They just sorta got blasted to bits. They might re-coalesce soon enough, but I doubt they’ll come back here again. They’re scared of you, Yuichi.”

“Why did you come back, then?” he asked.

“Hey... even if I am a spirit, we can make it work as long as we can touch, right?”

“Huh?” He couldn’t understand what she was talking about.

“See, I died before I could get a boyfriend, and I really feel like I missed out,” she said. “I never had a proper youth, and I still want a proper high school experience. So I thought... since there’s a boy here who can touch ghosts, that’s pretty perfect!”

“Unacceptable! I shall be forced to purge you myself!” Chiharu shouted. She began to unpack the bow from the instrument case on her back. “Yuichi Sakaki is a part of my harem! No specter shall ever lay hand upon him!”

“When did I become a part of your harem?” Yuichi muttered.

Chiharu began twanging the bow string again and again. The invisible arrows flew in a torrent, but Chie blasted them away easily. She had been sort of like the specters’ boss, which suggested she must have had quite a lot of power.

“Damn! And isn’t this change of character a bit too sudden?!” Chiharu shouted. Perhaps because her attacks didn’t worked, Chiharu began to scold

the specter on other, more random points.

“Sakaki... this ability you have that Takeuchi mentioned, to befriend the people you beat up... it’s really something...” Aiko said with a furrow of her brow.

“I do not have that ability! At least... I don’t think I do, anyway...”

Yuichi couldn’t actually say with confidence that he didn’t.


SPECTER

Epilogue: “Protagonist”

Something was wriggling on top of the blanket.

The sensation woke Ryoma Takei up for a moment before indolence overtook him again.

It wasn’t very heavy. Even though it was on top of him, he could probably sleep through it.

Just a little while longer. Ryoma pulled the blanket over his head and tried again to escape from reality.

“Wake up, Big Brother!” The thing began to pound Ryoma through the blanket.

This was one thing he couldn’t sleep through. Realizing that convincing was required, Ryoma poked his head out from below the covers.

Big round eyes gazed back at him. Long, glossy black tails were bound up on both sides of her head, and she was wearing a middle school uniform. It was Ryoma’s little sister, Shiori.

“Little Sis... Big Bro wants to sleep a little longer,” he complained. “Can’t you see that from how I’ve been acting?”

“But look at the clock! You’re gonna be late!” Shiori pointed at the clock on the wall.

“Late, huh? Being late once or twice in my life won’t hurt anything,” he said. “It’ll be fine. Go on without me, Shio—”

“Hey, Ryoma! Don’t give Shiori grief!” The one who opened the door was the girl who lived next door, Mio Morikawa. Her long black hair was bound back into a single tail. Her almond-shaped eyes conveyed such fire behind them that Ryoma had a hard time fighting her.

They were childhood friends. They went to the same high school and were even in the same class — a tie he just couldn’t seem to sever.

“How many times are you gonna be late this month? Get a grip, already!” she snapped.

“What does it matter to you if I’m late?” he demanded. “You think you’re my mom or something?”

“What?!” Mio shouted.

Ryoma sat up. Now that Mio was here, there was no way he was getting back to sleep. Her presence also shook off the last of his exhaustion.

Ryoma waved his hands to shoo them both off. “Fine, I’ll get changed. Just get out.”

The two reluctantly left the room.

“I think I’ve really gotta analyze if it’s even necessary for me to go to school these days...” Ryoma muttered.

Ryoma was really busy. He’d gone to bed around 4:00 that morning and was extremely sleep-deprived.

But if he said out of the blue that he didn’t want to go to school anymore, his sisters would worry, so he’d just have to find a way to better manage his time.

Ryoma got dressed and headed to the kitchen to eat.

His big sister, Kotori, was waiting there, making breakfast. For some reason, Mio was at the table, too, looking rather unhappy. Kotori, though, was smiling as warmly as ever.

Their parents had both gone on a business trip overseas, so the three children lived there together, with Kotori assuming the role of mother. Looking at Kotori’s face, he decided once again that he didn’t want to worry her.

After rushing through breakfast, Ryoma was hurried by Mio to school. It was his usual morning routine.

Starting from his usual morning, he had his usual classes, then he returned home. He returned to his room as he usually did, and since he had no other commitments, he considered sleeping for a while. But as usual, events wouldn’t leave him alone.

An unfamiliar girl was waiting for him in his room.

She had red hair and wore a faded dress, and was sitting on the desk, reading a book as though perfectly at home.

Ryoma sighed. He tossed his bag aside and threw himself onto the bed.

“Oh? You don’t seem very surprised to see me,” the girl said without lifting her eyes from the book.

“I’m not,” he said. “I’ve had this happen a ridiculous number of times before. Girls come out of my TV and my computer and my books, and so many have come from the sky, I’ve lost count. There was even a girl who came out of the ground recently. Compared to all that, coming home to find a girl I’ve never seen before reading a book seems pretty normal.”

“I see,” the girl said. “That’s exactly what I was hoping for.”

“You know, you don’t talk like most girls nowadays,” he commented. “So, what do you want? You look like you’re from another world, right? You want me to beat another demon lord in a fantasy world? Stop a space war? I’m in the middle of a death game VRMMO right now, so it’ll have to wait.”

“Your nonplussed attitude suggests a wealth of experience, as well. But wait just a minute, please. I’ll explain after I finish reading my book.”

“Ah, I’ve never been through this one before,” he said. “It’s always people insisting I help them without even asking about my schedule. I’ve never seen someone putting off the explanation to read a book after they came to me.” He tried a little sarcasm, but the girl ignored him.

Ryoma waited.

At last, the girl closed the book. “Yuichi really is interesting. Commonplace encounters with the bizarre, huh? That sure is how it felt. Now, what were we talking about again?”

“If you don’t want anything, leave.”

The girl smiled. “I’m just kidding around. My name is Ende. I came here to give you an invitation.”

“To what? I’m busy, you know,” he shot back. “I can’t just go off with you out

of the blue. We can talk later. Just put your name on the waiting list, and when it's your turn, I'll deal with you."

"Don't worry about that," she said. "The stories have all moved on. There's nothing left for you to do. You should be free for a while, so please, hear me out."

"Huh? What do you mean, the stories moved on?" he asked, confused.

"The stories moved on without you," she said. "Most of them reached a bad end, I'm sorry to say."

"Huh?" Ryoma had no idea what Ende was talking about.

"Go ahead and see for yourself." Ende picked the HMD — a full-face helmet called a Head Mounted Display — off the top of his desk and tossed it to him.

Ryoma scrambled to catch it.

It had been sent to him out of the blue one day. The letter that had come with it had said it was for playing a VRMMO, and while he'd found it unbelievable, when he'd put it on, he had found all five senses immersed in a virtual world of a game.

Ryoma put on the HMD and started the game. A world in ruins stretched out before his eyes. There was no sign of anyone there.

If you died in this game, you died in real life. You could log out, but to do it, you needed key items, which were hard to come by. He didn't know what had happened, but he found it hard to believe everyone had managed to log out.

Ryoma logged out, removed the HMD, and glared at Ende.

"It's not like I did it," she said. "Don't glare at me that way. The story just moved on while you were away. You knew that could happen, right? What made you think that events couldn't occur if you weren't there?"

Now that she mentioned it, Ryoma realized that he had gotten the idea into his head that he would resolve everything without issue.

"Now, how the upcoming negotiation goes was going to depend on your reaction, and... you don't seem to be very angry, do you?" Ende added.

“Yeah,” Ryoma said. “I mean, I was feeling kind of paralyzed and approaching it with a sort of a ‘this again?’ feeling. If this had happened because I’d failed, I might feel differently, but as it is, it’s sort of a relief.”

That was how he really felt. He’d been drawn into situation after situation with no breaks in between, and he’d taken every one of them upon his shoulders. Lately he’d been keeping it up purely based on force of habit, and he’d given up on the idea that he could ever escape from that destiny.

“I see,” Ende said. “I have good news for you, then. If you help me, I’ll release you from all of that destiny. I’m preparing to participate in the Divine Vessels War. The Evil God will grant any wish to whoever gathers them all up. If you want to quit this life and be a normal person again, it wouldn’t be hard to wish for that. Of course, if there’s anything else you want, I can grant that, too.”

“The reason you came to me is because of the kind of person I am, right?” he asked. “I feel like that’s the reason you’re inviting me. But does that mean you understand what’s up with me?”

People had made vague overtures at him so many times, and drawn him into so many strange ongoing conflicts. At first he’d thought it was a coincidence, but it’d kept happening so much that it had almost felt like there must be some higher power at work.

“I do,” she said. “I’m hoping to acquire a power that you have. To put it simply, you’re a ‘Protagonist.’ Of course, there are a lot of different kinds of protagonists. ‘Datesim Protagonist’ and ‘Adult Datesim Protagonist,’ for instance. But you are generically and abstractly a ‘Protagonist.’ You draw stories to you and end up involved in them, and you have the power to draw stories to their end.”

“Protagonist...” he said slowly.

It did make sense, now that she mentioned it. It was said that everyone was the protagonist of their own life, but she wasn’t saying it in that way. She meant that he was the protagonist of a story with a dramatic plot. Ryoma had never considered that before. Somewhere in his heart, he may have dismissed it as an arrogant way of thinking.

“If I’m participating, then I want to win,” Ende said. “So I’ve been thinking

about what my best piece would be if I want to win... and I settled on ‘Protagonist.’ Of course, if we take this to extremes, it’s always the writer who decides how a story ends. But if there’s a protagonist, things will probably turn out in a way that’s good for that protagonist. In other words, I want you to use your power to bend stories to your benefit — your self-preservation power, or in other words, your protagonist effect.”

“What the heck is a protagonist effect?” he demanded.

“For instance, you’re in a gunfight but you don’t get hit by bullets, or you just happen to acquire a new power in the face of an overwhelming enemy, or you have an ally suddenly run in to save you when things are looking bleak, or you’re able to pilot a robot you’ve never even seen before, or you go on a trip and just happen to run into a storm that gets you trapped in a place a murder is taking place, or the sword you buy at a weapons shop just happens to be a legendary magic sword. Does that make sense to you?”

It all sounded familiar to Ryoma. He hadn’t thought much of it all at the time, but it did seem everything that had happened to him had been the result of this “protagonist effect.”

“So, what do you think?” Ende asked. “Will you work with me? If you want a reward besides the wish, let me know. As long as it’s realistic, I can probably provide it.”

“Sure, I’m in,” Ryoma said. “If it’ll mean I can live a proper life from now on.”

He agreed to participate without even asking what the war was about. Ryoma had found Ende’s proposal much more enticing than anyone else’s so far.

Afterword

Here we are at volume five.

I wasn't sure how long I could keep this up, but I'm managing it pretty well, I guess.

This volume has a slightly different format than usual. It's a collection of daily life stories coming off the fourth volume, and each story ties together loosely in a way that will continue on into the sixth volume.

With short stories, I have this idea in my head that you need to explain each one, so I'll try that here. This might contain light spoilers, so I hope you'll read the stories before you read any further.

Light Novel Conference:

There is no connection between Orihara's situation and mine. It's about how new light novels aren't selling very well nowadays, and the need to think of something that will sell.

Hinoenma:

You don't see many people avoiding having children because they're a Hinoenma, but the urban legend was very prevalent until recently, so I've always found it fascinating.

A Challenge From Chiharu Dannoura:

It was fun thinking about how Dannoura Archery worked. I haven't used all my ideas yet, so if I get the chance to bring her back, I'd like to unveil more.

Mika:

Based on the Mary doll urban legend. It's a bit of a cliche, but I mainly just

wanted to do that closing scene.

The Yokai Fave-Stealer:

I liked the explanation of the osaki, so I remembered it, and I stuck the recent internet slang “Fave-Stealer” onto it. It’s like a modern yokai legend.

Yori’s So Popular:

I mainly wanted to do a story about how popular Yori is, but I feel like it just became another story where Yuichi goes nuts...

Spirit:

Is this the first time the Narikama ritual has been used in a light novel? I abbreviated the ritual itself a lot, but it more or less goes like that.

Now for the acknowledgments.

To my editor, I’m sorry that I barely make it (at least, I think I do) every single time.

To An2A who handled the illustrations, thank you for providing wonderful illustrations once again. I’m happy that Yori finally got the cover page.

Well, see you next volume!

Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

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My Big Sister Lives in a Fantasy World: The Strongest Little Brother's Commonplace Encounters with the Bizarre?!

by Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Emily Sorensen

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