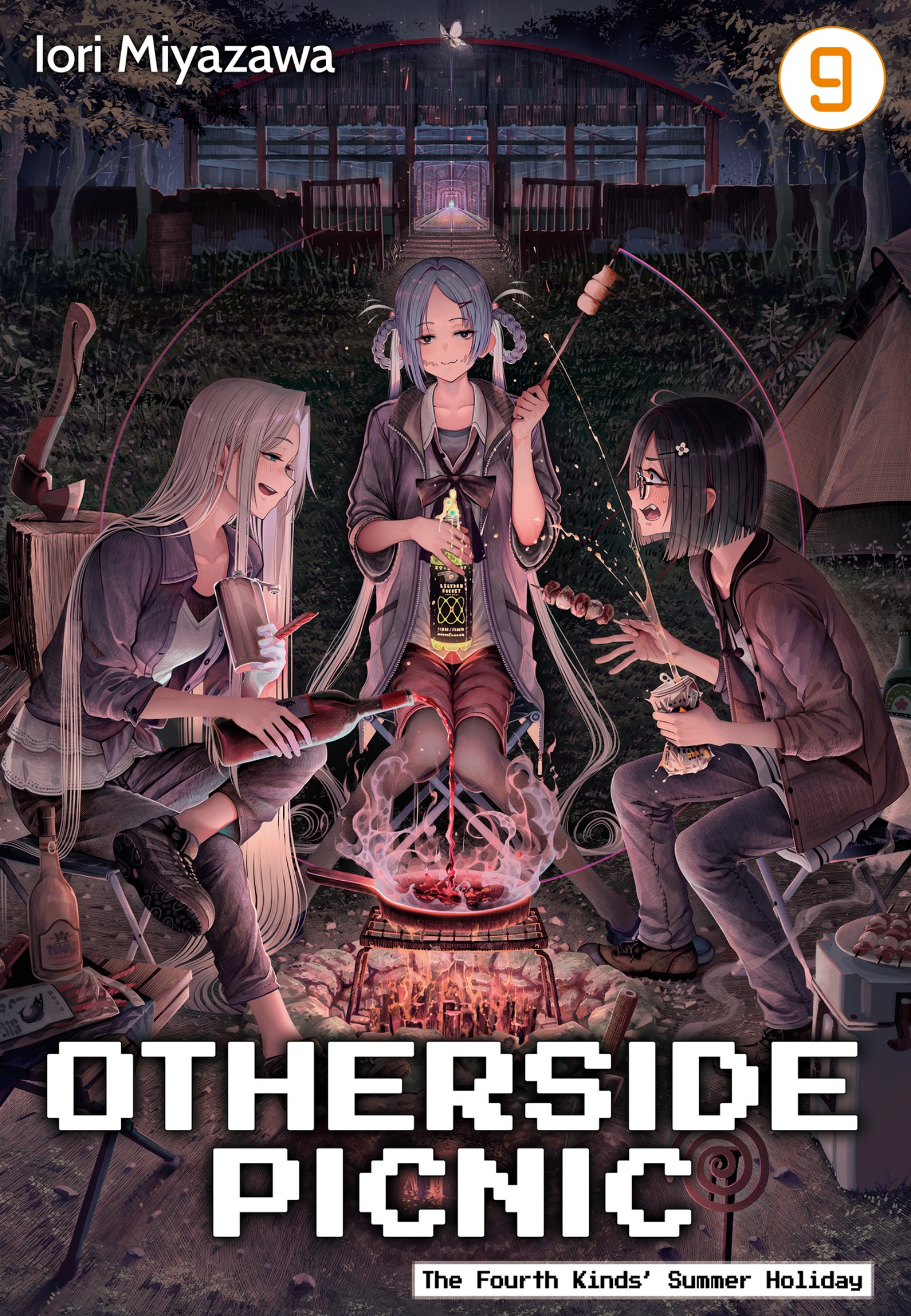

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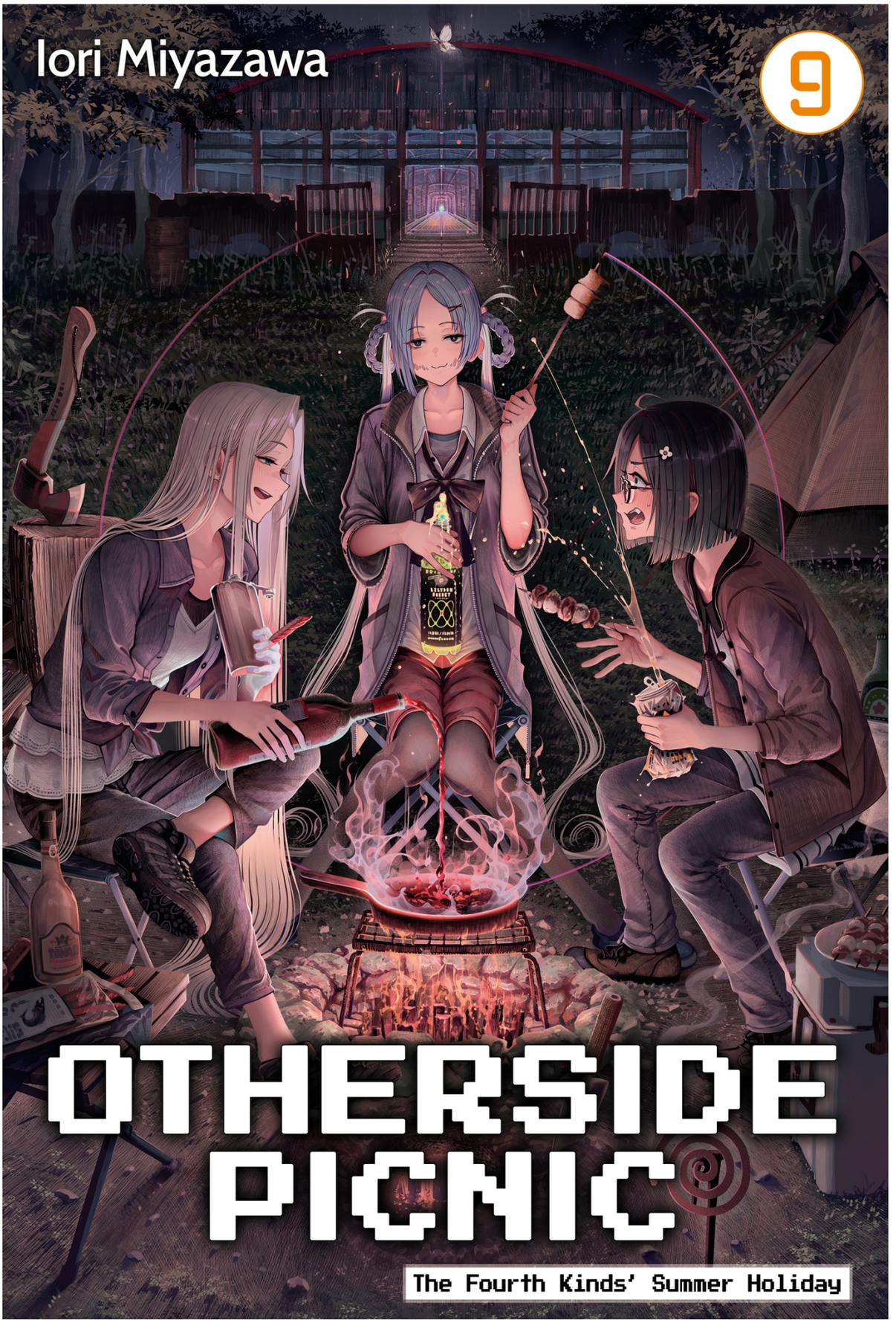

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1

The Mayoiga was dead.

Toriko and I stood before the ruins of the mansion, shocked, for quite some time.

The building, a compromise between Eastern and Western aesthetics, was falling apart, as though it had been decades since anybody lived there. The roof and supporting columns were still just barely intact, but the windows were broken, the doors had collapsed, and even from out here we could see the wind and rain had eaten away at the interior. In every nook and cranny, there was no trace of how it had once been well-kept.

“Do you think the two of them are in there…?” I tried asking, but Toriko shook her head.

“Even if they are in there…”

She let the rest of that statement go unsaid. I knew well enough what she meant without her finishing it.

Even if they are in there, in all likelihood, they’re no longer alive…

So thoroughly had life vanished from the structure in front of us that the thought came naturally.

The house where Todate—the hunter—and her partner Hana—the hunting dog—had lived had felt like one of the few safe places on the Otherside. Even though it was a strange building which maintained itself even when no one was around, it possessed a relaxed atmosphere that had made it feel that way.

The ruins of the Mayoiga made plain that that had been no more than an illusion.

“Anyway, we’ve got to check,” Toriko said, trying to change gears.

She was right. Even if Todate and Hana were no longer living, we had to see that for ourselves. We’d come here to see if they were safe.

As we checked the safeties on our rifles, I recalled how Todate had praised the way we used our firearms.

“You good to go?” I asked. Toriko nodded.

With that, we stepped into the Mayoiga, which had ceased to

be a place of safety.



It had only been a few days since I encountered a mujina that had taken the form of Toriko and wandered into the Otherside while riding a bus that ran near my house. Perhaps, fortunately, I'd arrived in a spot I knew: the bus stop on the mountain road that was below the Mayoiga. Considering it was the dangerous night time of the Otherside, I'd fled into this mansion without even thinking about it.

At that point, the Mayoiga had still been intact, but there had been no one there. I didn't even find a trace of Todate or Hana. Left with no other option, I'd decided to shelter here for the night, borrowing a room on the second floor where I'd lain down to sleep, but…

Although I had somehow made it back to the surface world, I still didn't know if Todate and Hana were all right. I'd been too busy with my own problems at the time to think about it, but their well-being had been weighing on me ever since. That being the case, once things had settled down after everything that happened between me and Toriko, I'd talked to her about it.

When I told her I was worried about the two of them, and suggested we go and check in on them, Toriko instantly agreed, just like I'd thought she would, though when we'd first met the pair, she'd been too shy to really talk with them. That was one respect in which Toriko never changed. She was a woman who could worry wholeheartedly for people she'd only met once.

"You've changed, Sorawo," she said. I was kind of happy to hear it.

"You think?"

"Before, you didn't seem to care what happened to other people."

I wasn't going to deny it. Even now, there was still a part of me that was like that, but I didn't feel like I could abandon people so easily anymore. Not Kozakura, not Akari, and not even Runa Urumi. We'd only met Todate and Hana once, and while they were friendly, I'd never got the sense that they were interested in us. Yet not only was I not ready to abandon them, I was actively worried. Why?

"I've been telling you all along. You're a kind girl, Sorawo."

"Am I, though…?"

I had to tilt my head to the side at this. Toriko worried about others because of a kindness that came from deep inside her heart, but I couldn't help but feel it was different with me. If what

was making me act in this way was also “kindness,” like Toriko said it was, then my kindness felt like it had been added to me later, a sort of “external kindness.”

Regardless, we set out once our gear was ready. We traveled from the DS Research parking lot, through the Round Hole, to the Farm in Hannou, then took one of the gates there to the Otherside. The AP-1’s engine echoed across the silent plains, and we took the same mountain ridge road as before, parking the AP-1 at the bus stop, then climbing the stone steps to the wall that surrounded the Mayoiga. The glimpses of the building we caught on the other side of that wall showed it was in bad shape, so we already had the sense something was wrong. We circled around to the front, a feeling of unease building in our chests, and as we peered through the gate, we saw the Mayoiga had fallen into ruin.

The flooring was covered in dust; it creaked under every step. During our first visit, it had been so clean we’d hesitated to enter with our shoes on. There were gaping holes and places where the tatami mats had rotted and fallen through the floor. It was so bad I’d have assumed it was abandoned and left exposed to the elements for years.

“And it used to be so pretty,” Toriko murmured sadly as she looked at the kitchen.

The dust that had blown in through the distant back entrance lay in a thick layer that stretched all the way to the sink. The cupboards lay on their side, as though they’d fallen over in an earthquake, and shards of fine china that had been thrown from them lay scattered across the floor. Even the lid of the oven was covered in rust. Were those dried leaves that lay in a pile against the wall the herbs that had once hung from the ceiling?

“It wasn’t like this when you came here alone, right?”

“Not at all… It was empty then, but the building was fine.”

“I wonder what happened.”

I could only shake my head in response.

We climbed the stairs, moving cautiously to avoid our feet breaking through any of them. The second floor was in just as bad shape as the first had been, and no one responded when we called out.

The wonderful tiled bathroom with its retro-style sink, the hall that connected to the first floor… It had all fallen to ruin, a shadow of its former self. Because I had seen it back then, a

feeling of sadness won out over any sense of alarm. In the large walk-in closet where we had once played dress up, the floor was covered with ragged clothes and there was nowhere for us to stand.

As we were checking a row of guest rooms, Toriko, who was taking the lead, stopped still in front of one of the doors.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Look," Toriko said without looking away from the door. She held her AK so she was ready to shoot from the hip. Standing beside her to look inside, I saw the messy bed. On top of the wrinkled sheets, the blanket was curled into a ball. Like there was someone—or something—cowering underneath it.

"Todate-san? Hana?" I called out, but the lump in the bed didn't move. We watched for some time, but there was no sign of breathing. Toriko and I exchanged glances. We were probably thinking the same thing.

We stepped into the room. No response. I bent down, grabbed one corner of the blanket which was hanging down onto the floor, and then, steeling myself, I gave it a hard tug.

The thing under the blanket was revealed. I had half expected we'd find Todate, or Hana, or perhaps both of them, dead. But we didn't.

There was a lustrous mass on the messy sheets. It was translucent and flesh-colored, with veins of gold running through it. Maybe if you were to crush a figure of a woman with golden locks that was made using translucent clay, it would look like this.

"What *is* this...?" Toriko said, bewildered.

Taking another look around the room, it finally sunk in. The position of the bed, the little bedside table, and the open window. I recognized them.

"This...is the room I stayed in last time I was here."

"Wait, then what does that make this?" Toriko asked, pointing to the lump on the bed.

"It's...what used to be a fake Toriko, I think."

The thing I had seen that night. A mujina, taking the form of Toriko. It had appeared from under the covers, and my memory cut out at that point. I could try to remember, but I got nothing more than fuzzy images. It had unmistakably been Toriko's face, but...it had been like it was boiling.

"Urkh...!" I covered my mouth, and looked away, resisting the

urge to throw up.

"You okay?"

"Sorry, was having a flashback there."

I took a deep breath, then turned to face her again. After giving a nod to a worried Toriko to let her know I was fine, I looked down at the bed.

"This is that mujina?" she asked.

"Probably."

"You think...it's dead?"

Toriko prodded it gently with the barrel of her AK. There was a hard *clink* as it touched it.

"This thing...wasn't even alive to begin with, huh?"

The mujina didn't so much as budge. I hesitantly reached out with my hand, poking it with the tip of my finger. Even through my glove, I could feel how hard it was.

"It's glass," I concluded.

"So a glass figure was left where the mujina used to be, then?"

"Either that, or...it changed, maybe. Transformed?"

As I cocked my head to the side, Toriko looked up as if she'd had a realization. "We've seen something like this before."

"Huh? Where?"

"The first time we took the AP-1 for a long drive. Don't you remember?"

Now that she mentioned it, I did. It was last year, on Christmas Eve. We entered the gate in Kozakura's yard, and traveled to the gate at DS Research.

"That time all the kudans showed up..."

"Yeah! We were driving in the dark, and there was something like this lying on the road."

Oh, right. Back then, a glass sculpture of a woman with the head of a cow had suddenly appeared.

"What did we do about it?" I asked. "We didn't smash it or anything, right?"

"We did nothing. But later, one that wasn't glass, but more like...I dunno, a dead body...showed up..."

"Oh, yeah... That's right."

My memories of all this were a bit hazy. Maybe it was because I'd felt psychologically cornered at the time, or because the kiss that came after that at the love hotel and Toriko's Christmas present had overwritten them.

Toriko looked at what remained of her impostor with a mix of

curiosity and revulsion. It felt awkward to watch, so I spoke up. “You shouldn’t stare. It’s not visible now, but its face was super creepy.”

“Why’s it naked? I don’t think I like that.”

“I didn’t like it either.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“‘Why not?’ Some freak that had turned into you came at me naked. How could that not be unpleasant?”

“Did you wish it was the real me instead?”

“I didn’t have time to think about that!”

My irritation must have amused Toriko, because she burst out laughing. She crouched down and picked up the blanket, then threw it over the statue, hiding it.

“The mujina attacked, and you ran away…but how’d you get back to the surface?” Toriko moved away from the bed, and approached the window where I was standing.

“I dunno. Before I knew it, I was at DS Research.”

I kept looking out the window to keep her from reading my expression. Even if she tore my mouth open, I would never admit to having woken up in Runa Urumi’s room, with my head resting in her lap as she petted it. But if Toriko saw my face now, she’d know for sure I was hiding something. It was incredibly difficult to keep my thoughts hidden when she was around.

Toriko hugged me from behind. I felt her lips on the back of my head.

“I’m glad you were safe.”

“That tickles,” I grumbled as I kept looking outside. Below was the gravel-covered area where a car could pull up to the front of the Western-style part of the Mayoiga. That night, a large, black car had arrived, and… No, or was it a large, black bull?

“Where could Todate-san and Hana have gone?” Toriko wondered, as her lips, still against the back of my head, made my skin vibrate.

“One thing’s for sure: they aren’t in this house.”

“I thought they might be dead, but…”

“If they are, I think there’ll be some trace. If the Mayoiga didn’t automatically clean it up.”

“If anything, the place has only gotten more dirty.”

“Hey, have you started nibbling on my hair?” I said before breaking free of her, unable to take how much it tickled. “If they did go somewhere, I have an idea where it might be…”

“Where?” asked Toriko.

“The bottom of that hill.”

On the other side of the Mayoiga, there was a downward slope where it was too dark to see what was at the bottom of it. I couldn’t place my finger on precisely why, but I’d felt a strange fear when we’d approached the hill road. I had since had repeated dreams of something horrifying—a dark beast, an ox-drawn cart, a portable shrine, it was different every time—climbing that hill. I think that the black car that appeared last time I was here must have come up that hill too. I’d thought it was the master of the Mayoiga, and that had terrified me.

“Down there, huh…” Toriko’s expression darkened.

“I get how you feel. The place is kinda…scary, right?”

After I said this, Toriko immediately shook her head.

“But we’ve gotta go. I’m worried about the two of them.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

We left the bedroom, then moved down the hall and came out into the entrance hall which had a two-story ceiling. Taking the curved staircase there, we descended to the first floor. The double doors that led outside were wide open, and leaves and branches that had been blown in by the wind lay scattered across the floor.

Toriko stopped, then crouched. “Look, Sorawo. There’s footsteps.”

“You’re right.”

There were small, muddy footprints dotted around the floor of the hall. They weren’t human. They looked like they were made by hooves, with two sharp points—a deer’s, maybe? It had come in the door, tread on the faded burgundy carpet, wandered around near the wall, and then…

The prints continued through a half open door. It led into the room with the fireplace, where we had been treated to kusa mochi. I peered through the door, then doubled back in surprise.

“Ah!”

“What?” Toriko asked.

“The deer. It’s in there.”

The room, which had once been like a stylish café, was now in a state of disarray. Tables and chairs had been upended, and only ashes remained in the fireplace. Even the light that shone in through the windows felt gloomy. In the middle of it all stood a single deer.

The deer held its head high, not stirring as it stared into space. No, that wasn't it. Those bulges of flesh near its eyes were obstructing its sight. It probably couldn't see anything, but it remained still despite our arrival. It couldn't see us, but surely it could hear us.

"Is it...alive?" Toriko asked, seemingly mystified.

I didn't get it either. Unlike the glass sculpture from earlier, it looked alive, but also showed no sign of breathing. I entered the room, hesitantly approaching it. No response. Its antlers, pointed up towards the chandelier on the ceiling, were full of cobwebs.

"Maybe not. Hold on, is it stuffed...?"

No sooner had the words left my mouth than, like ice suddenly melting, the deer burst into motion.

Ignoring me as I cried out in surprise, the deer jumped around at random, kicking away the remains of tables. The way it had gone from standing stock-still to this half-crazed frenzy, it was like it was trying to shake off an invisible swarm of insects, or dodge a hail of bullets.

As we stood there, too shocked to act, the deer ran into all sorts of things, and then it bolted out the door. We heard its hooves on the entrance hall floor, and then the gravel outside, receding into the distance.

"Th-That surprised me..."

I let Toriko throw her arms around me. I patted her on the back, thinking, *She never did this kind of stuff before.* Seeing Toriko act "like a girl" always shook me up a bit. I understood it was a show of our closeness, and she did it as a way of having me indulge her, but every time she did something like this, it just made me take a step back and think, *I guess humans do this kind of stuff, huh.* I didn't hate it. It just surprised me.

"I guess it wasn't stuffed, huh?" I remarked.

"You think it was looking for food?"

"Could've been. It wouldn't have come in here while Todate-san and Hana were around, but now that they're not anymore, it came in to explore. I'll bet that's it."

"We must've scared it. I feel kind of bad."

When Toriko pulled away from me, there was a worried look on her face. "Todate-san said there were bears too, didn't she?" she asked.

"She did. That's been worrying me too."

It felt like there was a good chance the two of them could have been assaulted by a bear. Even veteran hunters could still be caught unaware, and on top of that, this was the Otherside. We didn't even know how bears lived here.

"Let's go," I said. Toriko silently nodded.

I recalled Todate mentioning that Hana's previous owner had been taken out by a bear too. Had they encountered a bear, or the master of the Mayoiga? In either event, I was practically certain all we would find was their remains.

2

Heading out the Mayoiga's gate, there was an empty lot paved with gravel. The hill road in question was on the other side. Verdant branches reached out from either side to cover the road, keeping the slope dark even in the middle of the day. I'd have been hesitant to go down a road like this even in the surface world.

"How's it look?" asked Toriko.

"I looked with my right eye, and there doesn't seem to be anything."

"Okay. In that case..." Toriko said with an expression that was anything but okay, then flicked on the light that was attached to her AK. I did the same. Two powerful beams cut through the darkness...and were swallowed up by it.

It was dark even when we shone a flashlight into it? It was like we were dealing with some horror game lighting here. I almost said as much, but thought better of it. There was no need to go out of my way to make Toriko more uneasy.

We steeled ourselves, then stepped onto the hill.

Gravel crunched under our feet. Even if we turned our lights off, our presence would be blatantly obvious. The incline was a gentle one, but the poor visibility and footing made it feel much steeper. If we slipped, there was no telling how far we might tumble down.

The canopy of branches overhead rustled in the wind. We used our lights to alternately check the ground at our feet and the area around us as we descended into the darkness. Occasionally, I would get the feeling I'd seen something in the trees. But when I looked again, there was nothing there. I wasn't picking anything up with my right eye either. Had it been a trick

of the light, or had I spotted the shadows of animals that had adapted to the Otherside using my peripheral vision? We continued on without me figuring out the answer.

Toriko stopped suddenly. “You hear that?” she whispered. I stopped to listen as well.

“Water…?” I suggested.

“Right?” she agreed.

We could hear water, but we didn’t know where. When we went deer hunting with Todate, we’d seen a small river near here, so that wasn’t surprising. But the sounds that we were hearing now weren’t like the smooth flow of a river, but more rhythmic, like waves.

Waves? Here? As I was thinking how weird that was, the slope leveled out. The trees thinned, and our field of vision opened up. But despite that, it was still dark around us. It felt like a little sunshine wouldn’t be out of place here, and yet when we looked up towards the sky it was completely dark.

“It’s night already…?” Toriko wondered.

“That can’t be right. I mean…”

The hands on my wristwatch still said it was noon. We’d set out with time to spare, assuming it would take a while to find Todate and Hana, so I knew there ought to be plenty of time still before sundown.

“Couldn’t it actually be midnight instead?” Toriko expressed her concerns as she peered at my watch. We had experienced time weirdness while on the Otherside a number of times in the past, so her worry wasn’t exactly baseless.

“I dunno… There’s no stars in the sky, so maybe that rules out it being night.”

But if it’s not night, what is this darkness?

I turned to look back. The circle of light was able to just barely illuminate the hill road we’d come down.

“Hold on,” I said. “If we keep going, we may not be able to go back.”

Toriko came to a stop. “You’re right. What do you wanna do?”

“Look around a bit.”

I set my backpack down and stuck my hand inside, relying on my sense of touch to dig out some packages containing thin, sticklike objects. Checking them under the light, I saw they had loud colors like green, pink, yellow, and blue, which seemed totally out of place here. Although, I couldn’t read the brand

name, there was no mistaking these were glow sticks. I had bought them thinking they would come in handy somewhere. They're little sticks that use a chemical reaction to emit light for a while after you bend them, and you can find them in the party corner of any hundred-yen shop.

I know they were probably originally developed to be used at places like concert halls, but they fit the bill for what we needed here too. I immediately unwrapped one. When I held it with both hands and gave it a bend, I felt something snap, and the stick started to glow. Its fluorescent pink light lit up the area around us.

"Wow, so they're this bright, huh!"

I could see Toriko's shocked face clearly in the pink light. The light was more powerful than expected, so even though I was the one who had snapped it, I was surprised too. They were supposed to last around eight hours, and if they were this bright, they were more than good enough to be used as lights. I tossed the light I was holding down the hill road, then snapped another one. This one was yellow. I dropped it at my feet once it lit up.

"I wanna do it too!"

I gave one to Toriko, who was holding her hand out for it, eyes sparkling, and she tore the package off like she couldn't wait any longer. Her excitement was palpable from her expression. When she snapped the stick, a blue light radiated out.

"This is fun," she said.

"They're useful," I responded. "I'd heard they could be used as lights in an emergency, so I thought they would come in handy, but I'm really glad I bought them now."

We started walking again. Toriko held up the glow stick in her hand like a child proud of her new toy. I wanted her to just drop it on the ground somewhere, but...whatever, it was fine.

Once we were all the way down the hill and things leveled out, the ground switched from gravel to bare dirt. It was a bit moist, but not to the point of being muddy.

This time, I was the one to spot the footprints.

"Toriko, look..."

When she saw what I was shining my light on, Toriko cried out in surprise. "Are they Hana's...?"

"They could be."

The small paw prints looked like a dog's. They came from the

direction of the hill, just like we had.

If these prints were Hana's, then we might find Todate's nearby. With that in mind, I raised my flashlight to look around the area, but froze solid when I saw something I hadn't expected.

No, maybe I could have predicted it.

The area around us was totally covered in footprints.

Not just one or two kinds either. The moist earth bore the marks of dozens of people coming and going. But it wasn't just footprints; there were tire tracks, hoof marks, and prints left by creatures I couldn't even identify. It was a mess of footprints. Even if Todate's were among them, we'd never be able to tell them apart.

"It's like in my dream..." I murmured.

"Huh?"

"I've seen all sorts of things climbing that hill in my dreams."

"This is the first I'm hearing about it."

"I don't think I mentioned it. I mean, they were dreams."

When I said that, Toriko glared at me, upset. "Tell me these things."

"Oh, come on, they were just dreams."

Toriko dropped her glow stick to the ground, and held her AK with both hands. "What happens after that in the dreams?"

"I dunno. I woke up whenever something got to the top of the hill."

"What about Todate-san and Hana?"

"I dunno." I shook my head, then snapped another glow stick. "For now, let's try following the footprints. If we find Hana, I'm sure Todate-san will be with her."

"Okay."

We continued onward. The tracks on the ground grew more distinct as we went. At first, it had only been slightly damp, but it was gradually getting wetter.

The sounds of water we'd been hearing all this time were getting closer. There was no mistaking it now. It was the sound of waves. But it didn't feel like the loud sound of ocean waves crashing against the shore. These probably were ripples at most.

Eventually, our lights lit up the surface of the water, backing up my suspicion.

A flat pool of water spread out before us in the darkness. It was still, like a sheet of black glass, and if it weren't for the fact

that the faintest of waves were washing up against the shore, I might have thought it was frozen.

There was no sea breeze in the air. I wasn't about to taste it to check, but it was probably fresh water. We'd seen the Otherside's ocean when we'd gone to Okinawa. But this gave me a different impression. It was quiet, like an underground lake. Maybe it actually was a lake. Even with our flashlights, we couldn't see the opposite shore, so it seemed possible that it might be that big.

I turned back to see the glow sticks we'd dropped lighting the way back. At the very least, there was nothing dangerous in the area their light reached. With that confirmed, I looked at the lake again.

"Sorawo, are those..."

I looked down at what Toriko was looking at. There were small boot prints next to what we assumed were Hana's paw prints.

"You think they're Todate-san's?" I asked.

"It looks like a proper boot, so I'd say so."

I couldn't recall what kind of footwear Todate had been wearing, but as Toriko said, the imprints in the dirt here weren't from the sort of flat-bottomed shoe that you'd wear in the city, but outdoor shoes that left clear marks. It made sense to me that they would have been left by Todate.

Two sets of tracks, one human, and one canine, continued on.

"No way..." Toriko murmured.

The footprints vanished into the water; straight in, with no sign of hesitation.

3

We stood by the waterside, looking down into the lake in silence for some time.

"Jusui...?" I wondered aloud.

"Was that French?" Toriko gave me an inquisitive look.

"Huh?" I said, confused.

Bewildered, Toriko tried again. "Did you just say 'Je suis'?"

"I said 'jusui'... It's written with the characters for 'enter' and 'water.'"

"Ohh... Err, I assume it means to enter the water and drown?"

"More or less. It means to commit suicide by drowning yourself."

As I explained this, I started to question the likelihood of it.

Would those two really have thrown themselves in there? Not just the human, but the dog too?

“It doesn’t make sense, huh? No matter how strong the bond of trust between them was.”

Toriko nodded in agreement. “If Todate-san went in the water, I think Hana would have stopped her.”

There was no way a human and dog cast themselves in there together; there must have been some external factor. Were they being controlled? Were they hallucinating? Or was there no water here yet at the time when they came?

Was it because they encountered the master of the Mayoiga?

The last time I came, I was horrified by the thing that arrived in the parking area. It made me think of the concept of the master of the Mayoiga.

There was no such element in the original story. But wasn’t it something that anyone would imagine? Whether the empty house in the mountains was inhabited by a god, or a monster, it would be some being beyond human understanding. If a human entered that house and ran into the owner, what would become of them? Wouldn’t that fear cross most people’s minds?

If I thought of the Mayoiga standing on the hill not as an object of folklore from the *Tono Monogatari*, but as a structure created by the Otherside, then it might be a phenomenon that included those unspoken fears. It had been a fear of mine, at least, and Todate—and perhaps even Hana—might have feared it deep down too. I was pretty sure that any person squatting in a house worried that its owner might return. I was less confident about how dogs felt, though.

Well, what if they met it, then? What if the master returned and found them?

I dunno. Once they encountered it, that was it. Ghost stories could work that way. What they saw, and how scary it was, all of that could be left to the imagination. In fact, imagining the things left unsaid could actually be scarier. Todate and Hana went missing. The end.

But we had come along after; Toriko and I were peering into what came after the ghost story. If we stepped into the realm of the untold, the untellable, and encountered *them*, what would become of us? As that fear crossed my mind—

“Ah.” I lost my balance, and clung to Toriko.

“Sorawo?”

“Sorry, give me a moment…” I apologized, barely articulate, but my mind wouldn’t stop.

It was the same sensation as when we thought about what was on the other side of the Otherside. Whenever we thought about them, it was like there was a switch that got flipped in our brains, redirecting the flow of our thoughts. There was some sort of circuit like that in there. Since becoming aware of it, I’d learned to cut off those suspicious thoughts and get back to normal, but…what had caused it this time? Thinking about the master of the Mayoiga? Was that it? Did that basically mean that my sense of the concept of a master of the Mayoiga was practically the same as my sense of *them*? If so, it all fit!

There were a lot of ghost stories that ended with the encounter. If you look it in the eyes it’s over, if you talk to it it’s over, if you hear it it’s over, if you touch it it’s over, if you look at its face it’s over, if you understand it it’s over… “It’s over” could mean vanishing, death, madness; essentially your removal from the human world. In other words, it was a transit from the real world to the spirit world. As for why it was that way, once you learned about the other side, there was no choice but to go there.

“Sorawo, what’s up? Are you okay?!”

Toriko shook me, breaking the flow of my thoughts out of this unfamiliar circuit. I’d apparently kept my grip on her arm, murmuring to myself the whole time. Resisting the thoughts that were trying to drag me down into the darkness, I raised my head. As I looked at Toriko’s face, I felt my sanity slowly return.

“This is, y’know… Contact.”

I managed to put that much into words, and the conversation I had with Kozakura the first time we met came back to me.

“Hynek divided close encounters with flying saucers into the first, second, and third kind.”

“The first kind are simple sightings, the second kind are incursions, and the third are encounters with a living creature.”

“The fourth kind refers to cases in which the encounter has an effect on the body.”

“As the degree of contact deepens, people are entranced by the other world. They get addicted, and some never return…”

Well, what was beyond that?

Was there something beyond contact of the fourth kind?

What happened with contact of the fifth kind?

“Kamikoshi-kun, you’re probably at the forefront of first contact.”

Tsuji had said that to me. The woman at DS Research who called herself a magician.

I see. So that’s what this was. That was where we were right now.

“I see now! I get it!” I clung tightly to Toriko, desperately, to convey what I’d learned. The words rushed out of my mouth unbidden. “Todate-san and Hana made contact! With *them*! That’s why they couldn’t be here anymore! They had to go to the other side!”

The moment I saw a look of understanding dawn on Toriko’s face as she looked down at me, there was a sound from the direction of the lake. It was an unsettling voice, like the crying of an infant, or the yowls of a cat in heat.

We both turned in surprise. The light attached to Toriko’s AK raked across the surface of the water. There was something, indistinct in shape, floating there.

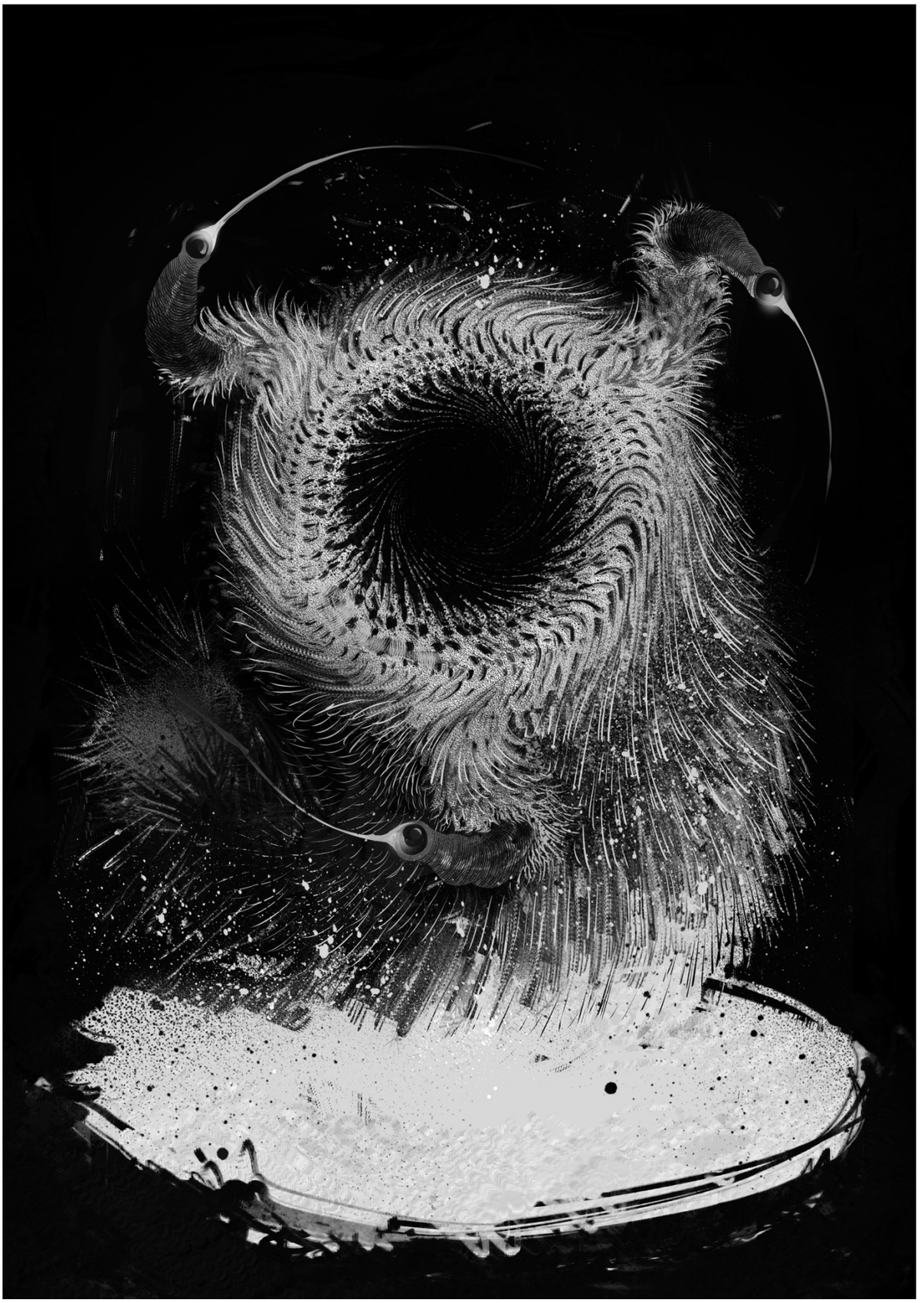
It looked to be about the size of a sleeping bag. I reflectively associated it with a full body bag. But the mass moved, quickly dispelling that idea. It was covered in hair, glistening in the water. This was no sleeping bag, and no body bag either. It was alive. It moved like a jumping fish, flopping around on the surface of the lake.

“Sorawo, what’s that?!” Toriko took aim with her AK, keeping the creature in the circle of light. Thanks to that, I was able to get a good look at it despite its continued intense motion.

My overall impression was of a huge caterpillar, bigger than a human. Firm hairs covered its entire body, so hard that they might have been closer to a porcupine’s quills. As it twisted around, I caught a glimpse of its head. There was a gaping hole in it, with three short stalks growing out around it. The stalks were positioned in a triangle, with glassy spheres attached to the end of them.

“It’s a Shishinoke,” I said hesitantly.

The monster was like a massive slug covered in needles. Those three stalks were likely eyes. I knew this creature well from internet horror stories. The first person to tell their story encountered it while camping with their dog. If this thing was following the text of a horror story, then had Hana’s presence brought it here?



“Shishinoke? What’s that mean? Lion’s hair?” Toriko asked, her tone doubtful. “It doesn’t look much like a lion, though… Is it because the hair’s like a mane?”

“I don’t think it has anything to do with lions.”

“It doesn’t?”

Long ago, the kanji for beast, deer, boar, and meat could all be read “shishi.” The word referred to any large creature that could be hunted in the mountains. If the name Shishinoke was rooted in Japanese legend, then that was probably where it came from. Its form, like a big hairy slug, was reminiscent of the Nozuchi, a snake youkai with only a mouth.

That said, this thing that had appeared in front of us wasn’t a traditional youkai, or the Shishinoke from those internet ghost stories. It was another Otherside “phenomenon” borrowing the image of something.

The Shishinoke thrashed about on the surface of the lake, getting closer and closer to the shore. Its three eyestalk-like appendages twisted around, facing towards us.

“If it’s okay for me to shoot, just say the word,” Toriko said, taking careful aim. I nodded.

“Got it. I’ll try looking with my right eye.”

If I recalled the original story correctly, the dog that bit this thing died of injuries inflicted by its needles. The person who reported their experience faced misfortune too. If this being was approaching us following the text of a dangerous ghost story like that, then there was just no way it was going to be harmless.

I focused on my right eye. The Shishinoke raised its body up above the surface of the water, almost as if it could sense I had. It looked ready to pounce towards us at any moment. I was nearly going to say “shoot it” when it happened.

Ring! There was the sound of bells, and the scene in front of me stopped still.

The Shishinoke froze in place with most of its body lifted up above the water. For a moment, it made me think time had stopped. Toriko and I exchanged glances. No, only the Shishinoke had stopped moving.

Ring! Ring! The bells rang again. The sound was like something out of a religious service. I couldn’t tell where it was coming from. If I had to guess, I’d have said it was being generated by the entire area around us. Toriko seemed to be hearing it too, so I probably wasn’t hallucinating.

The Shishinoke moved. It stayed where it was, shaking its body in time with the sound, then stopped still again. The bells rang. It wriggled again, then stopped moving. The stop-and-go movements were dynamic, resembling a kabuki actor striking a mie pose.

"Ah!"

In an instant, the Shishinoke transformed. It grew from the size of a sleeping bag to much larger, and taller. It was a form I recognized—the Ushioni which had made an appearance at Satsuki Uruma's funeral. It had a body like a capsized boat, with a long neck that rose up high above it. Its overall shape was like that of a plesiosaurus...or rather, it was like Nessie. The needles covering its body had been replaced with light brown hair, like the fiber on a palm tree trunk.

After the funeral, I had looked it up out of interest. It closely resembled the Ushioni from festivals in Uwajima in Ehime Prefecture. The horned head that sat atop the long neck was somewhere between a bull and an oni, and it bore a fierce expression. It was apparently meant to swing that head around to exorcise demons.

The sound of bells was joined by that of flutes. The Shishinoke which had become an Ushioni swung its head around. If this had been at a festival, there would have been a bunch of men carrying it and causing it to move, but this Ushioni was moving on its own.

"This thing—it's like the time with Satsuki."

Toriko was looking pale, and that probably wasn't just a trick of the glow stick's light. I immediately moved in closer to her.

"It's okay. It has nothing to do with Satsuki!"

I had no basis on which to assert that so forcefully, but Toriko looked at me, drew her lips tight, and then nodded.

Yeah, that's right. It has nothing to do with her. And if it does, so what? You don't need to think about a woman from your past, one we all buried together.

Even though it really wasn't the time for it, I let out a strange chuckle. Now that my relationship with Toriko had grown so much stronger, I was properly jealous of Satsuki. Before, she had just been an obstacle to me, one that didn't bear thinking about. Only once we held the funeral was I able to perceive her not as a human-shaped impediment, but as a fellow human being.

With its shape changed, the Ushioni had stopped advancing.

It remained at a distance of ten meters from us, coming no closer. The way it spun around, splashing in the water, was like some sort of dance.

In my right field of vision, I saw it wreathed in a phosphorescent silver light. It was like how I saw a glitch or artifact. Should we open fire on it? Would shooting this kind of phenomenon have any effect?

“Sorawo, what do you think it’s doing?”

“Who knows? Maybe it’s waiting to see how we react.”

“I expected it to attack us, but… You were saying something before, about contact?”

I nodded. The ones on the other side of the Otherside had approached us several times before. If they were beings we could reason with, that would have been fine. Unfortunately, they weren’t.

“Toriko, do you remember what T-san the Templeborn said? ‘There’s nothing that isn’t communication.’”

“Ahhh…” Toriko’s eyes went vacant for a moment, but then she bobbed her head up and down, returning to sanity. “I remember.”

“Well, at a glance, that sounds like a declaration that they want to communicate. That’s what I thought at first.”

“It’s not?”

“I don’t think so. A little while ago, I went to DS Research on my own, and met a woman named Tsuji. She’s an acquaintance of Kozakura-san’s, and manages the warehouse of artifacts. You’ve never met her, right?”

“I haven’t.”

“There’s something she told me. Even if we call it all ‘contact,’ there are various kinds. Conversation, commerce, war, and so on… When it comes to us and those on the other side, it’s not a matter of talking. We aren’t even sure we’re standing on the same field, y’know?”

“Yeah.”

“So…”

Toriko’s eyes widened in realization. “Wait, so then T-san, and by extension those on the other side—they’d think that something like war is just a part of communication?”

“No, that’s oversimplifying it, and at the same time overstating how much they understand what communication is to us. I think they understand even less than that.”

“Even less…?”

“I think when he said ‘there’s nothing that isn’t communication,’ that was basically his way of telling us ‘we’re going to try all available channels,’ maybe. From their perspective, we’re like toys that squeak when you poke us…”

“So they’re gonna try every way they have of making us squeak?!”

“That would be one way of interpreting it, I think…”

Toriko looked back at the Ushioni, struck dumb with astonishment. “If that’s what he was saying, then it really was like a declaration of war, wasn’t it?” she finally said.

“Even if that wasn’t their intention, it might look that way from our end.”

If by saying “there’s nothing that isn’t communication,” that basically meant they were going to be testing every approach that they had of stimulating a response from humans, it was practically an attack on us. Because there were loads of things that would cause fear, pain, and bodily impairment. And that “communication” might not stop at things that we were capable of imagining.

“If this thinking is correct, there is a high probability that the other side’s attempts at contact may include many things that are harmful to humans.”

“Was that contact what got Todate-san and Hana?”

“Maybe. It’s possible that some types of contact we can endure might be too much for other people.”

From an objective perspective, the situation we were in now was pretty bizarre. If an ordinary person found themselves in it, they’d start panicking in no time. We were able to take it because of our past experience, and because we had the ability to fight back using our right eye and left hand.

There was one more decisive factor: we were together. I supported Toriko, and she supported me, helping us both stay sane. As proof of that, when I came to the Otherside alone, the mujina got me and drove me mad in an instant. My experience camping in this world and my abilities as a Fourth Kind hadn’t done anything to save me.

I looked at the Ushioni. The lacquered, wood-carved face of the monster dancing on the surface of the lake sneered down at us.

Fine. You want a reaction? We’ll give you one.

“Toriko, it’s okay,” I said.

I was about to add “shoot,” but then it happened. The Ushioni reacted as if it sensed my intention to attack. It spun in place, then transformed into yet another form. A gaudy four-legged beast wearing a crown, decked out white, gold, red, and black.

It was a lion dancer: the same Balinese lion dancer that had stormed our love hotel girls’ party. The holy beast Barong appeared in the Barong Dance, which depicted his defeat of the witch Rangda. Barong bounded through the water towards us as we were caught off guard. The bells and flutes were replaced with exotic percussion and heavier bells, rising to a cacophony.

Barong regarded us with his wide-open eyes, gnashing his fangs. The white hair covering his entire body whipped around as he danced, lowering himself to the ground, jumping, and striking his feet against the earth to intimidate us.

From a Shishinoke, to an Ushioni, and now Barong. What was this guy’s intention, taking on the forms of aberrations we’d encountered before? They used fear as a way of approaching humans, but while the Shishinoke was based on a horror story, I couldn’t see what was so scary about the Ushioni or Barong on their own. They might have inspired awe and worship of the supernatural originally, but that was something removed from our modern conception of fear.

Or was the intent to physically assault us this time? If so, it changed nothing about our reaction. We’d just pump it full of lead.

As I was thinking that, Barong changed form once again.

We both cried out in surprise.

“Todate-san?!”

“Hana…?!”

What was in front of us…was a beast. Yet at the same time, it was a person. It was a mixture of woman and beast.

A naked Todate and Hana, combined into one being—a chimera.

4

“Ito…sha…nou.” A voice, neither human nor animal, emerged from both Todate’s and Hana’s mouths.

“Itossha…nou…”

It had a sad, almost pitying tone. It was peaceful and kind…

Their two bodies, dog and human, had melted together. The human's hand scratched and petted the fur. The canine's nose touched and pressed against the skin, and its tongue licked it. Four eyes exchanged glances filled with trust, love, and peaceful contentment.

Toriko and I both stared with our jaws hanging open.

Or rather, we were enthralled.

It was beautiful—a beautiful creature, with a form that could not have existed in the human world. Woman and dog had melded together, but not completely, remaining distinct. Each accepted the other as part of themselves, but at the same time still an entity that they could never be fully compatible with—and loved them.

I could understand.

I—we—were the same way.

Their four eyes suddenly turned to us.

The human eyes narrowed. The dog's tongue came out. There was no hostility; they were welcoming. Perhaps they understood. They perceived us. It was a warmer reception than when we had visited the Mayoiga before. Back then, Todate and Hana had been friendly, but uninterested in us. The two of them had been closed off to anyone but each other.

Now, they were satisfied. With the completion of their world, their eyes had finally opened to the world around them. With those four dark, glistening eyes on me, I felt like I was being *seen* by Todate and Hana for the first time.

"Nue..." Toriko said the word. I nodded.

"That's what this is, yeah."

We clearly understood what was going on here.

"They" had imitated the nue. They'd seen us become the nue and were trying to do the same, similar to all the other ways they'd imitated humans...

Well, no, not "similar to" but "exactly the same as."

If "they" didn't understand humans, then they couldn't possibly understand nue. They were simply imitating it; the status that Toriko and I had achieved.

I should have been offended. Normally, I would have been.

It was a state Toriko and I had achieved by throwing ourselves at one another, driving ourselves mad, and they'd gone and imitated it by integrating Todate and Hana. It was horrifying, of course. I should have been creeped out.

But that wasn't how I felt. It was just too beautiful, because I could understand the two of them. To loathe this woman-dog chimera was the logic of the daytime world of human beings, but we were creatures of the night who had become the nue, and this was the world of night.

We had stepped into a place where human reasoning did not apply.

The front line of first contact. That's where we were right now.

"You laid down your gun," I said.

"Yeah."

"This thing, it's us."

"You're right. It's the same as us," Toriko replied.

"Are they watching our reaction?"

"Probably, don't you think?"

"What do we do?"

When I asked, Toriko held the glove on her left hand with her mouth. She pulled it off, revealing her translucent hand, then reached out, bringing her hand closer to the chimera.

The dog face sniffed her left hand, licked it.

I stood next to Toriko, looking up at the chimera. Its human face looked back down at me. Its eyes were peaceful.

I heard a noise, like a clicking tongue, come from the chimera's throat. As we stared into each other's eyes, for some reason, I began to feel like I was gazing into two deep, dark holes.

"Itosha, nou... Itosssha...nou."

Those words it was repeating, they brought tears to my eyes for some reason. I didn't understand them, yet I knew they were meant for us.

In some part of my mind, I sensed danger. What separated us from this human-dog chimera was getting fuzzier. The boundary between ourselves and everything else had thinned, and we were melting away—that was the vague sense of crisis I felt, but even it was growing hazy...

My consciousness was still, like in the moments before I fell asleep, when all of a sudden—a dog barked.

It was a vivid sensation, like it was right in front of me, and that instantly jolted me awake. Before I could wonder what had happened, I heard a long, echoing gunshot in the distance.

Was that Hana just now?

Was that Todate's gun?

But they were both right here. Mixed together...

I looked up, thinking I would see the beautiful chimera.

But what was there was not the chimera anymore. It was a great black beast—melded into the darkness behind it, and so massive that I had to look up to see it properly. So much of its form had been swallowed up by darkness that I couldn't tell what it was. But the swollen bit that was pointed towards us, which I assumed was the head, had a gaping hole in it. Three points of light, placed at equidistant points around the hole, traced geometrical patterns as they spun around and around.

"Itossha...nou," a baby-like voice echoed from the dark hole.

Itowashi yanou. (How I loathe you.)

Itoshi yanou. (How I love you.)

I heard those two contrasting meanings in it.

There was no need to speak further. Toriko raised her AK. It spewed bullets, the muzzle flashing white in the darkness. I watched with my right eye as they tore through the dark beast's body.

Without showing any sign of suffering, it began spinning in complicated patterns, as it was sucked into the hole in its head in what looked like an act of self-consumption. It only took seconds for the beast to disappear completely.

There was utter silence.

"Whew..." I let out a wordless sigh. The strength drained from my legs, and I collapsed on the spot.

"That was messed up..." Toriko said, practically clinging to her AK. "We almost got taken away."

I was too dazed to go anywhere for a while. The shock that I hadn't been able to feel during contact had hit me belatedly. Toriko was right. We'd come so close to being taken all the way to the other side.

"That howl..." I murmured.

"You heard it too, Sorawo?"

"Yeah. And the gunfire."

"That was Hana and Todate-san, right?"

We finally got to our feet, and shone our flashlights around.

"Hana!"

"Todate-san! Can you hear us?"

There was no response. The incessant flutes and drums had stopped, and all we could hear now, as before, was the subtle sound of waves.

“Do you think…they saved us?” I asked. Toriko looked out over the lake.

“Y’know, I thought that mixed-up monster was Hana and Todate-san,” she said.

“So did I,” I replied.

That chimera had unquestionably been Todate and Hana, not just an Otherside imitation. The pseudo-humans we had encountered before now all felt *wrong* in some way. Even Satsuki Uruma, who had been the most eloquent of them, still had something inhuman about her. By contrast, I could say that those two were genuine. The only thing that had changed was their form.

“Did they start out trying to take us with them, then stop?” asked Toriko.

“I dunno…” I replied. “This is just a guess, but maybe they didn’t really want to take us. Basically, ‘they’ wanted to pull us over to the other side, but Todate-san and Hana didn’t…”

“So they were used purely as a sort of mirror to draw our attention, then?”

“I think that the two of them have no hostility towards us, but also don’t really want to mix with us. Todate-san and Hana are strictly a pair, and they have no need for anyone else.”

“That’s why they warned us, so we wouldn’t go any deeper…”

“It might be simpler than that. More of a ‘don’t come any closer.’”

“So we got rejected? Heh heh!” Toriko let out a chuckle.

We stayed there awhile, staring at the dark lake.

“They seemed happy,” Toriko suddenly said. “Am I weird to think that? I mean, normally, it’d be a shock to see them in that state, but…I ended up thinking ‘good for them.’”

“I get it. They seemed…I dunno how to put it, but incredibly content.”

“Would it be good if we ended up like that?”

“Do you want to?”

That question got me a weird look from Toriko.

“Wh-What?” I asked.

“I was just thinking how sexy this entire conversation is.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

Toriko just laughed and didn’t answer the question.

Of course she was out of her mind. I knew that. But hey, I had been thinking the same thing.

After a long pause, I said, “Let’s go home.”

“Yeah.”

We turned, and headed back the way we came. The glow sticks showed the way in the darkness.

We left the lake, climbed the hill, and returned to a place where the light of day could reach. There we stopped and stood still once more, in a daze.

The Mayoiga at the top of the hill, which had been reduced to a ruin earlier, was now back to normal.

The gardens and mansion were as well-kept as the first time we’d seen them. It felt like, if we squinted hard enough, we might be able to see Todate wandering the halls. Maybe we would hear Hana sniffing, or the sound of her claws on the floor. That was far more ominous and unsettling than the chimera we’d seen down at the lake.

We would likely never set foot in this place again.

File 28: Kaidancraft

1

I think romance is genuinely boring.

I never really understood romance to begin with, but even now that I had a special relationship with Toriko, my general sentiment towards it hadn't changed.

What *had* changed was that we were closer...or rather, Toriko stuck to me wherever I went.

We were taking the Seibu Ikebukuro Line to Shakujii-kouen where Kozakura's mansion was. It was a Saturday afternoon, and the train wasn't terribly crowded, but Toriko was sitting so close she was rubbing up against me anyway. If I were tall enough for it, I bet she'd have tried resting her head on my shoulder.

She doesn't care where we are...

It's the middle of the day. Still.

Not that it'd be fine for her to act like this at night.

And come on, it's July*. The temperature is not conducive to excessive cuddling.*

Toriko looked at me and smiled.

"You've got a serious look on your face again," she whispered conspiratorially.

I recoiled at the sweetness in her tone.

"You don't want to do it? You'd rather not tell her?"

"Well... Uhh."

"If you don't want to, Sorawo, I'm not going to insist on it."

"It's not that I hate the idea, I just don't see the need to go out of our way to tell people."

Toriko wanted to tell Kozakura that we were "going out" now.

Was there any need? That was my question.

There was, and she wanted to. That was Toriko's assertion.

Her follow-up question was if I wanted to keep it hidden.

There wasn't really, but... was my (somewhat awkward) response.

This conversation had played out repeatedly. Each time the same as the last. I hated it.

Why did something happening between us give rise to a need

to tell other people?

Weren't we just causing them trouble by telling them? It would bother me if I were in their position. Like, what would they even be expecting me to do with the information. Were people really that interested in other people's relationships?

I sure wasn't...

But at the same time, Toriko's view was probably the more common one.

We had given our relationship a name: nue. Inside a storm of otherworldly sensations whipped up by my right eye and her left hand, we'd reached the blue abyss, and in the excitement of our return, the name had been born. It had seemed the most fitting word to describe the relationship between us, which no one else could ever have.

But because no one else could have it, no one else could understand it. From their perspective, we were in a "romantic" relationship, and we were "lovers."

It doesn't matter what they think, would have been one way to look at it. I was generally the kind of person who thought that way. And yet, at the same time, being seen in a way that I didn't intend to be was upsetting in its own way.

I mean, what did they even mean by "romance" and "lovers" anyway? Those were words used not between us to define our relationship, but to explain it to others.

Under what conditions could two or more people be said to be "going out"?

Was a romantic relationship about the permission to have physical contact? Was that what it ultimately came down to?

In a societal sense, was it the general understanding that there was consent for physical contact?

Plus, if I were to add one more factor, an understanding that the partners were one unit, and they needed to be left alone and not interfered with?

Was that all it was?

No, listen, I get it. That stuff is important.

I'm sure that Benimori-san would say so too.

But isn't that all...kind of boring?

"You don't like it, Sorawo?"

"It's not like that... Well, no... Maybe it is." I acknowledged it, but Toriko didn't get mad. She laughed.

"That's why you didn't want to be 'lovers,' huh?"

“Yeah, sorta.”

“I don’t have the same kind of reservations about that word as you do, Sorawo.”

“Yeah, I know… I’m not forcing you to go along with anything you don’t want, am I?” I asked, suddenly worried.

Toriko fixed her eyes on me and replied, “What would you do if I said you were?”

I had to think about it. If what Toriko wanted was to be ordinary “lovers,” and I didn’t, then what would it have been like if I went along with that?

“Sorry. I wouldn’t be able to do anything about it. But…”

“But?”

I brought my face closer to Toriko’s, lowering my voice. “Don’t you think it’s more interesting this way?”

Toriko stared back at me…then slowly nodded. I returned to sitting in my seat normally, relieved.

“We’re good, then.”

“You’re no fair, Sorawo.”

“Huh? How so?”

“Don’t ask me.” Toriko turned away in a huff.

I thought about it for a moment, and figured it out. She’d mentioned before that my deep voice made her weak.

Hmm, I thought, looking at Toriko’s ear, peeking out of her hair.

I can use this. I’ll give it a shot sometime when I’m in trouble.

“We’re here!”

“We’re letting ourselves in.”

We’d come to Kozakura’s mansion in Shakujii-kouen, and were about to make ourselves at home. Kozakura had accepted our visits under two conditions: that we tell her we were coming in advance, and we ring the bell when we arrive.

As soon as we were in the entranceway, I knew something was off. The lights were turned on even though it was the middle of the day. Despite being more timid than the average person, bright lights made Kozakura uneasy, so her mansion was always gloomy. There had been one period that was an exception to that, though…

“You think Kozakura’s okay?” Toriko asked, worried.

The last time it had been like this was after she’d suffered an emotional shock in the other world. Back then, she’d left all the

lights in the house on and had been unable to sleep without sleep meds.

"Did anything happen recently?" I wondered aloud.

"Hrmm... Nothing's coming to mind. Have you been here recently, Sorawo?"

"I was here last week, but everything was normal then."

As we were talking in hushed voices in the area where we were supposed to take off our shoes, someone poked their head out of the combined dining room and kitchen. It was the expressionless face of a child, with long black hair that almost reached the floor.

"Oh, it's Kasumi—hey there," Toriko greeted her. Kasumi remained impassive.

"*Hello,*" she replied casually in English, then walked over to us, her feet slapping against the floor. She was holding an ice pop with a white layer of frost on it, freshly plucked from the freezer. When Kasumi reached the front door, she looked from Toriko to me.

"Greetings!" she exclaimed.

"Huh?" I replied, confused.

"You need to greet people. Properly."

Toriko burst out laughing at this. "S-Sorawo... She's mad at you because you didn't greet her."

"Wait, at me?!"

"I mean, yeah. That's gotta be what it's about..."

Slightly miffed, I said, "Yeah, yeah. Hello."

"One yeah is enough," Kasumi said before turning around and running off.

"What was *that* all about?" I grumbled.

Yep, I knew I hated kids.

Feeling aggrieved at Toriko, who was leaning against the shoe box as she tittered, I took off my shoes and headed further inside. "Hold on, hold on," Toriko called after me as she followed.

The brightly illuminated hallway had a fresh coat of wallpaper. The white paper had a crayon drawing of a train running through the grasslands. It was immediately clear it must have been Kasumi's handiwork.

Kasumi opened the door on the left and went in. That was Kozakura's room. We followed her.

"Hey, Kozakura-san," I greeted her.

"We're here," Toriko added cheerily.

“Hm? Oh…”

Kozakura, who had been staring at her multidisplay setup, typing away without even a glance in our direction, turned as if she had just noticed our arrival.

Then she spoke. “Hey! Don’t walk around while you’re eating an ice pop! You’re supposed to sit down.”

“Mmm.”

“If you trip, the stick will get rammed up your throat and you’ll die, okay? If I catch you eating them like that again, I won’t buy ice pops anymore.”

“Hmmm.”

“Where’re your words?”

“‘kay.”

After giving the infuriating responses of a child, Kasumi plopped herself down on the sofa. She licked her ice pop, and began playing around with the tablet that had been sitting on the sofa, apparently having lost any interest in us.

“She’s gotten kind of talkative, hasn’t she?” I remarked.

“I know, right?” Kozakura replied. “She’s coming along, even if it’s just little by little.”

I felt like, compared to before, there were more natural responses mixed in with Kasumi’s borrowed utterances. Those were no doubt also borrowed from Kozakura’s speech, but they lent a certain “conversationality” to the way she spoke now.

“We noticed the lights were on in the hall,” Toriko said with a note of concern. “Did something happen?”

“It’s not safe if it’s too dark. For Kasumi,” Kozakura explained in an offhanded manner.

Wow… I couldn’t help but stare at Kozakura’s face.

“What?” she challenged me.

“Uh, I dunno what to say… You’ve sure changed, huh?”

“Yeah, of course I have. I’ve got a kid depending on me.”

“Well, yeah, maybe it does work that way, but still…”

“You’ve really settled into the mother role, huh?” Toriko commented, somewhat insensitively, earning her a snort from Kozakura.

“Maybe it’s ’cause I’ve had two brats to look after all this time. Even I’m surprised by how naturally I’ve picked all of this stuff up.”

I was sure it must’ve been exhausting to look after a child who could appear and disappear at will, but Kozakura seemed more

energetic than I would have expected. Her previous irresponsible and careless attitude had receded into the background, and if anything it was fair to say she was brimming with vitality.

“It’s hot with four people in here,” Kozakura said, turning down the AC with a remote. “You two want some ice pops as well?”

“Yes!” Toriko exclaimed.

“Uh, sure, I’ll have one,” I answered in a more subdued tone.

“Well, then get one for me while you’re at it,” she said.

I was being used.



I left the air-conditioned room and headed to the combined dining room and kitchen. There were dishes for two sitting in the drying rack, and some papers left out on the table. I took a glance. They were about child support, benefits, and the like…all bureaucratic stuff. There were notes stuck to the fridge with magnets. A shopping list, a list of dates for vaccinations, and a scribbled face, likely drawn by Kasumi.

I opened the freezer. In addition to the box of ice pops, there were bags of frozen food. Broccoli and spinach, white fish, dumplings, and sliced bread.

I stood there in a daze for a little while.

"It's a home…" I mumbled to myself.

Inside the fridge, I saw "home." The place felt lived-in, in a way Kozakura's mansion never had before. It had been getting better ever since Toriko and I started dropping in regularly, but this blew even that small amount of change out of the water.

I don't know why, but…my chest hurt.

It made me feel incredibly sad, and lonely.

I felt almost like I had been left behind, even though that wasn't the case at all.

At least, it shouldn't have been.

The cold air caressing my feet brought me back to my senses. I'd left the freezer open. I needed to close it before the things inside started to thaw.

I grabbed three ice pops, closed the freezer door, and headed back to Kozakura's room.

"Took you long enough," Kozakura said. "Did you make a side trip somewhere?"

"Sorry."

"Hm? It's not a problem, but are you okay?"

"It's nothing. Take an ice pop."

"I'll have the grape one."

"And you, Toriko?"

"What are these? Orange and apple?"

"Probably. I just grabbed them at random, so I don't even know."

"Hmm, I'll have this one then."

"You two sit while you're eating too, got it?" Kozakura warned us.

"We're not children…" I protested.

"It sets a bad example for Kasumi."

If that was her argument, I'd have to accept it. I joined Toriko on the sofa, and we were on our best behavior as we enjoyed our ice pops. Kasumi, meanwhile, had long since finished hers, and was gnawing on the stick, leaving her teeth marks on it as she messed around with the tablet.

"Whatcha looking at?" I asked.

Kasumi's eyes stayed glued to the screen as she read out, "The formal name of England is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Sanmaland. It was originally settled by Celtic people known as the Furiten. They were always playing mahjong, but then one of them left, and they didn't have enough people to play. That's how three-player mahjong, or sanma, was born."

I don't even know what she's saying...

"Is that what's written there?"

Toriko tried to look over her shoulder, but Kasumi held the tablet to her chest.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to take it from you..." Toriko tried to reassure her, but Kasumi didn't let her guard down.

"You can't. People will come out of the concrete."

"Huh?"

"It was revealed that during road work, or large construction projects such as dams, bridges, and air ports, people were being thrown in as human sacrifices, and in 2009 the slogan 'people from concrete' appeared. You must know about the tunnels and overpasses that collapsed after they took the people out of them!"

Having said all of this fluently, Kasumi got to her feet and rushed out of the room.

"Did I make her mad?"

"Don't worry about it," Kozakura said before musing, "Frankly, I think she looks at the internet too much. I tell her to keep it in moderation, but I spend so much time absorbed in my work I can't control her usage. I've put a child lock on it, and I do check her browsing history, so I think I'm monitoring her, at least."

"If you really wanted to, you could shut off the internet, couldn't you, Kozakura-san?"

"Sorawo-chan, what would you do in Kasumi's position if I turned off the internet?"

"Look for every possible way I could get around it."

"I'll bet."

"She only reads the internet? No books or manga?" Toriko

asked.

“She’ll read anything,” Kozakura replied. “If I let my guard down, I’ll find her looking at textbooks she’s swiped off my shelves.”

“Whoa, isn’t that kind of amazing? She’s a genius,” exclaimed Toriko.

“Nah, it’s not like she can actually read them. They’re full of kanji, and she doesn’t have the background to understand the material. Some of them are even in English. I thought she might be a genius too, at first, but as I watched, she just flipped through until she got bored, and tossed the book aside. Though, I can’t say it was a total waste for her. Her language acquisition may not follow established patterns, after all.”

“Hmm. Maybe she’ll become like a real scholar some day?”

Kozakura cocked her head to the side at Toriko’s comment. “I wonder about that. I think as her language acquisition progresses, she’ll become more and more ordinary.”

“You do?” asked Toriko.

“She has all these unconnected words inside her head, like little islands, and pulls out whichever ones seem to fit the current situation. Like a parrot mimicking human speech. In order to connect all those little islands, she needs basic education, and once those gaps are filled in she should become more like other kids her age.”

“How are you going to get her to learn that basic material?” I asked.

“I’m teaching her.”

“You, Kozakura-san?”

“I bought some educational books for kids and some picture books, and we’ve been using them. If I’m going to send her off to school, she needs to be able to speak to some degree.”

“Wow…”

“What?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

I was weirdly feeling lonely again for some reason. I sucked my ice pop as Kozakura fixed me with a dubious look. The cold apple-flavored treat made my teeth hurt.

“So, how did you end up formalizing you taking Kasumi?” asked Toriko.

“We went with a plenary adoption.”

“I figured that’d be it,” Toriko said, nodding.

“You figured?” I asked.

“Yeah… I looked into it, because I was curious. Since we don’t know who her parents are, she doesn’t have a family register. I wondered what would happen in that case.”

“I initially talked to Migiwa about pulling some strings to have a family register created for her, but when we thought about Kasumi’s future, we decided it was better to take the orthodox approach. Once they finished recovering from T-san incident, we went to the police, the child guidance office, and welfare services to report we’d found an abandoned child, and—”

“Huh?! You’ve been doing all that?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’ve been doing all of that. But things were a mess after that. The system needed to put Kasumi in an institution. But she’d just come back here on her own. Her case worker didn’t know what to do. I felt sorry for them. I mean, she kept escaping from situations where it was physically impossible to.”

“What did you do about that?”

“There was nothing I *could* do, so I contacted them when she came here. They would quietly go through the formalities, pretending to examine this place and wherever she’d escaped from, checking that nothing unusual had happened… Eventually, it was decided that they couldn’t find her parents, and the local government would make her a family registry, which put us on course for a plenary adoption.”

“Wow, that’s amazing!” Toriko exclaimed.

“It sure was. We used a bunch of Migiwa’s connections, which is kind of cheating, but it was still damn hard. I went through the pre-adoption training program, and they even visited the house.”

“So, that means Kasumi’s really your daughter now, Kozakura-san?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Huh…” I couldn’t help but be amazed. Kozakura may have felt awkward to have both of us staring at her, because she waved her hand and changed the subject.

“So? What brings you two here today?”

“Ah, it’s not that we have any business here, it’s uh…” I glanced at Toriko. She sat up straight, and cleared her throat.

“We have something to report.”

“Uh-huh,” Kozakura said.

“We’re going out now.”

“Congrats,” Kozakura said, clapping her hands lethargically.

“And?”

“That’s all. We just thought you should know.”

“Best wishes.”

“Thanks.”

“…”

“…”

There was a strange silence.

“Huh? Um, Kozakura-san, is that all?” I asked.

“What?”

“No, it’s just…”

“Should I act more delighted? If you ask me, you could’ve gotten on with it a lot sooner. Would’ve made people less irritated…”

“Um, strictly speaking, we’re not quite going out,” I tried to clarify.

“Huh?” Kozakura’s brow furrowed and she looked at Toriko. “Anything to say about that?”

“Well, we have some differences of opinion, but she’s largely okay with it, so it’s all good.”

“Toriko, what are you even talking about? Are you two really going out?”

“We are, we are,” Toriko insisted.

“And Sorawo-chan? You’ve agreed to this?”

“We have an agreement.”

We disagree over how to present the relationship to others, though.

Kozakura looked dubiously at each of us. “I dunno. You two sure can’t make anything clear…” she muttered. It was more on the mark than I expected, and I almost smiled despite myself.

Unclear. If I needed one word that defined our relationship, the nue, I don’t think I could have chosen a better one.

“What’re you grinning for?”

“Not a thing.”

Apparently, I had in fact smiled despite myself. Kozakura looked at me suspiciously as I struggled to wipe the grin off my face, but then she seemed to switch gears.

“Well, whatever. Honestly, I don’t have the free time to waste on other people’s love lives.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” I said. “You must have your hands full looking after Kasumi.”

“That’s not all. I’ve got more things I want to do now.”

Kozakura looked back at her desk. Was that some kind of programming code in the window open on the monitor in front of her? It was whatever she'd been banging away at when we'd come in.

"It's a good time, so do you want to hear about it? It has something to do with what you're doing."

"What we're doing…by which you mean what exactly?"

When I asked that, Kozakura got a slightly prideful look on her face.

"It goes without saying, doesn't it? Exploring the Otherside."

2

"Take a look," Kozakura said, beckoning for us to come over. She had a spreadsheet open on the monitor beside the one she was programming on. The cells were filled with countless words and text fragments.

"What do you think this is?" she asked.

"Happened to a friend, test of courage, spirit sense, suspicious fire, fallen warrior, pet shop, park toilet, unfamiliar woman, Buddhist altar, disappearance…" I read out some of the cells. "What is all this? At a glance, it looks like a list of vocabulary that's likely to come up in ghost stories."

"Yeah, you've got it," Kozakura replied so nonchalantly that Toriko and I looked at one another.

"Kozakura, are you all right?" asked Toriko. "You used to be so scared of ghost stories you'd have sooner died than read them."

"Well, yeah. But when they're broken down to the vocab level like this, they're no big deal. The fear comes from the way the story is told, after all."

"I agree with you there, but still…" I said.

"Even if that's true, you never did anything like this before. Why now, all of a sudden?" Toriko was as confused as I was. Go figure. If a scaredy-cat like Kozakura was starting up something like this out of nowhere, of course our first reaction would be to worry.

Kozakura chuckled. "What's there to wonder about? I always wanted to do this kind of research."

"This kind of research…" I echoed.

Oh, right. She's a cognitive psychologist.

"Call it a change of heart… I kind of got over things. Maybe

because of Satsuki's funeral, or because of taking in Kasumi. I'm not even sure what triggered it myself, but at some point, I found myself able to tackle the Otherside as a subject of study."

"Is it okay for us to interpret that in a positive way?" I asked.

"What're you worried about? You think I went crazy or something?"

"Well, if we're being honest, a little..."

"You dolt. I'm just fine. If anything, I may be thinking clearer than I ever have. I dunno. Maybe ending up super busy looking after Kasumi did me some good? Not having the time to get scared of things that haven't happened yet may have made all those vague fears that were hanging over me retreat. Not that I really get what's happened."

Kozakura sounded totally sane as she said all this. She didn't have crazy eyes, and she was articulating herself coherently too.

"Okay..." I said. "Well then, what are you studying with this list?"

"I'm still only in the middle of it. And that's assuming the premise that the other world is using ghost stories as an interface is true to begin with. I thought mapping that interface might be possible?"

"Mapping? If you want a map, we're already making one."

We were making a map of the terrain and landmarks of the other world, and we kept on adding to it as we continued our exploration and the places we knew expanded. Just recently, we'd drawn in the lake we found at the bottom of the hill road in front of the Mayoiga.

"I'm not talking about a physical map. I'm talking about conceptual mapping."

"Conceptual..."

Seeing I was struggling with the meaning, Kozakura explained. "I don't understand the Otherside, but ghost stories are a human thing. They're a linguistic space made of human concepts, described in human language. If the Otherside is using them, then their vocabulary and concepts are limited to those used in ghost stories. In that range, we can perceive the influence of the other world."

"Right."

"And if that's the case, don't you think we could define the contours of that linguistic space through analyzing the ghost stories humans have told in the past?"

I thought for a while before replying. “Possibly. How exactly are you going to go about analyzing that?”

“I’m lazy and timid, so I chose a method that minimizes my contact with the original stories. I prepared a simple natural language processing program and then scraped ghost stories from the web at random and stuffed them into it. From that, I extracted the elements of ghost stories broken down to the level of phrases and vocabulary. After some corrections to account for spelling variations and duplicate entries, I was able to collect the fundamental vocabulary that make up ghost stories.”

“The elements of a ghost story… Is that what’s in your spreadsheet there?” Toriko asked.

“Yeah,” Kozakura replied, nodding. “This is the first step, and well, it was simple enough, but from here things get a bit annoying. This material that I’ve extracted from ghost stories, as it is now, is just the raw ingredients. It needs to be given a structure before it becomes a ghost story. Do you know what the structure of a ghost story is, Sorawo-chan?”

“Huh? What do you mean by that? Like, the story that it tells?”

“Yeah, you’ve got it. Could you give me an example of one?”

“Erm…”

“You can keep it simple.”

“Oh, sure. Uhh…”

“And as unfrightening as possible.”

Kozakura’s repeated demands were throwing me off-balance, but I thought about it.

“Well, just as an example, you go to sleep one night and experience sleep paralysis, then when you wake up there’s an old woman you’ve never seen before sitting on your chest…”

“That’s a common one,” Kozakura said, relieved. It was such a cliché that everyone had heard it, and no one found it scary anymore.

“Just when you’ve forgotten about the incident, you visit a relative’s house in the countryside, and one of the photos of your departed ancestors in the room with the Buddhist altar seems familiar. It’s the old woman from the night you had sleep paralysis…”

“Huh? The story’s continuing?”

“Alarmed, you ask who the woman in the picture is, but no one knows, or even noticed that the picture was hanging there before…”

As I continued the story, Kozakura frowned.

“Then, taking the picture down from the wall, you look at the back and find there’s a crude human figure cut out of paper there, and the name written on it is—”

“Okay, that’s *quite* enough! Thank you!” Kozakura loudly interrupted me. “Yeesh… I let you talk about this stuff, and you just keep on going. Scary.”

“You’re the one who asked me to tell you a story, weren’t you, Kozakura-san?”

“Well, yes, you’re right. Anyway, let’s pull out the skeleton of that story. If we limit it to just the first part for sake of simplicity, during Ordinary Activity A, Abnormal Situation B occurs, leading to the observation of Abnormal Situation C.”

“A is ‘while I was sleeping,’ B is ‘sleep paralysis,’ and C is ‘an unfamiliar old woman,’ huh?”

“Right. A → B → C is the structure of this ghost story. This sort of story skeleton can also be extracted from the original ghost stories, like I was talking about earlier. By doing so, we’re able to create a collection of story templates for ghost stories. By the way, Sorawo-chan, is there a clear origin for the story you were telling just now?”

I had to think about it.

“I wonder… Honestly, I’m not sure. I’ve read so many ghost stories that it’s kind of hazy to me whether there was an original. It was probably a patchwork of stories I’ve read somewhere. I remember the famous ones, or the ones that left a deep impression on me, though.”

“Makes sense. Frankly, you can think of my program as trying to do what you just did there.”

“Mixing and matching material extracted from past ghost stories in order to assemble a single story.”

“That’s the idea.”

“So you’re making new ghost stories out of ones you’ve cut to pieces,” said Toriko. “Is there a point to all this? It just sounds like a lot of extra effort to me…”

“Yeah, I know, right?” I agreed. “And their quality as ghost stories will be lower too.”

“The quality of the individual stories isn’t a problem. The key point of this program is its ability to continuously generate ghost stories.”

“Continuously…?” I echoed.

“Yeah,” Kozakura replied, nodding. “It looks up ghost story material and structures at random, and keeps on mixing them. Nobody needs to read them. In fact, the entire premise is to automatically generate ghost stories that nobody will ever read. I’m going to leave it running around the clock all year, only taking care that the system doesn’t run out of space.”

I was confused, unable to see the point. “Random generation is going to spit out a lot of junk ghost stories. You’re okay with that?”

“I am. Because the goal isn’t to create ghost stories. I’m just getting to the important part.” Kozakura’s eyes shined as she continued. “Let’s get back to what I was telling you before. First, there’s a linguistic space created from the shape of ghost stories. The goal of this program is to expand that conceptual space faster than the speed of human imagination.”

“Expand it…?”

“Ghost stories could be said to be an attempt at defining unknown conceptual spaces through the use of language. We use them to map out linguistic areas that human language has not yet reached. Each time a new ghost story is born, that unknown space becomes describable through human language.”

“Ohh… So that’s it. I’m starting to see where you’re going with this.”

There’s a small area that’s lit up inside the boundless darkness. We don’t know what’s outside that light. We humans perceive the area inside the light as “reality.” If Kozakura’s automatic ghost story generation program was an attempt at expanding the area that light covered, it made sense to me.

“I think it’s an interesting idea. But you’re only sampling past ghost stories, right? And yet, the reality is that new ghost stories are being created all the time. I feel like your automatically generated ghost stories are just going to be a bunch of ill-formed recreations.”

“How do you define a ‘new’ ghost story?”

“Let’s see… One that handles things that haven’t been spoken of before. Or one with developments that have yet to be seen. Then there’s what we call irrational ghost stories, where the story itself breaks down, and events don’t follow from one another. I’m not sure you can automatically generate that.”

“Not true. For one thing, things that haven’t been spoken of before can be introduced using dictionaries outside of the

vocabulary collected from past ghost stories. For instance, let's see…since they caught my eye, I bet there isn't any ghost story featuring the sticks from ice pops, right?"

"There is."

"So there is… Well, it doesn't matter what it is, if I throw a list of random nouns at it, there will have to be some that haven't been used before."

"And how will you introduce new developments?"

"I think that most ghost stories have an abnormal event occur, which leads to another abnormal event, which leads to another…each adding more on to a preexisting story. How about it? Even in the example you gave us earlier, it felt to me like you started out with the overplayed trope of the old woman sitting on someone who has sleep paralysis, then went on adding more and more new developments. In other words, even if the stories have been told before, by digging into the developments that follow them, or expanding on the details, you can add novelty."

"Fair enough… You might be able to claim that."

There were actually a lot of ghost stories that started out making you feel like you were reading well-worn tropes…only for some unexpected detail to crop up and scare you. Stories involving youkai were a good example of that. My own experience encountering a mujina, for instance. If the story was just that I had encountered a person with no face on the street at night, that wouldn't be that scary on its own. It'd just make me go, *What is this, the Edo period? You're just regurgitating Koizumi Yakumo.* But the addition of the detail that the face was covered in pores rapidly made it give off a different impression. It could no longer be described in an idyllic manner like, "I met a nopperabou." It was an account of a new experience of encountering something ridiculously creepy.

"What will you do about the irrational ghost stories?" Toriko asked in my place while I was lost in thought.

"I think there's ways of handling them. I have two reasons for that. First, irrational sequences of events that don't flow from one to the next are already one of the specialties of random generation. In fact, I suspect once I get the program running, most of its output will be irrational sequences of events that don't stand up as stories. Even if the story goes the same way up until you wake up from sleep paralysis, if what you see there isn't an old woman, but an ice pop stick…you already have an

irrational ghost story.”

“Perhaps so,” I said. “By the way, if you replace that ice pop stick with a kettle, the story already exists.”

“Wasn’t the storyteller just dreaming?” Kozakura snarked.

“So, what’s your second reason?” I asked.

“If illogical ghost stories works as a category, that means there are ghost stories that make sense, a sort of rational ghost story.”

“Rational ghost stories… Isn’t that contradictory?” asked Toriko. “Aren’t ghost stories meant to be irrational?”

I took it on myself to address her question.

“No, not necessarily… There’s a whole lot of ghost stories where the cause is something like an ancestral curse, or the vengeance of a ghost, where you can see why the story went the way that it did. In that sense, talking about rational ghost stories may not be totally off base.”

“I wouldn’t know, but aren’t there actually more stories like that? If people had to go out of their way to come up with the category of irrational ghost stories.”

“I think you’re right.”

“Thought so. Which means, if we’re to seek irrationality not in the individual elements of the ghost story, but in the way developments take place, we just have to eliminate the sequential nature of the storytelling. To vastly oversimplify, if we shuffle the existing templates, deliberately creating a nonsequential story, we can guarantee its irrationality.”

“That all sounds logical,” I admitted begrudgingly. “But…”

“Let me clarify: I was simply answering your question of how to provide novelty to ghost stories that are being randomly generated. I don’t think there is any value in the stories that would be generated that way. I’m not looking to make ghost stories of the kind that you—or even humans in general—would want to read, Sorawo-chan. From the very beginning, quality was never part of the equation. The automatic generation is strictly a means of mapping the space of ghost stories as a linguistic form of expression and expanding it.”

“And what does mapping it do for you?”

“By learning the patterns and trends of the ghost stories that make up the other world, we can create a language model for the Otherside.”

“A language model… What’s that?”

“In the narrow sense, it’s a probabilistic model of a given language. If we’re going to be a bit more precise, it’s a program that learns the grammar and vocabulary of a given language, then predicts conversations. If it can predict what comes next in a conversation, that means it can provide an appropriate response when a human says something to it.”

“So, a program that can talk with humans?”

“Exactly. Haven’t you seen them talk about it in the news? Large language models.”

I knew they were a thing. But my knowledge of them only extended to some articles on AI I’d glanced at. Still, I was gradually figuring out the purpose of this program.

“Hold on, Kozakura-san…are you trying to create a program that can talk to the Otherside?”

Kozakura nodded. “You could say that’s the ultimate goal, yeah.”

“Are you trying to read the notes Satsuki left behind?” Toriko asked after a moment of silence. Her tone was tense, but Kozakura shook her head.

“Nah… That’s not what this is about. I think the letters in those notes, and the bizarre speech of people on the Otherside, are fundamentally different from the language this model handles.”

“It’s true that, since just reading them can cause harm, they must be different from normal language, but…where does the difference lie?” I wondered.

“You might call it a category error,” said Kozakura. “By my thinking, her notes aren’t even ‘language’ in the first place. That means that there’s no way to translate them into human words, and it’s likely impossible to create a simple model for them.”

“If they’re not language, then what are they?” I asked.

“Mere designs, or perhaps meaningless sequences of sound. You know how people sometimes try to imitate foreign languages, right? If you just imitate the form of a language you don’t know, your accent and pronunciation may sound right, but your output is going to be nonsense. It’s the same here.”

Seeing how uneasy Toriko looked, Kozakura turned and gave her a strained smile. “Don’t worry. I wouldn’t touch those notes even if they begged me to.”

There was a pause before Toriko said, “Okay.”

“Hold on. What happened to those notes anyway? Didn’t they disappear?”

“They’re still around,” I answered. “We brought them back from the funeral.”

Kozakura frowned. “No way. Where are they now?”

“We brought them back, so Tsuji-san at DS Research should be handling them.”

“Tsuji, huh… Well, whatever, we’re getting off track. Getting back to the topic of our conversation, the language model I’m attempting to create may be able to be developed into a communication tool with the Otherside. That said, it’s still only at the conception stage. I can’t just implement such an advanced function all of a sudden. First I have to start by building the language model, then aim to use it as a simulator. If the model is correct, it may be able to predict occurrences on the Otherside.”

“You think it’ll go that well?”

Kozakura smirked at my question. “Dunno. I’ve only just started making it, after all. I figure if it’s as good as the weather forecast, I’ll be doing well.”

Toriko let out a sigh of admiration. “Y’know, I think I’m seeing Kozakura do something like a researcher for the first time.”

“Don’t get sassy with me.”

“Listen… The fact is, even if you’ve had a change of heart, you’ve really shaken off whatever was holding you back. I mean, up until now, you always said you were doing your best not to think about the other world.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Was taking in Kasumi such a big influence on you?”

“Must’ve been,” Kozakura acknowledged. “To some extent, it was Kasumi who inspired this idea. I thought if I did the same thing as her word salad, I might be able to construct a language model for the Otherside.”

“Automatic generation may only create nonsense,” I cautioned her.

“That’s one of the things I’ll be able to test. You could say this is basic research on the Otherside.” Kozakura leaned back in her chair before continuing. “If you think about it, I’d never even thought to do research on the level of gathering data in order to build a model. Even though I had so much motivation before learning about the existence of the Otherside.”

“What were you doing back when you had that motivation?” I asked.

“Heh heh,” Kozakura let out an embarrassed chuckle. “Get

this. I was originally into UFOs."

"Huh?" I blurted out.

"You, into UFOs, Kozakura?" Toriko said in disbelief.

Come to think of it, we did talk about something to do with flying saucers the first time we met, didn't we?

"That said, it's not like I believed aliens have been secretly visiting Earth. Since ancient times, people have seen strange things in the skies. The question of why that is was a topic that caught my interest."

"From the perspective of cognitive science, you mean?"

"Yeah, from a CogSci perspective."

"Oh could it be—" Toriko began to say, then quickly shut her mouth.

"Could it be…what?" Kozakura asked.

"Um, er…could it be that the reason you're not working at a university is that you were chased out of academia for studying UFOs? I was thinking you might have something like that in your past…" Toriko explained awkwardly.

Kozakura burst out laughing. "It's not like that, silly. But yeah, maybe it wasn't a good look. Being an independent researcher of cognitive science already comes across as pretty dodgy on its own, and almost none of the people pushing research into UFOs are normal."

"Is it okay for you to say that?" I asked.

"Well, it's the sad truth of the situation. The scary thing is that some of them start out levelheaded and objective, only to turn into total nutcases in their later years. Maybe I'm not one to talk."

"Well, I think you're still fine for now, at least…"

"It sure is reassuring having you vouch for my sanity, Sorawo-chan."

"That was sarcastic, right? Even I could tell."

Kozakura cackled at my indignant response. It wasn't funny, though.

"Oh, right," I said after a moment, "this UFO talk reminded me of something. I had a question I wanted to ask, Kozakura-san."

"Oh, what's that?"

"Y'know how we've had an experience of the fourth kind, right?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"That terminology of dividing contact into the first through

fourth kind came from UFO studies, right? Is there anything that's beyond that?"

"You mean a fifth kind and beyond?"

"Yes."

Kozakura looked upwards as if trying to recall.

"A close encounter of the fifth kind is direct communication between humans and aliens. The sixth kind is a close encounter involving casualties, and the seventh is the birth of a child between a human and an alien."

"A... A child?"

"The eighth kind is an alien invasion, and the ninth kind is official relations between humanity and aliens... I think that's about how it went."

"Huh... That's, uh..."

"Kinda simplistic, huh?" Toriko didn't hesitate to say what I hadn't.

Kozakura nodded.

"There's all sorts of people saying whatever they want at this point, so it's not a good reference for anything. I feel like I've seen lists where aliens manipulating human genetics to force out evolution is the fifth or sixth kind, though."

"I get where they're coming from with conversation and casualties, but it's the one after that, with the human-alien baby that feels kinda strange to me," I said.

"Maybe they don't have to go in numerical order?" suggested Toriko.

"Oh, that makes sense. If it's just saying that there could be that sort of close encounter too."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Kozakura. "The system presumes an increasingly 'high level' of contact as the numbers go up. That's why the appropriateness of the ranking is open to consideration, and criticism."

After that serious remark, Kozakura's tone became more casual.

"But y'see..." she continued. "There seriously aren't enough UFO researchers who do that sort of thing properly!"

"O-Oh, is that a fact?" I asked.

"It *is.* The guys talking about UFOs don't have their feet on the ground. They lack the self-awareness to see just how much their views on UFOs are shaped by their own cultural background and religious views. When I hear an account of UFOs with blatant

Christian influences, it's just off-putting for me. It's boring, seriously."

"Uh-huh..." I didn't really get it, but it was clear she had all sorts of complaints.

"What I got from all that is that preexisting systems for measuring this sort of thing aren't going to be of much use. But your system of categorizing depth of contact with the Otherside into the first through fourth kind has its origins in that system of measurement, right, Kozakura-san?"

"That's certainly true."

"Well, how would you define a close encounter of the fifth kind with the Otherside?"

"Let's see..." Kozakura thought about it. "I'd always assumed the end result of contact of the fourth kind would be death, disappearance, or madness, so in all honesty, I'd been avoiding thinking about it. But..."

"Sorawo and I disprove that theory," Toriko noted.

"So far, at least. Don't get full of yourselves." Kozakura glared at us before continuing. "Sorry that this is a boring answer, but wouldn't you say that a close encounter of the fifth kind with the Otherside is also dialogue with an Otherside entity?"

"Communication..." I echoed. "If that's what it is, then I feel like we've already had one."

"Really? Do you think that you've been able to establish communication with them?"

I was at a loss for what to say to that.

"I don't think so, no," I concluded.

"Didn't think so. It's not even clear that it's possible. Interaction and communication aren't the same."

"Do you think with your program, we'll be able to communicate?" asked Toriko.

"I've only just taken the first step towards laying the groundwork for that," Kozakura said, a far-off look in her eyes. "Let me confess—the original concept was different. You know what you were saying earlier, Sorawo-chan, about how automatic generation might only produce garbage? That's exactly what I was trying to do: create a massive amount of garbage."

"Huh? What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"If the Otherside are referencing human ghost stories, then by flooding their source of reference with copious amounts of garbage ghost stories, they would be forced to reference them,

and might not be scary at all anymore."

I was taken aback by this. "You're telling me you were trying to attack the Otherside using automatically generated ghost stories?!"

"Yup. My initial goal was to destroy their channel with a saturation attack using spam."

"Why would you do that…?"

"Why? Because I was pissed they kept on frightening me. That's enough of a motive, isn't it?"

"Maybe for you, Kozakura-san…" Even as I was still feeling shaken by the revelation that Kozakura had been plotting destructive actions against the Otherside, she went on talking.

"But I gave up. Figured it probably wouldn't have any effect. There are already plenty of ghost stories that aren't scary, but the Otherside's approach is effective in causing fear because their focus isn't on the stories they reference, but on the human sense of fear. That being the case, what I was doing was pointless—or so I thought when I gave up on it, but then I realized another use for it. This was just around the time I took in Kasumi, so the timing was perfect. Otherwise I'd have gone on generating meaningless spam, or forgotten the whole thing."

"That's nice…" I said.

"So, did that program have a name?" Toriko asked.

"I was calling it SKM."

"What's that short for?"

"It's very on the nose. Spam Kwaidan Maker."

"What an awful name! The acronym sounds like 'scum' too."

Kozakura laughed at Toriko's criticism. "Okay. Fair enough, the name was more fitting for its original purpose, but it doesn't really suit it anymore."

"That's right," I interjected. "Please give it a cool name."

"I'm terrible at coming up with names. Got any ideas, Sorawo-chan?"

Because I'd spoken up, she threw the task back to me. I hurriedly tried to come up with one.

"Uh… Let me think… How about…Kaidancraft?" I spat out the name I came up with on the spur of the moment.

Kozakura and Toriko both looked mystified by it.

"What's that mean?" asked Kozakura.

Toriko, who knew my interests, soon guessed, "Is that the 'craft' from Minecraft?"

“Yep, that’s the one. Um, do you know Minecraft, Kozakura-san?”

“I know it, yeah.”

“The maps in that game are procedurally generated, right? The world is created and expands as the player explores… So, the name came to me by association… I mean, since your program is actually crafting ghost stories, or kaidan…”

“Ohh, I get it. Fine, that’ll work.”

Kozakura accepted my faltering explanation without objection. She probably wasn’t the type to get hung up on names.

The desire to do something similar to Minecraft, building a base, and then exploring and expanding our map—that had been part of my motivation when it came to the Otherside. Even I thought it was childish, so I still felt a little embarrassed even after she accepted my suggestion so easily.

“The automatic ghost story space mapping through natural language processing program, Kaidancraft. Yeah, sounds okay to me.”

“I dunno… On second thought, it’s kinda lame,” I said. “Let’s not go with it.”

“Why not? Sounding a little lame is just right for this kind of thing.”

“Wah, but…”

“It’s funny seeing the awkward look on your face, Sorawo-chan, so I’m sticking with it.”

“What kind of reason is that…?”

I must have looked really exasperated, because Kozakura let out a cheerful laugh.

Kozakura needed to prepare dinner for Kasumi, so we decided to head home before sunset. She invited us to stay and eat with them, but we decided we’d abstain today.

Kozakura saw us off at the front door. Kasumi had vanished off somewhere, and didn’t show back up. Turning to look back as we were about to leave, I said, “Kozakura-san.”

“Hm?”

“Is it okay if we come again?”

“Huh? Why’re you asking now?” she answered grumpily. “It’s a year late for that. Why are you suddenly showing restraint now that I’ve taken in Kasumi? It’s not like you.”

Seeing me fall silent, Kozakura grinned.

“You can do whatever you want. I’m used to it at this point.”

“Was that good enough?” I asked Toriko on the way back to the station.

“What do you mean?”

“For reporting our status to Kozakura. That was our goal today, right? But the report ended quickly, and her response was disinterested.”

“It’s fine. The important thing is that we talked about it.”

“I don’t get it… Saying that we’re ‘going out’ sounds super vague, and yet by sharing that information we’re able to build a social consensus around it. It really makes no sense.”

“You keep on saying that stuff.”

“Sorry for being so stubborn.”

“The more important thing, Sorawo, is are *you* okay?”

“How so?”

“You seemed like you were suffering.”

Toriko apparently saw right through me. I let out a sigh, then confessed.

“I don’t really understand it myself. But seeing that Kozakura’s house had become a ‘home’ shook me up…”

I told her about it. The intense feeling of loneliness I’d felt in Kozakura’s kitchen. The isolation I’d felt when Kozakura talked about Kasumi’s education.

Toriko listened without saying a word, then suddenly stopped and hugged me.

“Egh,” I squealed.

“…”

“Wh-What? We’re outside, you know? Outside.”

While I was busy worrying that people could see, Toriko asked, “Do you want kids?”

I had to at least answer the question. Even I could tell that, for Toriko, who saw our relationship as something adjacent to a romantic relationship or marriage, the question was a serious one.

That wasn’t going to change my answer, though.

“Not in the slightest… Sorry…”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“Do *you*, Toriko?”

“Hrmm…” Toriko groaned as she moved away from me. “I dunno anymore.”

“Is that my fault?”

“You’re definitely the one who gave me cause to reconsider,” she said as she started walking again and gestured for me to do the same. “I always had this vague idea, even as a child, that someday I would get together with the person I loved, and we’d adopt a kid and raise them together. I like kids, and it felt natural to me to do that.”

“Yeah.”

For someone with Toriko’s background, maybe that made sense.

“But then you went and said you hate kids, Sorawo. I panicked a bit. Like, if a hardened criminal said they hated kids, I’d get it. But a nice girl like you? It didn’t make sense to me.”

“Isn’t it pretty harsh, saying you’d get it if a criminal said it?”

“Maybe it is. Sorry.”

“But I don’t think I said anything that strange. I mean, kids are noisy, and stupid. There’s not much *to* like about them.”

“Ahh…” Toriko gazed up to the heavens, unsure what to say.

“Like I told you before, I don’t utterly despise them or anything. I just don’t want them any closer to me than they have to be.”

“Yeah, that’s what I don’t get… Sorawo, you’re good around Kasumi. You don’t mistreat her.”

“I wouldn’t do that, obviously.”

“And when we went looking for her in the interstitial space at DS Research, you were really nice to her there too. Based on your actual behavior, your own statement that you ‘hate kids’ just doesn’t ring true for me, you know? Maybe you just convinced yourself you do?”

“It feels kind of off to me as well. If I’ve been acting the right way in front of Kasumi, that’s great and all, but…I’ve been thinking recently, maybe my kindness is external in nature.”

“External?”

“Your kindness is like, y’know, it comes from your soul. It looks to me like you act that way because it’s second nature to you, and you believe from the bottom of your heart that you’re doing the right thing. But in my case, I think my kindness is learned, and I’ve been taught what the appropriate response is for a given situation.”

“Is there really inborn and learned kindness…?”

“If there’s one more thing I can say on the subject, it’s that I

reject the notion of family… It may have been that I didn't like how Kozakura and Kasumi had become a family."

Toriko cocked her head to the side at this.

"Hrmm?"

"What?"

"Nah, if I say it, we'll probably get into a fight…"

"What is it? Tell me."

Toriko gave me a strange look, then seemed to make up her mind. "It's not that you didn't like that they had become a 'family,' it's that you're afraid Kasumi is going to take Kozakura away from you, don't you think?"

"Hm…?" It took several seconds for the meaning of what she'd just said to sink in. "Do you mean…"

The blood rushed to my head. Not out of anger, but embarrassment.

"I told you it'd cause a fight…"

"I'm…not going to fight with you over it, but…" My face was hot. I couldn't look Toriko in the eye. "Basically, I was looking for a 'mother' in Kozakura? Is that what you're saying?"

"I didn't take it that far! You just wanted, um…an older woman who'd indulge you…"

"Augh, enough. You've said enough already. Spare me."

I covered my face with both hands and blocked out what Toriko was saying.

"I didn't expect it to be such a body blow."

"…"

"Did I hit the nail on the head?"

"I never even realized it myself…" I groaned, unable to recover from the damage. "Was I that obvious?"

"Nah, not really. Besides…it's not like I don't understand the feeling."

"…"

Come to think of it, Toriko lost her parents too.

Trying to pull myself back together, I lowered the hands covering my face.

"Ugh… This is the worst. And my lack of self-awareness about it makes it all the more humiliating."

"Sorry."

"There's no need to apologize, though." I let out a long sigh. "What kind of expression am I supposed to make the next time we meet?"

“I don’t think you need to make any kind of face. Just act normal.”

“Okay. I’ll try to see Kozakura as a woman from now on.”

“Hey, I kinda don’t like how you worded that. This is the worst!”

3

The next weekend, we entered the Otherside using the gate in Jinbouchou for the first time in a while.

The last time we had come here was Golden Week during the T-san the Templeborn incident. Though we’d begun work on our plan to open holes in each floor of the building to create a safe route to the ground floor, all sorts of other things had since cropped up to impede construction.

Wearing work clothes and carrying suitcases, we boarded the elevator and used the usual process to access the other world. I had the sequence of buttons committed to muscle memory at this point, and could do the whole thing without thinking.

When the elevator door opened, the other world appeared before our eyes: the empty roof, the unobstructed blue sky, and the plains dotted with ruins. I’d grown used to it now, but I still couldn’t forget how overcome I was with emotion the first time we came here.

“Oh, good. It’s sunny on this side too,” Toriko said, raising her hand to the sky.

There were cases where the weather in the two worlds wasn’t fully linked. The rainy season was over in our world, but we hadn’t been so sure about what it would be like over here, so we were relieved. Though we wouldn’t get rained on once we headed down to the lower floors, I hadn’t been keen on the idea of working while it rained.

Unlike Tokyo, which was so hot I would have sworn it was in the tropics, this world was still a bit more temperate; that was likely thanks to the haze between us and the sun weakening its strength a little, as well as the wind that was blowing. With no buildings to block the wind and no air-conditioning units emitting their heat outdoors, the Otherside felt far more livable in summer.

We opened our suitcases and began pulling out construction tools. Then, after checking thoroughly to ensure that the

stepladders leading down to the lower levels hadn't come loose, we climbed down through the holes we had opened up last time to the tenth floor, then the ninth.

Our current direction for the project was to prioritize opening up holes all the way down to the first floor. There was all sorts of other stuff we wanted to do too, like opening larger holes that we could lower larger packages through, installing pulleys, and putting up a tarp on the roof to keep the rain out, but first, we wanted to just secure a safe route down. I didn't want to risk the ten floor ladder climb up and down the side of the building anymore.

"Well, let's get to work," I said.

"Okay," Toriko agreed.

Once we put on goggles and dust masks, our construction work began. As the blades of electric construction tools ate into the floor of the ninth floor, an ear-piercing shriek tore through the silence of the Otherside. There was a violent pleasure to be found in using the core drill and disc cutter to bust through reinforced concrete. It had been a while, but I quickly got the hang of it again.

We traded places several times as we continued our destruction of the building. Even though it was cool, it was still summer, so we were a mess of sweat and dust in no time. After three hours of work, drinking water and eating salt candies to fight off dehydration, we had a hole that went through to the eighth floor.

I fixed the stepladder that we had brought in place and climbed down there. This floor was just like all the others so far —empty.

"We're making good progress," I said. "We could get down another floor today."

"Yep," Toriko agreed. "Let's break for lunch."

The towel was white from plaster after I used it to wipe my face and neck. We headed to the surface world to eat curry and pick up drinks and ice cream at the convenience store, then came back to the Otherside. Even with the wind, we felt like we were going to dry out if we stayed out on the roof, so we went to take our afternoon nap one floor down on the tenth floor.

I woke up a little over an hour later. The wind felt nice. We'd brought a little cooler with us, so the ice cream and barley tea were still cold. With the surface world facing the hell of

temperatures over thirty-three degrees day after day, it was easier to stay sane on this side.

"Sorawo, are you in a bad mood today?"

"Huh?"

I was staring vacantly at the ceiling, my bag resting under my head like a pillow, when Toriko asked a question that left me dumbfounded. On the picnic sheet, there were two empty cups of Häagen-Dazs between me and Toriko, who was lying next to me.

"Why? Do I look like it?"

"When we met this morning, you were even quieter than usual. I thought you might not be feeling well, or maybe you were sleepy, but you've been quiet since then too."

"You sure do watch me closely."

I was still impressed every time.

"So, yesterday, I was talking to my friend Benimori-san at uni," I began to explain.

"Benimori-san. What's she like?"

"When I was agonizing over my...relationship with you, she's the one I went to for advice."

"Hmm?"

"Whoa, hold up. You're scaring me."

"What's so scary?"

"The way your face suddenly got all serious is way too scary."

"What did you tell her about me?"

"Scary, scary, scary. I'll tell you the story in order, so listen."

"I am listening, okay?"

Even as I faltered under this unexpected pressure, I explained. I told her how, when I was given a one week time limit, and forced to seriously consider my relationship with Toriko, Benimori-san was the one who heard my childish worries about the difference between friends and lovers. That she had advised me that not every relationship between two people had to follow a preset pattern, so it was fine for us to explore a variety of possibilities and find what worked for us. And finally, how she'd easily figured out the person I was worrying about my relationship with was Toriko.



“I see… You were thinking about things seriously too, in your own way, huh?” Toriko murmured, seeming pleased.

It looked like, as I was talking, she’d concluded Benimori-san wasn’t a threat.

“She sounds like an interesting girl. I’d like to meet her some time.”

“Fine with me.”

I figured she was going to switch over to her smiling shy girl mode again even if they did meet, but I had no reason to refuse. Benimori-san would enjoy it, at least.

“So? What happened when you were talking with Benimori-san? Did she say something?”

“Uh, that’s not quite it… I was the one who said something.”

“You, Sorawo?”

I let out a sigh of regret. “So, while I was at the university, Benimori-san comes up to me, and she asks me what happened after that.”

“If she’s the type that likes to gossip about romance, yeah, of course she’d want to ask. So what did you tell her?”

“I had to think *really* hard about it. Like, how could I explain it so she’d understand?”

It was a much harder task than explaining to Kozakura. Benimori-san didn’t know about the Otherside, or the ups and downs of my relationship with Toriko. There was no way a friend with practically no background information was going to understand me going on about “nue.”

After a whole lot of hemming and hawing, here’s what I finally said to her: *“We’re going out now.”*

“I mean, come on! I was so frustrated with myself! We found our answer after so much searching for a relationship between us that wasn’t romance. But when people ask me about it, and I try to explain it to them, I’m drawn towards using the context of a romantic relationship! It’s humiliating…”

As I was venting indignantly, Toriko put her hands on the ground, pushed herself up, and then leaned over me.

“What?”

Even as I was asking that, she kissed me.

“What? What?”

She just looked at me without saying a word.

“Hey! You! No getting horny!”

“I can’t?”

“No, you can’t!” I pushed Toriko off me and got up. “Okay, I’m up! I’m up now! Break time’s over! Construction time resumes!”

“Okayyy.”

What was that all about? Was there something arousing about what I said?

I was still perplexed as afternoon construction began.

Toriko didn’t get the true essence of what I was saying, I thought to myself while drilling through the concrete.

It had been a shock to me that, when trying to describe our relationship, the words “going out” had come out of my very own mouth. This was no laughing matter. It scared me—that, against my will, I’d been pulled towards the context of romantic love.

Those words weren’t what I’d intended. They had left my mouth of their own volition. In that moment, I’d had no will of my own. The me who had said “We’re going out” was a bot.

No matter how Toriko and I came to an agreement between ourselves, no matter how we tried to define our special, unique relationship, if we let down our guards for a second, it would get turned into romantic love. Like we were being pulled towards a celestial body with an enormous gravitational pull.

If I explained things in order, I think Toriko would understand. Benimori-san too…probably. But what about other people? Kozakura probably found the whole topic tiresome, but it wasn’t like she was the kind of person who wouldn’t understand even after we had a serious conversation about it. I had a feeling that Natsumi would be a lost cause.

The other thing that scared me was that people who didn’t know me would probably interpret even these worries of mine through the context of romantic love. I was confident of that. In other words, they’d see me as a beginner when it came to romantic love, flailing around like a fool because I didn’t want to accept my love for what it was. Whether they came to that reading benevolently or in a mocking way, they would still be looking at me as if I were immature. After all, those caught in romantic love’s sphere of gravity moved in line with its context automatically, unable to perceive the pull that it exerted on them.

It probably wasn’t even the fault of the individual humans affected, much like it wasn’t humanity’s fault that we were subject to gravity here on Earth.

Well, what was to blame, then? I thought about it. Could it be

that the very concept of “romantic love” itself was something incredibly terrifying...?

“There, we made it!”

Toriko’s voice brought me back to my senses. The core drill in her hand had broken through, opening the final hole.

Once we cut the remaining rebar with the disc cutter, the opening was complete. Now we could descend to the seventh floor.

“That was a little over three hours, maybe,” said Toriko. “We’ve gotten a bit faster, wouldn’t you say?”

“Do the same thing four times, and you start to get used to it,” I replied.

We lowered the stepladder, then went to take a look together. Even knowing there was bound to be nothing again, I still got excited with each new floor.

Raising my goggles, the wind felt good blowing across my sweaty face. The sun had begun dipping to the west. Its light felt blinding this time of day. As I looked around, wondering where we should make the next hole...

“Toriko! There’s stairs!” I cried out in surprise.

“Wha... Hey, there are!”

The opening to a downward staircase was near the center of the seventh floor. I rushed over to look down. The stairs turned around before continuing down to the sixth floor, and then even lower from there.

We’d been expecting to have to bust our way through the concrete six more times before we got down to ground level, so this was a happy surprise. We forgot how tired we were as we held hands in delight.

“How far down do you think it goes?” I wondered aloud. “Even if it’s only part of the way, this is going to save us so much effort.”

I was about to start going down immediately, but Toriko hurriedly stopped me.

“Whoa, whoa, Sorawo. Are these stairs safe? They look fine, but this building is practically a ruin.”

I paused and looked at her for a moment. “You sure are smart, Toriko.”

“Thanks. You may be a bit dumber than usual right now, Sorawo.”

“And you aren’t afraid to say so, huh?”

That said, Toriko was absolutely in the right on this. If, after all our careful work to avoid getting injured, the stairs collapsed and we ended up with broken bones or something, that would be the worst.

I sat down at the top of the stairs, carefully testing my weight on them. They felt firm enough under my feet. No signs of collapsing…that I could tell.

“It feels safe,” I said, turning to look at Toriko.

But as I did, I thought I heard something, and we both reflexively looked down the stairs.

“There was a noise just now…” I said.

“Yeah.” Toriko nodded.

I listened closely. There was no doubt about it. In the silence of the Otherside, I immediately picked up noises that hadn’t been there before.

The distinct sound of footsteps.

I heard the hard soles of leather shoes striking concrete at a steady pace. They were coming towards us.

Someone was coming up the stairs.

Whoever they were, they must have heard us talking, and yet they approached without a word. That wasn’t a good sign…actually, hearing footsteps on the Otherside already felt wrong.

“Who’s there?” Toriko demanded loudly, pulling out her gun.

There was no response. The footsteps kept climbing at the same pace. I got up from the stairs and pulled out my gun too. Then, suddenly, we heard them downstairs. Voices. A group of men and women, chatting as they climbed the stairs. But there was still only one set of footsteps.

“…-ssan, where do you…”

“…I think. That place is…”

“…no, no. Ha ha ha…”

“…but you know, that sort of thing…”

“…even so, I’m not sure…”

The voices were getting closer, but I still couldn’t hear what they were talking about. It was like someone had extracted just the vibe of a peaceful, everyday conversation. If I were to offer an analogy, it was like a number of people had left the office for lunch break, and were discussing where they should go.

We backed away, guns still in hand. The voices and footsteps grew closer, and we could tell they were on the floor below us

now. As I focused my consciousness into my right eye, so I was ready to shoot at any time, the owner of the footsteps finally appeared from the stairs.

First, we saw a bizarrely shaped mass. It was longer vertically than a human head, and transparent like glass, letting us see whatever was on the other side of it. It had this lumpy and swollen shape, like a mass of mushrooms that had been allowed to continue growing well past when it was time to harvest them.

There was a human body underneath that mass. It wore a white shirt and gray pants, with brown leather shoes on its feet. It had clumps of dried mud on it in various places, as though it had been lying on the ground. The hands protruding from the sleeves of its shirt were misshapen, having become transparent masses like its head. I couldn't even tell where the fingers were supposed to be.

As it crested the stairs and stood on the seventh floor, it looked at us—not that I knew for sure that it had the sense of sight. It just felt like we were being seen.

Toriko gulped.

"Sorawo, we may've seen this guy before."

"Huh?! Where?"

"When we went Kunekune hunting, there was a guy collapsed on the ground—no?"

Her mention of it brought the memory back. She was right! A long time ago, when Toriko invited me to come to the Otherside and we had entered the marshlands to hunt Kunekunes, we'd seen a dead guy who looked like this. His head had been invaded by transparent fungi, and he'd thrust his fingers into his own eyes…

The man had clearly been dead, but here he was in front of us now. The transformation of his head had progressed far beyond where it was the last time we'd seen him. Perhaps his hands had been affected by it too.

The indistinct voices I'd been hearing suddenly cut out at some point. Were the flashes of light I was seeing inside his head the result of light that shone into it being refracted inside?

What's he going to do? Will he attack us? Or will this one try to talk to us too…?

While I kept him in my right field of vision, considering whether it might be best to act first and open fire, the guy abruptly turned to the side. He then advanced two or three

steps, before turning his back to us.

Then he floated into the air.

“Huh?” I blurted out.

For no reason that I could understand, he stepped on the air, and continued climbing. Almost as if there were stairs there that we couldn’t see.

Toriko’s mouth hung open. As we watched, he turned around at an invisible landing, and continued climbing further. The soles of his leather shoes continued treading on the air above us. I thought his head would hit the ceiling, but he continued through it without resistance, then disappeared up to the floors above.

Where was he going…? We hurriedly raced to the step ladder. Despite our haste in climbing it, there was no longer any sign of the man. We still heard that sound which mimicked conversation from the floors above, though, and it was gradually getting further and further away.

When we went back to the roof, that sound had vanished too. The man was nowhere to be seen. There was a little dried mud that had fallen in front of the elevator, and I thought that it might have been left by the man, but I couldn’t be sure.

What was that all about? The two of us discussed it. Maybe someone who worked in this building wandered into the Otherside, then got taken out by a Kunekune. They could have been trying to return to the surface world.

It had nothing to do with us, though, and there was no way we could check, so it was all speculation.

“What was with those air stairs?” asked Toriko.

“Maybe when that person wandered in, there were still stairs in the building,” I suggested. “If they’re still moving according to old memories, they might have climbed stairs only they could perceive… I mean, you know how Otherside structures can change when you aren’t looking at them. It was that way with the Mayoiga too.”

“Yikes. If this building goes and resets itself after all the hard work we’re putting in, I’m gonna cry.”

“That, or it could be like the revolving observation platform, where a slight shift in the other side can change the details.”

“You think…he passed through another phase, and returned to his original world?”

“Who can say…?”

I don’t think he got out into the surface world. If a guy like

that showed up, there would have been a whole kerfuffle about it. But then where did he go...?

It seemed Toriko was getting a little melancholic, imagining a scenario where someone who had been lost returned from the Otherside, but I had severe doubts whether returning to the world he came from in that state would be anything to be happy about.

File 29: The Fourth Kinds' Summer Holiday

1

"Excuse me for asking, but do the two of you have plans for summer vacation?"

We turned and looked at one another in response to Migiwa's unexpected question. It was the end of July, and we were in his office. He'd called the two of us here, saying he had something to discuss, but then that was the first question he threw our way.

"Plans..." Toriko echoed.

"Do you mean like going on a trip, that kind of thing?" I asked him.

"I do mean that kind of thing," Migiwa confirmed.

I shook my head. The idea of planning some sort of event during summer break was a novel one to me. Now that he mentioned it, maybe people did do that sort of thing, but all I had thought of it was that I was glad to have a bunch of time to explore the Otherside and get things set up there.

"I don't have any. How about you, Toriko?"

"I figured you wouldn't have thought of anything, Sorawo."

"Well, sorry."

"It's fine."

"I mean, listen, the summer break's short. We've got, what, ten days or so? And even if we went somewhere, there'd be a ton of people."

"Is it short? My image of summer breaks in university was always that they were long," Migiwa said, a dubious expression on his face.

"I thought that too, but they're short..." I grumbled, checking my schedule. "It's from August 9th to 19th... That includes Saturdays and Sundays. It's not even two weeks. I never thought it'd be *shorter* than in primary school. Hey, Toriko, weren't you shocked too?"

When I looked over, Toriko's eyes shifted sideways.

"Hm?"

"..."

"Why did you avert your eyes?"

"..."

"Wait, don't tell me... Toriko, is your summer break longer than mine?"

"Just a little bit."

"From when to when?"

"August 1st to September 26th."

"Whaaaaaa?!" I shot to my feet in surprise. "The hell?! That's almost two months!!!"

"Ahh, yes, I thought that the summer break in university would be about that long," Migiwa said, satisfied with what he was now hearing. I sure as hell wasn't satisfied, though.

"Why'd you keep quiet about it...? Okay, look, I know I never asked, but you could have told me this *last* summer."

"I couldn't bring myself to..."

"Gahhh! I can't take this!!!"

Feeling desolate, I plopped myself back down on the sofa.

It's not that I don't get how she'd miss the chance to bring it up.

And it's not that I don't think there's something wrong with me not having even the vaguest sense of when the person I spend so much time with will have their summer break.

Ignoring my desolation, Migiwa seemed to be thinking about something.

"Ah, I see... I had considered that the dates might vary between universities, but I never anticipated there would be such a difference. Well, I am sure it will not take that many days, so I do not expect it will pose a problem."

"What are you talking about?" I asked for the sake of asking, even as apathy crept in. Migiwa raised his head.

"Oh, pardon me. Assuming that this is possible for the two of you, I was wondering if we could trouble you to come camping with us."

I was left confused by the unexpected word in that sentence. "Camping? What's that a euphemism for? Is it along the same lines as when you 'played in the water'?"

"It is not."

"Pitching tents and sleeping outdoors? Is that the camping we're talking about?"

"Staying in tents outdoors will be part of it."

He was beating around the bush. Was it because Migiwa was overly serious, or was it some sort of joke on his part? As I sat there, perplexed, Toriko asked, "Is it boot camp?"

“That is closer to my meaning, yes.” Migiwa nodded.

“Boot camp? Is that the thing where you do a bunch of exercise?”

“It originally refers to basic training for new recruits in the military.”

“Huh…? So, basically, you’re saying you want to train us?”

I recoiled, imagining us exhausted while a drill sergeant cussed us out.

Migiwa laughed and shook his head. “Heavens no. You two are beyond being treated like fresh recruits, surely. I wanted to ask you to serve as instructors.”

The drill sergeant in my imagination was replaced with Toriko and me. Now I was even more confused.

“Who would we be teaching, and what? Toriko may be one thing, but I’m a total amateur.”

I wasn’t being modest here. Unlike Toriko, who had learned to shoot at a young age, I barely knew anything about firearms. The one thing that I had mastered was muzzle discipline, which Toriko had patiently taught me, so that I wouldn’t carelessly put a bullet in myself, or anyone else. I figured even someone as dense as me needed to do that much right.

But when it came to actually hitting what I shot at, I was still awful. We didn’t have much ammunition on hand, so I wasn’t practicing much either. But I didn’t really feel the need to get better at shooting. I figured that as long as I had the minimum technique necessary to shoot when I needed to, that was good enough. I wasn’t a highly motivated shooter, not me.

Having come into possession of a handgun and rifle, I was glad to use them, but I had no passion for guns. Obviously, I took good care of the Makarov because Toriko gave it to me, and I felt a sense of attachment to the CQB-R that I’d gotten during the difficult escape from Kisaragi Station. If either of them got lost or destroyed, it’d probably hit me pretty hard. But in the more general sense, they were nothing more than tools for exploration to me, the same as the hatchet that I used when bushwhacking.

“The ones I would like you to instruct are the operators from Torchlight…”

Hearing Migiwa say that only confused me more. Torchlight Inc. was a PMC that did work for DS Research.

“But they’re professionals, aren’t they?” I objected.

“I’m not sure I have many tricks I can teach the pros either…” Toriko agreed.

Seeing our confusion, Migiwa seemed to come to his senses and bowed his head. “I am terribly sorry. Allow me to explain again, starting at the beginning.”

It looked like we’d jumped ahead in the discussion around the point where boot camp came up. Migiwa started his explanation over.

“First, the premise is that we wish to reorganize the security of DS Research. This facility has suffered two breaches in a span of half a year. The first by Runa Urumi’s cult, and the second by T-san the Templeborn. In both cases, there was no major damage, but to this day we still have yet to come up with a fundamental solution. This could be said to be an extremely bad situation.”

During Runa Urumi’s invasion, some of the staff were hurt when they got shot with nail guns, and T-san had killed the fourth kind patients. Looking at it objectively, that was the worst outcome.

“But I don’t know what you could have done differently. There’s no resisting Runa’s voice, and T-san was on a whole different level…”

“We cannot afford to excuse ourselves in that way. We have no idea the next time a hostile fourth kind contactee or ultrablue entity might appear, and at present we have no means to counter them.”

“She’s not hostile, but the same goes for Kasumi too, huh?” Toriko interjected. Migiwa could only let out a dry laugh.

“Yes… She would be a nightmare for anyone in charge of security. In fact, I have jumped out of bed many times after having dreams where she took something terrible out of our UBL artifact warehouse.”

“It sure is a good thing she hasn’t, huh…” I said, speechless.

“We have no guarantee of that,” Migiwa responded before continuing, “We introduced Torchlight as part of the lessons learned from the incident with Urumi Runa. Even against someone with the abilities of a Fourth Kind, a professional security would still be able to provide some deterrence and defense. Or so we hoped, but…”

“T-san wasn’t playing fair.”

Toriko was right. No matter how much they had hardened their defenses, there was little they could do if the enemy

suddenly appeared inside.

"But what can you do, then?" I wondered. "If the same thing happened again, hrmm... The only thing that comes to mind is laying traps."

"Even if we train Torchlight for you, Sorawo's eye and my hand aren't exactly things we can impart to others..."

Migiwa nodded. "That is why I have called Tsuji-san back in."

Tsuji. The woman I'd met here before who called herself a magician.

"Erm...sorry, who's that again?" asked Toriko.

"Someone I believe you have yet to meet, Nishina-san. She manages the UBL artifacts warehouse for us, but has been away on leave for some time."

"Oh, the warehouse manager. Didn't you say you'd met her, Sorawo?"

"Yeah."

My first impression of her was that she was slippery and hard to get a handle on. I'm not sure whether she was serious when she said she was a magician, or if it had been meant as some kind of joke. But what was certain was that she had resisted my right eye without being a Fourth Kind. Assuming she hadn't cheated somehow.

"Will Tsuji-san be able to protect DS Research?" I asked.

"That, I cannot say. If she can, then all the better," Migiwa answered. "That said, we cannot rely on Tsuji-san alone. I would like to put a system in place that will allow us to rotate through multiple personnel capable of defending against hostile entities. It is to that end that I wish to train Torchlight."

Finally, I saw how all of this fit together. He wanted us to be in charge of their training.

"Can I take what that person said about being a magician seriously?" I asked.

"Of course you would be suspicious of her. Honestly, although I can be deceived by smoke and mirrors, I do believe we can assume that, at the bare minimum, she has some psychological tricks at her disposal."

"Like hypnosis?"

"When I inquired about that, I was told, 'Hypnosis is a type of magic.'"

I could just imagine it. She wasn't the type to give a straight answer to any question.

“I sort of understand what this is about now. But what kind of training do you want us to give them…?”

“Ah, yes. Let me get into that. First, I would like to set up a dedicated facility for the training of operators. What you might call a simulation environment modeled on UBL.”

“Operators” was what Torchlight’s soldiers were called.

“If it’s a simulation, are we talking about VR or something?”

“No. Utilizing virtual reality might be an option in future, but first we will use a physical training environment. Fortunately, we have a facility that is suitable for that training.”

“There’s a place like that?”

“Yes, a convenient place, out in the mountains, away from prying eyes.”

“Hold on, do you mean…”

Migiwa nodded. “I do. I think that we will use the Farm in the Mountains out in Hannou, which you manage for us, Kamikoshi-san.”

2

We headed to the Farm in the Mountains—or more precisely, the facility in the mountains of Saitama that Runa Urumi created based on the famous ghost story spot of the same name. Getting there by ordinary methods meant driving over winding, unpaved mountain roads. Those roads could also be overgrown with brush too, so anyone who didn’t have business out there would never even realize it existed. Maybe that made it perfect as a training ground for a group like Torchlight, who were in possession of illegal weapons.

“There…huh?”

“Correct. It is cut off from the outside world, and yet we can use the Round Hole to easily travel to and from the DS Research building. I struggle to think of a more convenient location—although, I acknowledge that you may not want anyone else going there, Kamikoshi-san.”

Migiwa said it before I could, which just felt awkward. He’d seen right through me.

I had volunteered myself as the manager of the Farm because it was the perfect opportunity to secure a facility with portals for just the two of us. Runa’s cult had set up multiple gates there, so there was no way I could just ignore a place like that. Migiwa had

accepted my rambling proposal that I should be responsible for the facility, and I'd become the administrator.

That was how the Farm had become our base of operations. Honestly, I didn't want anyone going there who didn't need to.

However, I was also aware how selfish that wish was. And the fact was, Migiwa and Torchlight had been to the Farm with us a number of times. Torchlight also operated as a construction firm, and we had needed their assistance with large-scale construction projects such as expanding the service entrance that connected the Round Hole in the basement to ground level or installing an elevator to lift the AP-1 to the upper floors. That elevator was still in the works, but the service entrance had recently been completed. What all of that boils down to is that there were already people other than Toriko and myself going to the Farm. And for construction work that I had requested at that. It'd be awful for me to try and shoo them away as unwelcome at this point.

That said…

"That place is unquestionably dangerous. Even if it's a bit late to be bringing it up now."

We'd closed all the gates we found, but none of them were completely gone. There was no way to open them again from this side without Toriko's hand, but what about from the other side of the gates?

Even setting aside the gates, the place was crazy. Runa and her overenthusiastic cult members had done too good of a job making the Farm into a hodgepodge of haunted spots. We had the means to resist, but for any ordinary people going in there, it was just a creepy place that was bound to have a negative effect on their bodies and minds.

"I might say that is precisely why we would choose it. Our hope is to train operators with a tolerance for exposure to the UBL, so it is the ideal training environment for our purposes."

"This is one heck of an idea you've come up with. Are you sure it's going to be okay?"

I got worried as I remembered one of those big, tough operators vomiting when exposed to the sinister nature of the Farm.

"I have already discussed the matter with Sasazuka and obtained her consent. They were surprisingly enthusiastic about it over there."

Are they nuts…?

It must have been obvious how uneasy I was, because Migiwa added, “Of course, this is all premised on the two of you being able to oversee things. If that proves impossible, then we will not be making use of the Farm. It is incredibly inconvenient to access without using the gate in the basement, which makes it unrealistic for us to use it without the two of you.”

“That all makes sense… Toriko, do you think it’ll be fine?”

“I don’t see why not?” she answered easily. “And camping out overnight in this world sounds fun too.”

“Camping out overnight… Is that really what we’ll be doing? I know we talked about camping, but with the gate connected to here, it’d be possible to come home every night, wouldn’t it?”

“We plan to have the members of Torchlight camp there. It would be around three days and two nights, I suppose.”

“Which means that we need to stick with them during that time, huh?”

“That is what it would mean, yes. I must apologize, but I may not be able to be present for the full duration. I have duties to attend to here that I cannot neglect.”

“Thank you for your service…”

I dunno what it is, but it’s probably a lot more trouble than the training.

After much hesitation, I nodded. “Got it. In that case, okay, we’ll give it a go.”

“Thank you. Now, as for compensation, will this amount be enough for the two of you?” He showed me the number on his calculator.

“Consider the job taken!” I replied emphatically.

“It is much appreciated,” Migiwa responded with a bow of his head. “I have one more related matter to discuss, if that would be all right. I am considering using this training to resolve another issue of concern.”

“What would that be?” I asked.

“How we are to handle Runa Urumi.”

“Oh.”

Yeah, that’s an issue of concern all right.

“I believe we had come to an agreement to watch her behavior, and then allow Runa Urumi to go free at some point in the future. Do the two of you still have no objection to that course of action?”

“Well, yeah, that’s right,” I replied.

“Yeah… I don’t think there’s any other way,” Toriko agreed.

“Understood. I am of the same opinion. In the time since we took her into our custody, Runa Urumi has not used her powers. This is despite her having had the opportunity to.”

“The opportunity?”

“Yes. Under the guise of a careless mistake, I made it so that we were alone together in the hospital. She understood the situation, but made no attempt to do anything.”

“That was an awfully bold move, huh?”

“Perhaps it was. I had people watching us, however, and they were instructed to contact the two of you if I was taken down.”

“Still… She’s dangerous.”

Toriko was stating the obvious, but she was right. If Runa Urumi commanded a person to “die,” they would.

“I cannot force all of the risk onto the two of you, after all. She underwent what you might call a period of probation, and her behavior during that time was acceptable. I think it is about time we realistically considered her release.”

It felt like it had been a long time coming. While I couldn’t completely free myself of my concern over whether it was okay to let a Fourth Kind contactee with a Voice that could control other people out into the world, we weren’t part of the justice system, and Runa Urumi’s sins weren’t the sort that could be judged by the law. In the eyes of the law, DS Research was way worse for imprisoning a minor.

That meant that we had to let her go at some point, and when we did we’d have to bring her into our “family” in order to manage her… It was a conclusion born from a mix of an adult’s sense of responsibility and craftiness. I wasn’t entirely on board with it, though, since I distrusted the whole framework of family.

“I’m fine with releasing her, but what did you mean when you said you wanted to use this training to do it?”

“Runa Urumi originally created the Farm. I thought that her knowledge and ability might be of use during the training.”

“I guess it’s like having her do volunteer service as part of your sentence,” Toriko said, sounding satisfied with the explanation.

“It is perhaps similar, yes,” Migiwa agreed. “As part of her reintegration into society, having her engage in some labor as a part of ordinary society will let us see if she is able to cooperate

with others.”

“I don’t think we’re part of ordinary society, but I get your point,” I said. “But…we won’t be able to watch her the whole time. I think it would be impossible to look after her while also overseeing Torchlight’s training.”

“I understand. In regards to that, I have thought of an alternative method.”

“An alternative method?”

“First, let me call her in before we talk about it.”

Migiwa used the phone on his desk to make a call on an internal line. Some time later, there was a knock at the door.

“Excuse me.”

The office door opened, and Runa Urumi was led in by a nurse. The moment she looked in our direction, her face lit up.

“Kamikoshi-saaan!”

Yeah, yeah. I raised my hand to greet her. It felt like she was going to jump on me, so it doubled as a way of stopping her.

“Please, be seated,” Migiwa said, gesturing towards an empty sofa. Runa blinked, then sat down as she was told.

The nurse was someone I hadn’t met before. She was muscular, like someone who did judo. As she was about to leave, Runa gave a friendly wave, and said something in sign language. The nurse grinned, then bowed her head and left. Was that the deaf nurse I’d heard of who was in charge of taking care of Runa?

“Erm? So, what’re we all here for?” Runa looked around at each of us. “Uh, actually, is it okay for me to be here? I probably shouldn’t say this myself, but—”

“Runa,” I cut her off.

“Yes.”

“Wanna go camping?”

“Um…?” Runa gave me a dubious look.

“Camping. In the mountains. Do you want to go?”

For some reason, Runa kept getting paler as she looked at me. “Am I going to be killed?”

“Huh?”

“Does this mean you’re going to bury me in the mountains? I had the feeling it was coming eventually.”

“No!”

“Well, what’s it a euphemism for, then?!”

“I’m telling you, it’s not a euphemism.”

Seeing that Runa was afraid, Migiwa spoke up. “Urumi-san. After discussing the matter, we agreed that we should be able to release you from this facility. I am sorry to have inconvenienced you for so long.”

“Release me…?”

“I believe it will be possible for us to provide some support for your reintegration into society. However, before that, we have a favor to ask of you, which is why you have been called here today.”

Runa had been listening with a blank look on her face, but now she reacted like a startled bird, rapidly looking from me, to Toriko, and then to Migiwa.

“You mean I can get out of here?!”

“Well, yeah,” I said with a nod.

Runa thrust both arms into the air. “Woo-hoo! I’m getting out of the slammer!”

“Oh, come on. The ‘slammer’?”

“Let’s have ramen! We gotta! Won’t you go with me, Kamikoshi-san?”

“Before you get ramen, there’s a job that needs doing first.”

“A job? For me?”

We explained to Runa that a private military company was going to be holding a training camp at the Farm, and we wanted her to help with it as the former owner.

“Wow, you sure messed around and did whatever you liked with my Farm, huh?”

“Yeah, ’cause it’s mine now.”

“There you go, acting like a Sengoku Era warlord again.”

Pffft! I heard a big laugh from Toriko’s direction. I dunno why, but it had apparently tickled her funny bone.

“Mmm, I get what you’re saying. Basically, this is like a graduation exam, huh? To test if it’s okay to release me.”

“Yeah, maybe something like that.”

“Fine with me. Let’s go camping. With campfires, and marshmallows and everything.”

“It’s the middle of summer, though…”

I was good with camping, but that was my one concern. Even though we were going to be up in the mountains, wasn’t it going to be super hot, and weren’t there going to be tons of bugs if we went camping in August?

Runa gave me a look of surprise. “You didn’t factor that in

when choosing that place?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Maybe it’s because it’s a haunted spot. It’s really damn cool out there.”

Toriko and I looked at one another. Was that…okay? If there was cool air, then wasn’t it the bad kind?

Now that she had a grasp on the situation, Runa was all fired up. She put her hands together in front of her, and turned to face us. “Umm, I have a suggestion, y’know.”

I had a feeling it wasn’t going to be anything good, but I still asked. “What?”

“It’s great I get to rejoin society and all, but I’m a minor, and an orphan, right?”

“Yeah…” I’d never heard someone bring up being an orphan so enthusiastically.

“So I’m going to need a guardian, or a sponsor of some sort. Isn’t that right?” This was a question directed at Migiwa.

“Yes. It is as you say.”

“I figured! In that case, um—”

“No way! Nuh-uh! Not doing it!”

I sensed what was coming my way and seriously panicked. It was true that I was old enough now, but I couldn’t possibly act as her sponsor.

“Huh? Oh, gosh. No, that’s not it. You’re still a student, right, Kamikoshi-san? I wouldn’t ask that of you.”

“O-Oh…”

Ignoring my disarray, Runa continued. “That’s not what I want… I was wondering if I could maybe ask Kozakura-san.”

Ohh… I could feel an air of satisfaction with that answer fill the room.

“Why Kozakura?” Toriko asked.

“Well, she seems nice, and when we were talking before, I got the sense that we have some common interests.”

She definitely thinks Kozakura’s a pushover.

Before I could say anything, Migiwa spoke up. “Have no fear. We have already considered the matter of your sponsor, Urumi-san.”

“Oh, you have? Then, Kozakura-san—”

“I have called the person here, so please, speak with them directly.”

“Huh?”

The door opened as if it had been waiting for just this moment.

“Hi there.”

It wasn’t Kozakura who entered the room with a chipper greeting, but a woman with very short hair and pierced ears—DS Research’s self-proclaimed magician, Tsuji.

“Oh, hey, it’s Kamikoshi-kun. I guess that must make you Nishina-kun. Right?”

“Uh, yeah, and?”

Tsuji grinned at Toriko’s obvious wariness.

“Hmm, I see. You’ve got a good look on your face! And so this must be…” She stopped next to Runa, peering down at her from above. “Runa Urumi-kun. This is the first time I’ve met you when you’re awake. Last time I saw you, you were groaning, and had your face wrapped in bandages.”

“Who’re you…?”

“I’m Tsuji.”

“Right…”

Still looking down at Runa, Tsuji turned towards Migiwa. “Migiwa-kun, are you the type who thinks, ‘Let the women handle the kids’?”

Migiwa had a completely serious look on his face. “I’ve never lived on the straight-and-narrow, so surely it would not be right for me to involve myself with a minor.”

“Ha ha, that’s hilarious. You heard him, Urumi-kun.”

“Yes?”

“Since that’s how it is, I’m the one who’s going to be your sponsor. Nice to meetcha.”

It took a moment before Runa went, “Huh?!” She turned to Migiwa to protest. “Uh, I don’t like this. Like, who even is this person? Isn’t it ridiculous, having someone I only just met be my sponsor?”

“It’s true that this is the first time we’ve met, but I have my reasons.”

“What do you mean, reasons?”

“So, when you attacked this place, you messed up the artifact warehouse, yeah? Well, I’m the one in charge of managing it.”

“Ah…” Runa got a look on her face that said, *Oh, crap.* Tsuji was still smiling, but her smile was just a little bit menacing.

“You really yanked my chain doing that, but I can’t get violent with a minor, y’know?”

“Wh-What are you planning to do? Hang on, stop it, please.”

“I’m not going to do anything. In fact, I’m even going to let bygones be bygones, and become your sponsor. Aren’t I just the nicest?”

“No, no, no, Migiwa-san! This person scares me! I want Kozakura-san instead!”

“Nuh-uh, nuh-uh, we can’t let you monopolize her like that. Kozakura-kun belongs to everybody, okay?”

As I looked on passively, thinking that Tsuji was saying some pretty out-there things herself, Runa finally reached her limit and stood up. “Fine! I don’t need a sponsor! Just leave me alone!”

“That just won’t do. Because you’re a child.”

“I’m telling you I don’t want you!”

“Oh, really? Then will you use that voice of yours, make us all do what you say?”

Runa fell silent. “No… I wouldn’t do that.”

“You sure you don’t want to?”

“I made a promise that I wouldn’t. With Kamikoshi-san!” Runa violently sat back down, pouting.

“I see, I see. Yep, I think I can be her sponsor, then, Migiwa-kun.”

“It would be a big help.”

“To be honest, the odds were eight-to-two in favor of me refusing, but Urumi-kun was more of a good kid than I thought. And it sounds like I’ll be paid a special allowance for it.”

“Huh…? Did you just say you were planning to refuse?” Runa asked.

Tsuji didn’t hesitate to nod. “Yeah, I mean, I don’t know you very well. But I feel like I learned something just now.”

“What are you saying you learned?”

“That you have the will to keep promises you make with people.”

“Is that all…?”

“That will is the most important thing. After that, it’s a matter of stamina. So, on that note… Nice to meet you, Urumi-kun!”

Runa stared up at Tsuji’s smiling face in silence. Finally, she opened her mouth to say just one thing: “I think I might hate you.”

“Y’know, I get that *all the time.*”

This conversation had just decided how Runa would be treated. I was surprised by how fast it had all happened, but now

that it was settled it wasn't really my place to say anything.

"Now then, please take a seat as well, Tsuji-san," said Migiwa. "I was just telling them about the camp."

"Ohh, Torchlight-san's? Well, if Kamikoshi-kun and Nishina-kun are going, then I don't really need to go, do I?"

"You must be joking. You are going to be central to formulating our defensive measures, Tsuji-san."

"It's gonna be hot, and there'll be a whole lot of bugs. I don't wanna go."

"According to Urumi-san, the area is actually quite cool."

"And the bugs?"

"Urumi-san, can you tell us about that?"

Asked for her opinion, Runa made a sour face. "They're everywhere, so you shouldn't go. In fact, there's nothing *but* bugs. If you pitch tents there, they'll get buried in them. So, please, don't come."

"Oh, gosh. Do you think a mosquito coil will be enough to handle them?"

Tsuji's tone remained aloof and playful. I was starting to figure something out. If you wanted to blunt Runa's momentum, maybe you had to go this far. Looking at it that way, maybe Tsuji was a good pick for Runa's sponsor. Since Kozakura was a serious person, she'd probably get stress ulcers having to deal with her.

"What's Tsuji-san...going to do? At the camp," asked Toriko. It was an incredible feat for a shy girl like her.

"I wonder what I'll be doing. Migiwa-kun?"

"Yes. I spoke about it a little earlier, but after the T-san incident, Tsuji-san was the one I talked to about defending DS Research. Because she is a specialist in that field."

"A specialist in what?"

"The professional term for it would be 'spiritual defense,'" Tsuji said as she took over explaining. "Everybody loves Psychic Self-Defense. The kind Dion Fortune-sensei wrote about. Oh, did I mention it yet? I'm a magician."

"A magician..."

"Yep, yep. Of the practical kind. Magick written with a k."

Toriko looked at me as if she wanted me to save her. I didn't understand it that well myself, though, so I could only shake my head.

"Is this person all right...?" Runa said with suspicion, recoiling from Tsuji. I had to feel bad for her. Anyone would feel the same

way if the person they might end up living with proclaimed themselves to be a magician.

"Erm... So basically, Tsuji-san is trying to defend DS Research using occult means?" I asked reluctantly, and Tsuji pointed at me in a way that said "you got it."

"Something like that. You're quick on the uptake, Kamikoshi-kun."

That didn't feel like a compliment.

"I can't imagine it's going to be very effective, though," I said.

"Oh, really?"

"The Otherside approaches us using the context of internet lore and real ghost stories. The ghosts that appear in those sorts of stories are already far from the image of ghosts and youkai as they existed before, and traditional religious methods like sutras or exorcisms are often ineffective against them. The kind of magic you're talking about may be different from religion, Tsuji-san, but if it's coming from a preexisting occult context, I suspect it's not going to work..."

Tsuji listened to me speak without getting upset. "I dunno. Who can say?" she said when I was done.

"You dunno?"

"I think it would be good if we could test all sorts of things, including that. And the folks at Torchlight are volunteering to act as test subjects. That doesn't happen often."

"Yikes... Don't go experimenting on me, please," Runa said warily.

Tsuji widened her eyes in exaggerated surprise. "What are you talking about, Urumi-kun? You're an experimenter, not a test subject."

"Come again?"

"That is true," Migiwa interjected. "We have high hopes for your work as an assistant during the training."

"What do you mean, as an assistant?" Runa asked.

"I was thinking, if you use your voice, interesting things might happen," said Tsuji. "So if anything, you're going to be working with the aggressor."

"Wha..." Runa sounded deeply unhappy about this.

"In that case, Migiwa-san, does this mean the four of us are going to be training the people from Torchlight?" I asked.

"That is correct," he replied with a nod. "You will create a training environment using your eye, Nishina-san's hand, and

Urumi-san's voice. Special forces use a training facility called a kill house to practice breaching. This will be the UBL equivalent of that. Tsuji-san, you will be there in your role as Urumi-san's guardian, to experiment using your skills as a magician, and also to provide advice."

"Okay, okay. You get that, Urumi-kun?" Tsuji said.

"Yeah, I got it. Basically, we need to make a haunted house, right? I'm good at that. I did it all the time back when I had my fan club. It probably doesn't have much to do with my voice at all."

I had thought Runa was just sulking, so I was surprised when she gave a proper answer. Maybe she was willing to talk in a nonaggressive manner about things she understood.

I raised my hand. "Can I ask just one thing? I have a condition, or something I need to check."

"Go ahead," replied Migiwa.

"Am I correct in assuming that this training is only for actions in the surface world? Basically, is it that the purpose is not to fight the Otherside, but create a system which can respond in the event that an Otherside entity attacks DS Research on the surface?"

I had no intention of helping anyone other than Toriko and me enter the other world. It was a secret place for just the two of us. Even now that I had learned how terrifying it was, and how unfathomable, I had no intention of bending on that basic principle.

"Rest assured. We are not thinking of deploying into the UBL."

"Okay then. You good with that too, Toriko?" I checked.

"Okay."

Once she nodded, we were all in agreement.

"In order to create a training plan, I believe we will hold a number of meetings with Sasazuka, the company president of Torchlight, in attendance. I will contact you later to schedule a date. Thank you all for taking the trouble to come here today."

With that closer from Migiwa, we called it a day. Runa had wanted to eat ramen, but Tsuji becoming her guardian must have killed her appetite, because she went back to her room without a word. I don't understand how minors think.

Thanks to her, Toriko and I still had a hankering for ramen, though, so the two of us went out for ramen together.

3

There wasn't much time until the camp began, and that time had gone by at a rapid pace, as we'd held meeting after meeting. All because my summer break was short. The planning stage had overlapped with the exam period before summer vacation, which had honestly been exhausting. Toriko was already on break. Oh, how I resented her. I don't even know how many times I ground my teeth when I saw her in the window of our video call, dressed casually and eating ice cream. Yet every time she was on a call, she'd done her makeup, and was wearing a different outfit. I was like, *What's with her?*

Somehow, I got through all of it, and made it to my own belated summer break. There was no time to relax, though, because it was off to camp on the very first day. I headed out with my stuff, then traveled through the city of Tokyo—which, even in the morning, was already so hot and humid that I felt like I was swimming—and arrived in Tameike-Sannou. When I reached the underground parking lot of the DS Research building, there were more people than I'd ever seen down there before.

"Good morniiing…"

"Good morning, Kamikoshi-san. I look forward to working with you today."

Migiwa, who was polite as always, had taken off his jacket, and wore a gray T-shirt and cargo pants as he busily worked to prepare for departure. It was my first time seeing him in anything other than a suit; the Mayan tattoos that densely covered both his arms were now on full display. Normally, that would have made him stand out like a sore thumb, but not today. There were more than ten operators from Torchlight in the parking lot, and pretty much all of them had a tattoo somewhere.

"Morning, Sorawo," Toriko said, pushing her way through the crowd as she approached. She'd taken off her jacket and wrapped it around her waist. The two of us went and set our stuff down at the foot of a pillar that was a short distance from the crowd.

"They've all got incredible tattoos, huh?" Toriko said as she looked all around. I guess the same thing caught both of our attention.

“Yeah, they’re pretty amazing. Do you think soldiers are all like this?”

“Could be, for a lot of them. Mama had some tattoos too.”

“Maybe it’s a cultural thing.”

“That’s part of it, and I hear some people get them so that their body can be identified even if they get blown to bits on the battlefield.”

“Blown to bits…”

As I shuddered at this incredible reason I would never have imagined, Toriko moved her face close to me.

“You want to get some too?”

“You brought that up before.”

“It’s super common to get tattoos in Canada, so I don’t really have anything against it. Do you dislike them, Sorawo?”

“They do leave a bad impression on people here in Japan. And it sounds painful.”

“Maybe a tiny one would be okay?”

“If you don’t have anything against getting one, why haven’t you, Toriko?”

“Family policy. Mom said I couldn’t until I was an adult. Because I might regret it later.”

“Makes sense.”

“So, how about it?”

“Hmm… I’ll put it off for now.”

“Putting it off, huh?”

Toriko sounded disappointed, so I added, “I tried imagining myself with a tattoo, and it just doesn’t feel right. It’s too far removed from how I envision myself.”

“Really? I think it’d be cute, though.”

“Besides…if I get one, you’ll get one too, right?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“I dunno if I want a tattoo on your pretty skin. Even though I’m sure it’d look great and all.”

“Could…!”

Toriko nearly shouted out loud, but then drew her lips taut, took a deep breath to calm herself down, and then quietly said, “Could you save that kind of comment for when it’s just the two of us?!”

“Why?”

“This is the problem with you Sorawo.”

I had no idea what she was mad about. Ignoring my

confusion, Toriko began fanning herself with her hand.

Well, no... Maybe I kind of did get it. I think Toriko was taking my words in a more intimate way than I'd intended them.

Don't just come up with things on your own, then get all flustered. Try to be serious here.

The elevator opened, and Runa and Tsuji came out.

"Morning, you two."

I didn't expect her to greet us as a set.

"You had exams yesterday, right?" she asked. "Must have been tough."

"Nah, the exams ended the day before yesterday. I had a supplementary lecture..." I explained.

"A supplementary lecture! I like it. Oh, to be so young again. That's university life for you."

"Kamikoshi-san. Don't you think Tsuji-san talks like an old man?" Runa grumbled.

"Really? Y'know, I get that all the time."

"So maybe she really *is* one. I don't want to live with an old man."

"I'm *so glad* I get to live with Runa-chan!"

"Save me. I'm pretty sure this counts as some kind of harassment."

Despite her snark, Runa seemed so much more full of life than the last time I'd seen her. Since she had no friends, maybe she'd needed someone she could complain to without holding anything back. Although, that was probably a too-convenient explanation for it. I didn't know if Tsuji was doing it intentionally, and I had a feeling that she hadn't put that much thought into it.

One thing I could say was that I wasn't up to providing the kind of close relationship that Runa was looking for. Toriko didn't trust her, and then there was Kozakura, who she had nearly brainwashed. Thinking about it that way, I did feel sorry for her.

Am I being a softie?

Whatever the case, she was going to need to regain her humanity with the help of Tsuji's annoying behavior. I sure was glad I wasn't Runa.

"Good morning, Kamikoshi-san!"

The next to come over and greet me was President Sasazuka of Torchlight. I was bewildered by the way they all took turns coming to see me... But, no, it wasn't time for bewilderment. Maybe I should have gone and greeted them on my own? Why

had I been just standing here in a daze ever since I arrived?

As I was being confronted with my lack of social skills first thing in the morning, Sasazuka spoke to me in a crisp tone of voice. “Thank you for coming when you are so busy. Let me express once again, we look forward to working with you today!”

“Oh, sure. Nice to be working with you too.”

I felt a little overwhelmed by the energy of an athletically inclined person, but managed to bow my head in response.

“Is everyone ready…?”

“Yes, we’re all ready to go. You can open the gate whenever you would like!”

“Got it.”

There were sixteen operators from Torchlight, Sasazuka included. Migiwa, Tsuji. Runa, as well as Toriko and I brought the total to twenty-one.

Once the order to go was given, trucks and vans filled with construction materials turned on. Everyone but the drivers went on foot. Standing at the front of the line, Toriko and I stepped forward. The spot where we would open the gate was marked on the floor of the parking lot.

“All right, I’m gonna open it.”

“Okay, go ahead.”

Toriko reached out with her left hand and grabbed the air. I saw the silver haze twisting in my right field of vision. Toriko swung her hand to the side and the gate opened like a curtain. The slight wind that arose stirred her hair as it blew into the gate.

There was much oohing from behind us. Many of them had seen it already, but this wasn’t the sort of thing that was easy to get used to. Even I felt a fresh sense of surprise each time I saw it.

“Head out!”

On Sasazuka’s command, the operators moved into action. As we watched the procession of soldiers carrying large packs vanish into the silver mist, it brought to mind memories of a story I read long ago. I think it was during the First World War. There was a unit from some country or other marching through the foggy hills when they vanished… I think I must have learned about it when studying ghost stories about going to another world.

It was an old story, and of dubious credibility, but the quiet

scene it evoked in my mind had left an impression on me, so I had always liked that story. Where did the soldiers in that unit go? How long did they march? I'd pondered those questions time and again.

Now here I was, spiriting away soldiers myself.

The operator directing traffic on the other side of the gate signaled to us. The line of waiting vehicles slowly advanced, passing through the gate one by one. There were two vans and two trucks, each bearing the mark of Torchlight's other face, Tomoshibi Engineering. Once all the vehicles had passed through, it was our turn.

"Well, shall we be on our way?" Migiwa said and then stepped through the gate. Tsuji and Runa did the same. The two of us went in last, and then Toriko opened her hand. The space she had forced open closed shut like waves crashing together, and with that the move was complete.

This basement where the Round Hole was set up was darker than the parking garage at DS Research, and the air was chilly.

"Ahh. Ahh, ahh." Runa put her hands to her ears, and made sounds like she was testing a microphone.

"Is something wrong?"

"Don't your ears pop when you go through here? Like in an elevator."

"Yeah, they totally do. It's the difference in air pressure. This is the mountains, after all."

"Is the difference that great?"

"I mean, DS Research is in Tameike-Sannou. The name alone tells you it's low lying."

"It does?" asked Toriko.

"I think the 'Tameike' means there must have been a big pond there long ago. Even by Tokyo standards, it must be close to sea level. Not that I've looked it up."

How big was the elevation difference between central Tokyo and the mountains of Saitama? Tens of meters? I wouldn't have ruled out it being more than a hundred. I'd already gotten used to it, so I didn't think about it anymore, but I got a clogged-up feeling in my ears every time we did this. It was maybe a little late to be realizing it, but using the gate repeatedly over a short span of time might not be great for our health. People who were sensitive to air pressure changes would probably get sick immediately.

There was a ramp that went up one of the walls. That was the ground level service entrance that had recently been completed. Now that it had been, we could finally ship vehicles and construction materials in through the Round Hole.

It was made much easier by the fact that Runa's cult had already begun the work before abandoning it, but if not for that, the amount of equipment we could bring into this tight space was limited, so it would have been a fairly difficult project. I was told that they had repaired a broken power shovel and used it to open up the tunnel.

The vehicles slowly climbed the ramp. We followed behind them.

We tread over the brand new concrete, and through the wide-open shutter. Once we headed out to ground level, the summer air rushed in to greet us.

"Didn't you say something about it being cool, Runa?" I asked.

"It's hot in the sun. I mean duh. It's summer."

Runa was the only one who'd brought a rechargeable handheld fan. It had never occurred to Toriko or me to bring something like that.

"Does that thing help?"

"It's better than nothing. Can we get into the shade already?"

She didn't have to ask us twice. We followed the line of cars from the service entrance at the back side of the building around to the front side. The Farm had three buildings. The Residence Building in the center, the Factory on the right, and the Cattle Barn on the left. There was an open space in the middle, which they surrounded on three sides like a square bracket.

The building we'd just come out of, with the Round Hole in the basement, was the Cattle Barn. The Residence Building was three stories, with rooms laid out like a school. Contrary to its name, it wasn't a place people could live, but there were gates to various places on the Otherside there. The Factory felt like it had actually been used for something in the past, and there was broken industrial equipment left abandoned there.

The open space in the center was covered in a very thin layer of tiny gravel, like I had seen in some parking lots in the countryside. There were weeds peeking through the hard ground everywhere. The train of vehicles had stopped here, and they had begun unloading the materials.

Sasazuka, who was directing the work, turned as we were

approaching and said, “You can stay in the shade.”

“Okayyy,” Runa replied selfishly, then marched off in the direction of the Factory.

“Huh…? Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yes, setting up is our responsibility. We’ll be hauling around some big construction materials, so sorry, it would be better for everyone if you’d stay where it’s safe for a while.”

“We’ll be setting up our own tent. That’s fine, right?”

“Oh, of course you can do that. I’ll call you when things settle down here.”

It was true that I couldn’t do much in the way of grunt work, but being treated like I was a guest rubbed me the wrong way. Because, fact was, this was *my* turf.

As I walked off to follow Runa, feeling a little upset, Toriko looked at my face and smirked.

“Wh-What?”

Toriko pointed at me. “Sengoku Warlord.”

Oh, shove off.

Once we entered the Factory, the heat vanished like it had never been there at all. Even the sounds outside felt somewhat distant. Turning to look back, on the other side of a large door frame with no door, it looked like a summery scene had been cut out and framed. It wasn’t far away at all, and nothing should have blocked the noise, but it was like we were in another world.

“It really is cool…” Toriko said, her voice echoing off the high ceiling.

The inside of this building was the very picture of an abandoned factory. The abandoned machinery and tools were covered in rust, and the paint on the walls and floor had discolored to the point where I couldn’t even guess their original shade, while cracks ran through them like dried skin. The windows were pretty much all broken, and this had allowed plants to creep in.

“Isn’t it just great? Makes you want to put together a ruins photo album, doesn’t it?” Runa said as she looked around.

“Was it like this from the beginning?”

“Yes. It was love at first sight. I wanted to shoot a promotional video here someday.”

“A promotional video? But for what?”

“For one of my song covers, maybe?”

I shouldn’t have asked.

After getting my hands on the Farm, we had only been visiting the Residence Building where the gates were, so it was my first time coming here in a while. Here in her familiar old haunt, Runa kept on walking ahead of us. I wondered what her guardian was up to, but there Tsuji was, her arms crossed as she looked around.

"You sure you want to let her do whatever she wants?" I asked.

"Hm? Ohh, that's right," Tsuji replied, as if only noticing the issue now that it was pointed out. "Urumi-kun, don't wander too far or you'll get lost."

"Huh?! I'm not a child. Besides, this place is practically my house." Her response pissed me off.

"You heard her," Tsuji said to me.

"'You heard her.' Really...?"

I couldn't help but think, *Is this person all right?* But Tsuji's attention seemed preoccupied with something else. She was looking around, thinking about something by herself.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Kamikoshi-kun, I forget, do you have a strong sense for spirits?"

It was a strange question to get in response.

"No, not at all."

"And you, Nishina-kun? Do you see them?"

Toriko also shook her head. The two of us only had incredibly mundane senses. Once you set aside the massive abnormalities that were my right eye and her left hand.

"Is there something going on?" I asked.

"Yeah... I do sense those sorts of things, and—Kamikoshi-kun, do you believe in ghosts?"

"No, not at all."

My response got a look of amusement from Tsuji. "You've had all these paranormal experiences, but you don't believe in ghosts?"

"It's not even a matter of believing or not. They don't interest me."

"Oh, is that right? Can I ask why?"

"At the end of the day, ghosts are human, right? There's only so much a human is going to do once they turn into a ghost. It's boring."

"Ohh, I get it. You sure are pretty hardcore, huh, Kamikoshi-

kun."

After expressing how impressed she was, Tsuji moved the conversation along.

"Listen, in our industry, what people feel and see can vary a whole lot. Even with the people who claim to have spirit sense, or spiritual abilities, it's normal for them to be saying completely different things from one another once they get talking. But I think for all of those people, if you bring them to a strange place, they'll feel something is funny about it with their own senses. So, though they each express it differently, they do know that something's off."

"Uh-huh. And how about this place?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I feel like there's something very…weird about it. But it's just that, a feeling. Ever since we got to the Farm, I've felt like I've come to the wrong place, but have no idea what exactly is off about it."

Tsuji was silent for a brief moment, then with a half smile said, "There's another thing they say in our industry. The scariest things are the ones you can't see. Where you've got the sense for spirits, and ought to be able to see something, but you can't. There's just this presence, or premonition rather. You don't see anything. That's the kind of pattern that's seriously bad news."

Tsuji grinned as she added, "And, yeah. That's the kind of seriously bad pattern I feel like we're looking at here."

"Yikes…" I exchanged glances with Toriko, and shook my head at her unspoken, *"You see anything?"*

"So…how is it bad news?"

"There are limits to the information our eyes and ears can tell us. They have set wavelengths they can perceive, and there are upper and lower bounds to that. If there are similar thresholds for the senses for spirits, then we can't perceive information that goes outside of that."

"So what you're saying is…"

"Yeah, no matter what horrifying thing is happening here, if it's outside of my threshold, I have no way of knowing about it. You know, there are people who let their guards down because they have spirit sense, and die as a result. I'll bet that's probably why."

Tsuji looked unflinchingly into my eyes as she continued.

“I thought you might be able to see something, Kamikoshi-kun. But you don’t really?”

“That’s right. I don’t see anything special… But we’ve been here several times, and we’re more or less fine, you know?”

“Oh, yeah? Well, it’s fine then!”

Tsuji let out a hollow laugh.

“I may just have been imagining it,” she continued. “It’s also very possible that even if something is going on outside of our thresholds, it won’t have any effect on us.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Okay, okay. Well, guess I better cheer up then!”

Tsuji got back to her usual self, and called after Runa who was walking deeper into the Factory.

“What do you think, Sorawo?” Toriko asked in a quiet voice.

“Hrmm. I can’t say one way or the other. I don’t really sense anything abnormal.”

“Do you think she really has those sorts of spiritual abilities? I know she said she’s a magician or whatever.”

“I dunno how far to take her seriously, but she was able to endure my eye.”

“Huh?”

“I looked at her with the intent to drive her crazy, but she was unaffected. According to her, she can use her own evil eye.”

“Why did you do that? And when?” Toriko asked with a tone of exasperation.

“It just sort of happened… She started it, okay?” I couldn’t help but sound like I was making excuses.

“But setting that aside,” I continued, “you don’t sense anything out of the ordinary either, right, Toriko?”

“It’s not like I don’t feel anything weird.”

“Huh? For real? In what way?” I was surprised at her unexpected response. Toriko had a bewildered look on her face as she continued talking.

“It’s nothing to do with this place… I felt it back at DS Research too. Whenever I’m near that Tsuji person, I occasionally get a feeling like something’s brushed up against my left hand.”

“What is it?”

“Dunno. There are times when it feels like paper or cloth, and times when it’s like a person passing by. But it’s super faint, and only lasts a moment, so I could be imagining it.”

“Hmm…” I murmured thoughtfully.

From the back of the factory, Tsuji let out a startled cry. “Huh?! There’s water here?!”

“Yeah, there’s water, big deal. Don’t underestimate me. It’s even properly drinkable.” For some reason, Runa sounded proud of herself.

It’s not like you made the water come out.

I walked in the direction of the voices. The two of them were in a room with a simple sink. Maybe it was a break room or something when the Factory was still running. Runa and her cult had apparently used this as a living area. There were still long tables and pipe chairs sitting out, while plastic bottles and empty containers from premade meals littered the room.

“Kamikoshi-kun, this building has running water, huh?”

“It sure does. The electricity and gas are still running too.”

It was originally a ruin, so most of the facilities were broken, but we could get the bare minimum of usage out of them we needed for our life necessities. After confiscating the building from Runa and her cult, we’d decided to maintain the facilities as they were. For the construction we had planned, we were at least going to need the electricity, and for the convenience of the construction crews we were going to want the gas and water too. DS Research was paying the bills for us now.

“I thought the place was a ruin, but you could live here. That surprised me.”

“I did my best to make it comfortable.”

“The people who really did their best were the ones you brainwashed.”

We hadn’t been coming to this building, so it had hardly changed since our last visit. In other words, since the time when we came with Migiwa and Torchlight to check on the facilities after Kozakura and I were kidnapped. It had been months since then, yet the mess in here made it look like everyone had just left moments ago, and it was creepy. Even if it was cool in here, and the electricity, gas, and water all worked, this was not an atmosphere I wanted to stay in for long.

This was Runa’s first time back on the Farm since the incident. I looked at her, thinking that she had to be feeling something.

“What?”

“Nothing…”

Runa only looked back at me dubiously. I was unable to figure out what she was thinking. That might just have been my lack of

people observing skills, though.

“Hey, Urumi-kun. Why’d you try to create a place like this?” asked Tsuji.

“Who can say?” Runa replied curtly. “Before I knew it, I was already working on it. I thought I’d need this kind of place to call Satsuki-sama.”

I noticed Toriko tense up for a moment at the mention of “Satsuki-sama.”

“Hmm. And where did you get that idea?” Tsuji continued questioning.

“Where? What do you mean by that?”

“Did you think of it yourself? Or did someone else tell you?”

“Well… Um… I wonder…”

Her tone was hazy. I looked at her face and was shocked. Her eyes were out of focus. She had a glazed over expression, like she wasn’t looking at anything.

“Runa?”

“Yes?” Runa blinked repeatedly, then cocked her head to the side with a dubious look. “Huh? I can’t remember. I wonder why…”

Even if she’d started it herself, it was possible she wouldn’t remember the impetus. But her expression just now was strange. Thinking about it again, even if she had a group of brainwashed followers she could use, securing a large building out in the mountains, and using it to recreate the situations from ghost stories seemed like too big of an idea for a mere high school student.

Uh, not that I’d know that. It might just be that I wasn’t able to come up with it because I wasn’t of Runa’s caliber. But even so, it felt a little strange.

“Saying this feels like I’m trying to evade responsibility, and I don’t like it, but…” Runa continued in a hesitant tone. “I may really not remember. It feels like this place, this building, they’d been prepared for me by the time I realized it… That can’t be right, though, can it? I think what probably happened was that, because my head was so full of Satsuki-sama, one of my fans got everything ready on their own initiative.”

The people brainwashed by Runa’s Voice had acted even without her commands, trying to anticipate her desires. Looking at it that way, what she was saying certainly seemed plausible. But even with that said, some lingering feeling that something

was off remained. Could they really operate in such an organized fashion? It seemed easier to consider the existence of another mastermind.

"I'm asking just to be safe...and it seems a little late to bring it up, but there wasn't anyone higher up than you? That wasn't a thing, right?" I asked.

"If you're asking if someone was giving me orders, then no. Obviously, Satsuki-sama is an exception to that, though. But it wasn't like Satsuki-sama was giving me commands for every little thing I did. She was my personal god."

"Could there have been someone among your brainwashed followers with that kind of sway?"

"Nah, there were people I could trust to handle things, but I don't think there was anybody who thought about things that deeply."

Runa had been younger than any of her followers, and she said that like it was nothing.

You're the one who made them unable to think deeply, aren't you?

"I didn't like squabbling inside my fan club, so I made sure to tell them. Get along, okay? I don't want anyone treating anyone else like they're more or less of a fan, and don't just go doing things on your own."

"Feels like they could interpret that any way they liked."

"But everyone did what I told them to. Actually, they were all only interested in me, so it felt like they had no interest in anyone else."

Could it really have gone so well? That one male follower who'd tried to shoot me to death had been showing powerful jealousy and a calculating nature. Maybe they acted good in front of Runa, but who can say how they really were...

"Did I ever tell you how I formed my fan club?"

"I don't think so," I replied.

"It was with ghost stories."

"Hm?"

"Those people were originally the viewers of my livestreams. I did make others into my fans, like bureaucrats, and people who could get their hands on firearms, when it was necessary. But pretty much all of the membership was made up of my viewers."

"They happened to show up for a livestream and got brainwashed? I feel so bad for them," Toriko let out her all too natural feelings on the matter.

“Well, sorry, but it doesn’t matter that they just happened to be there. I just happened to end up with this life I’m living. My parents just happened to be religious, I just happened to encounter Satsuki-sama’s voice, and just happened to get caught by DS Research. Isn’t it that way for everyone?”

Her tone could be read either as argumentative or resigned. With a meaningful look in my direction, Runa continued.

“Kamikoshi-san, you like ghost stories too, right?”

“Why do you bring that up?”

“If our fates had been just a little different, you could have been listening to my stream. Hearing my Voice.”

“…”

“And if you had, you’d have become my fan—doesn’t it just give you the strangest feeling thinking about that?”

“Which outcome was better?”

“Huh?”

“Do you wish I’d been your fan? Or are you happier it turned out this way?”

“…”

Runa wasn’t answering, so I continued.

“You said it when you kidnapped me, didn’t you? That you wanted to be friends.”

“I did say that… So you remembered, did you?”

“I was always reading ghost stories, so I’m not up on what ghost story streams are like, but if I had delved into it, maybe I would have found your streams. And you’d have gotten me in an instant, I’m sure. I’d have gathered at the Farm, worshipping Luna-sama. If that had happened, I’d never have been abducted, and Toriko wouldn’t have come to save me. What about you, Runa? You’d have abducted Kozakura, learned about the existence of the notes, raided DS Research, and maybe even made it to your Blue World. No clue what’d have happened to you after that, though.”

It would have offended my conscience to bring the scars on her face or her mother’s death into the conversation, so I was deliberately unclear on those points.

“However it played out, the me that’s here now, who you said you wanted to be friends with, wouldn’t have existed. Maybe you’d have had a puppet me who said yes to everything you said, sure—but would you have preferred that?”

Runa just stared in shock for a while, then drew her lips taut,

and glared at me. “You’re so mean, Kamikoshi-san!”

With those parting words, she stormed out of the room.

What’s she getting so mad for when she’s the one who provoked me? I was thinking when Toriko elbowed me.

Seeing the reproachful look she was giving me, I defended myself. “It’s not my fault. She’s the one who picked a fight with me.”

“This isn’t about a fight…”

“Hm?”

While Toriko frowned, an amused Tsuji said, “I thought you were trying to put the moves on that girl.”

“Huh…?”

“Nishina-kun, this kid, she’s a natural seducer, isn’t she?”

“She so is…!” Toriko’s response was brief but packed with deep conviction.

“You’ve sure got it rough. How about the two of us talk sometime? About all sorts of things…”

“Yeah… I’ll think about it.”

Seeing the usually shy Toriko give a not entirely uninterested response, I felt lost. While I was confused, Tsuji followed Runa out of the room.

“Toriko, when did you and Tsuji-san become such good friends?”

“We haven’t really. I’ve just been talking to her at the meeting with you.”

“But, I mean, you two seemed to understand each other so well just now.”

“Oh…” Toriko looked down at me with an inscrutable look on her face. “I may have an easier time getting along with people who are around you.”

“Wh-Why is that?”

“There’s a sense of community. Like, we can grumble together…”

“Could you not get excited about bad-mouthing me?!”

“We’re not bad-mouthing you. Just grumbling.”

“You’re not making any sense!”

While I was still highly offended, Toriko sandwiched my face with her hands, and started pinching my cheeks.

“Whoa! Stop…”

“You see why I’d want to grumble, right? If you start seducing another woman in front of me.”

“I don’t know how I was seducing her! Were you listening to what I said?!”

“Okay, I’ll explain.”

“Y-Yeah?”

Toriko continued without smiling. “Runa provoked you, saying, ‘If you had watched my streams, you’d have never been anything more than another one of my fans,’ right?”

“That was a provocation, yeah. I got that.”

“In response, you pushed back, asking, ‘Would that obedient me have been enough for you? Isn’t what you really want the me that never bends to your will?’ If you say that to her with a straight face, she’s already lost. Of course she’d have no choice but to run away like that.”

“You really think I can pull off that kind of high-level communication?”

“The problem is you don’t even know you’re doing it.”

As Toriko released my cheeks and lowered her hands, I quietly said, “Listen, I think there’s something wrong with you.”

“No, that’s not—”

“Toriko, she’s in high school, you realize that, right?”

“That’s…true.”

Toriko reluctantly accepted it. She let out a long sigh. “The problem is that you’re so cool when you act like that, Sorawo…”

Should I be grateful for the compliment? I didn’t even know anymore. “I think I may genuinely hate human communication,” I groaned.

At that point, Tsuji’s voice came from outside the room. “Kamikoshi-kun! It looks like they’re done setting up camp. They’re calling for you.”

“Oh, coming!”

As I turned to say, *“Let’s go,”* Toriko hugged me, and before I could ask her what was up she kissed me too. Releasing me seconds later, Toriko shot me a look that said, *“I’ll let you off with that,”* and then gallantly left the room.

I wiped my lips and sighed.

The moment I leave an opening, it’s just smooch, smooch, smooch. I mean, seriously, what is with her?

4

By the time we headed out of the Factory, things had changed

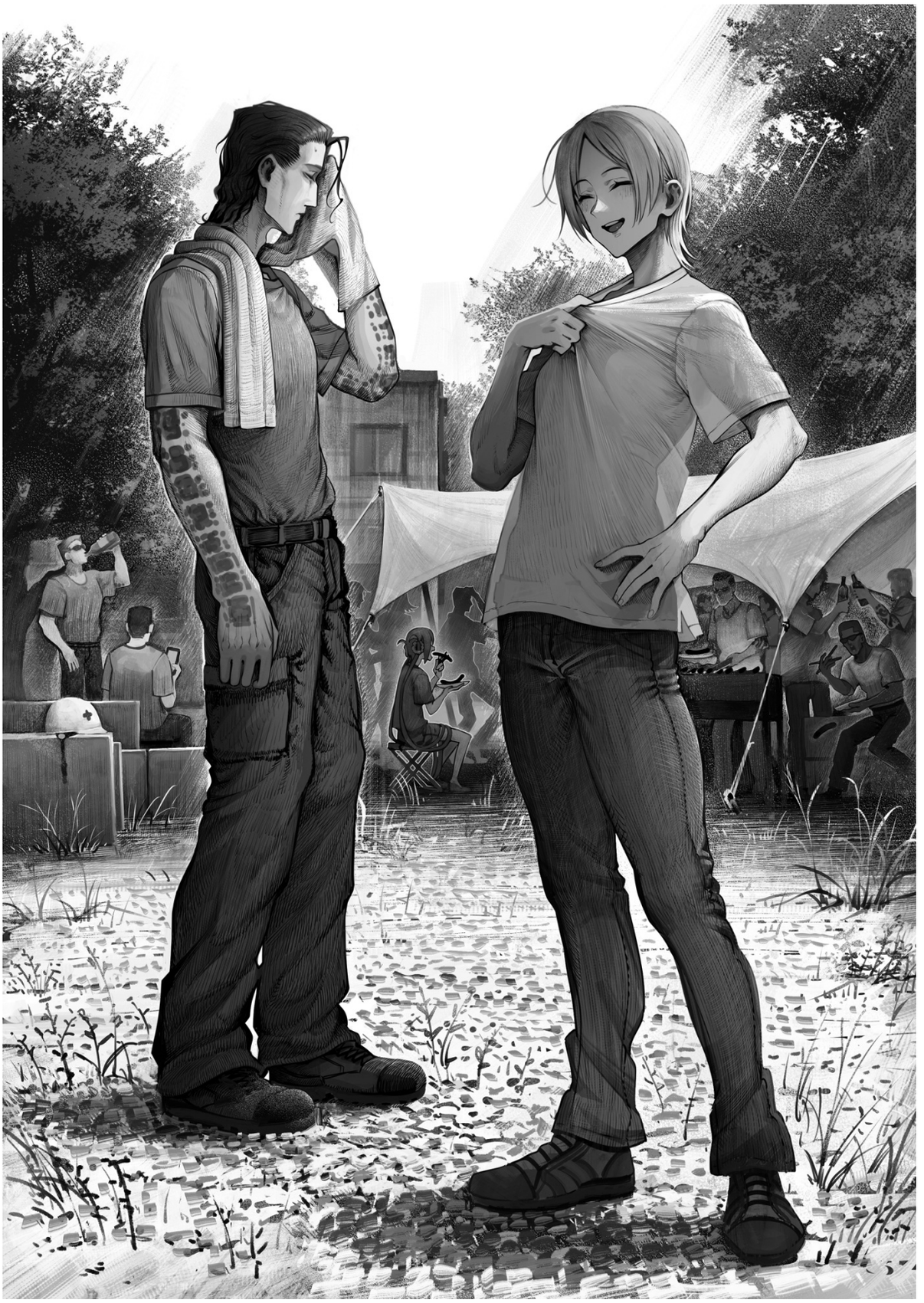
considerably in the open space between the buildings. There were a number of canopy tents set up on the open side of the square bracket that was formed by the three buildings, with tables, chairs, and flat-pack shelves set up underneath them. It was like the headquarters for some sort of outdoor event, and I could hear the sound of a large generator running. They even had floodlights set up, ready to be used at night. The preparations weren't fully complete yet, but it looked like most of the large packages had been unloaded at this point.

The Torchlight operators were currently a short distance away, setting up their own tents. These weren't the sort of compact tents that the US forces had been using at Kisaragi Station, but the kinds of larger tents I'd only ever seen in a display at an outdoor shop, designed to sleep several people. If this was all I saw, I'd just assume they were a bunch of extroverts with money and time on their hands who'd come out here to have a good time.

Sasazuka noticed us and came over from the canopy tents.

"I'm sorry for the wait," she said. "You're welcome to set up your own tents now."

"Okay," I replied. "Will over there be fine?" I pointed to the opposite side of the canopy tents from where Torchlight were setting up theirs.



We got our luggage out of the trucks and set up our tents on the edge of camp. Ours was red, while Runa and Tsuji's, bought by DS Research for the occasion, was khaki. Since Runa and Tsuji both had no camping know-how whatsoever, they just ended up watching idly as Toriko and I pounded in tent pegs, but Migiwa came over, so we had him take care of their tent for us.

"You're used to camping, huh?" Tsuji observed, sounding impressed.

While chucking our sleeping bags into the set-up tent, I responded. "Not really. We just did it once before, in the other world."

"Hmm, and you weren't scared?"

"We were."

This was our first time pitching a tent since Christmas, when we'd stayed overnight on the Otherside. Which meant this was our first proper camping experience in this world. Well, no, it was kind of questionable if staying at the Farm in the Mountains, and with such a large group, counted as a proper camping experience.

Regardless, we were done setting up, so we headed back to the canopy tent. Sasazuka was there talking to her subordinates, and turned towards us.

"Kamikoshi-san, have you already gone to see the Cattle Barn?"

"No, not yet."

"I haven't either, so why don't we scope it out while we discuss plans?"

Toriko and I headed to the Cattle Barn with Sasazuka and Migiwa. As it had in the Factory, the air suddenly cooled as we entered the building.

Sasazuka turned back to look at us. "What do you suppose it is? The air feels different…"

"The other building was the same way," I replied. "But I don't think it has anything to do with the buildings. It feels hot and humid outside because the sun is beating down on us, but maybe the entirety of the Farm is actually cool."

"I see… Now that you mention it, I did feel a chill all those times we came here to work on construction. If you're correct, it will probably get a lot cooler very quickly once the sun sets."

"I would like to check with the two of you, but all of the gates are closed, yes?"

I nodded in response to Migiwa's question.

"Every gate in the Residence Building is closed. But I still get the feeling this cold air is coming from the gates."

"Yeah," Toriko agreed. "I think the gates still mess with the air even when they're not open."

Sasazuka let out an exasperated laugh. "If it weren't for the occasion, I'd want to stay far away from this place."

Obviously, I wouldn't have wanted them here on any other occasion either. No matter how horrifying it was, this was an exciting place full of doors to an unknown world, and it was also a hideaway in the forest that I shared with Toriko.

That said, we needed carpenters to help us maintain our hideaway, and given that they were funding its maintenance, I couldn't ignore our sponsor's wishes. There was always the option of going bankrupt and becoming denizens of the Otherside, but that was just *an* option, not one I wanted to pick—not now, at least.

Not to toot my own horn, but I think I've become a lot more sociable.

The four of us walked through the Cattle Barn, looking around. It was a little more familiar to me than the Factory. The Round Hole was in the basement of this building, and we'd needed to pass through the complicated layout inside this building to get outside. The tight, twisting corridors were gloomy, and forced us to go up and down stairs unnecessarily. The operators who came to handle construction had gotten so fed up with it that they smashed through some of the walls to make shortcuts for us. That had improved things a bit, but until the service entrance was completed, the route from DS Research to the Farm had been pretty inconvenient.

Sasazuka flipped the light switch, turning on the lights on the walls and ceiling, which quickly brightened the room. There was similar lighting strung up in the hallways, so even in the middle of the night, it was easy to get around the Cattle Barn, at least in the areas we passed through regularly. That said, the building was mostly disused, and lacked that lighting, so it was still creepy.

"I want to make a kill house for training here," said Sasazuka. "What do you think? Will that be a problem?"

I looked around. There were lines of concrete enclosures with wooden fences. It felt like a disused cattle barn, which was

where we got the name. “Sure. We have no plans to use this building.”

“Thank you.”

“Will you be using the Factory for anything?” Toriko asked Sasazuka.

“We have no plans as of yet, but since it seems to have been built as a factory, maybe we could set up some machines there and put it to use in future. If there’s a need for that, that is.”

Yeah, I guess that makes sense…? Nothing was coming to mind at the moment, but it was worth considering. I made a mental note of it.

“Is making a kill house that easy?” I asked.

“For our current purposes, it’s simple. If we were using live ammunition, we would need to use materials that prevent ricochets, but we’ve only brought toy guns.”

“Oh, really?” Toriko asked, sounding surprised. Sasazuka cast an amused look in our direction.

“Yes, they’re electric guns that fire BBs. It’s not that easy for us to use real guns, after all.”

“Yeah, go figure… Ah ha ha.”

Of course, she said all of that knowing that we carried around real guns all the time. I had to wonder what Sasazuka thought of us breaking the law on a regular basis, even more often than a PMC.

“In our preliminary meetings, we had discussed using Urumi-san’s ability in our training. Does that look like it will be all right? From your perspective,” asked Migiwa.

I thought about it. It was awkward, since we’d just had a bit of a fight, but she seemed stable for now.

“I think it should be fine. Runa herself described the camp as a sort of graduation exam, so maybe that’s how she’s looking at it. I think she’ll be a good girl until the camp is finished, at least.”

“No telling what she’ll be like after that, though,” Toriko added, sounding less than satisfied. She must not have been amused that I, the one who got kidnapped, was being soft on Runa.

“Do you think she is getting along with Tsuji-san?” Sasazuka asked.

“They seem to be getting on well enough,” I replied. “For now.”

“For now, huh?”

“Well, we have to expect they will argue over a thing or two. And that might go on forever.”

“You’re kind of…taking the long view of this, huh, Migiwa-san?” I observed.

He smiled. “In my estimation, this is what it means when you accept talented problem children into an organization.”

Maybe that was the kind of thing only a man who had managed an abnormal organization like DS Research for as long as he had could have said. “And is it the same with me?”

“Ha ha ha,” Migiwa laughed like I’d said something funny.

Not gonna answer that one, huh?

“Can we use the materials upstairs freely?” Sasazuka asked, pointing up towards the ceiling.

“Yes, just like we discussed in the meetings,” I said. “Though, I’d call it junk, not materials.”

“Got it,” she replied. “Do you think things will go well?”

“I wonder about that. We’ll just have to get Runa to remember how it’s done somehow.”

When we left the Cattle Barn, the scent of cooked meat was wafting through the air. One glance told me where it was coming from. There were sausages cooking on a grill set up under one of the canopy tents. It was a large charcoal grill, about a meter wide, and it was lined end-to-end with sausages that were sizzling as they dripped fat.

“Ah, Hahihohi-han.” Runa swallowed the meat, then said, “These things are ridiculously good!”

“Oh, yeah?”

“There are plates and chopsticks over there! Try some yourself!”

It looked like she’d completely forgotten our fight earlier.

The Torchlight people were already in barbecue mode, opening canned beer and generally having a good time. Even with the sun beating down quite hard, they didn’t seem to mind. Maybe they wanted to get a tan? Many of them seemed to be actively exposing themselves to the sun aside from wearing sunglasses.

While I was standing there, unsure what to do, someone handed me a paper plate and chopsticks, and the next thing I knew we were getting freshly grilled sausages. Toriko and I rushed into the shade under the canopy tent. Tsuji and Runa were there too, so it was sort of a meetup point for us indoorsy

types.

"They said we can grab some drinks there," Toriko said, pointing to a massive cooler. I could see cans of beer and fizzy drinks floating in the ice water. Toriko had already acquired a can of Budweiser.

"You're already drinking."

"This isn't enough to get me drunk. It's like water."

"You have a higher alcohol tolerance than me, Toriko, so you're probably right."

"You're no lightweight yourself, Sorawo."

I hesitated, but ultimately gave in to temptation, and grabbed a Corona beer.

"Cheers!"

Runa held up her can of coke, so we all kind of ended up saying cheers with her. I have no idea what we were supposed to be toasting, though.

It was obvious that Runa would be the one drinking a soft drink, but Tsuji had a plastic bottle of tea.

"Do you not hold your drink well, Tsuji-san?"

"Oh, I do drink. But I refrain from psychoactive drugs when I don't have a reason to take them."

"Is alcohol a drug?"

"It sure is," Tsuji said in a playful tone. "And a fairly harmful one at that."

"But you'll take it when you have a reason to?" Toriko asked.

"Sure will. And drinking fine alcohol and having a good time is a perfectly valid reason. But I'm on the job now, so I figure I ought to stay sober."

"I see a couple people here drinking on the job, though," Runa said, looking at Toriko and me.

"Well, what's the harm?" said Tsuji. "Their abilities aren't influenced by alcohol. I just can't say the same about my own."

"Wow. Magicians sure have it tough, huh?" Runa snarked.

"Tell me about it," Tsuji replied, playfully overacting. "It *is* tough. Even if it doesn't seem like it."

"The people from Torchlight didn't hesitate to open up their drinks," I observed.

"Well, many of them are foreign, so beer's probably just like water to them. Due to genetic differences, Japanese people aren't as good at metabolizing alcohol, so I think people from other countries must have a very different view of things."

“And how about Sasazuka-san and Migiwa-san?” I asked.

The two of them were drinking with the Torchlight guys. Sasazuka was at home with them, so I could understand her making herself comfortable, but Migiwa was mixing in surprisingly well.

“I dunno, but Sasazuka-san’s probably trying pretty hard, don’t you think? There are a lot of men in her line of work, so it’s tough trying not to get looked down on for being a woman. I don’t think she could ever admit to not being able to hold her drink.”

“Ahh…”

I saw a female operator I recognized next to Sasazuka. Her name was something like Michelle, and she was with them the last time they came here. Maybe she and Sasazuka were close? Was such pointless speculation a sign the resolution I viewed human relations at had gone up? Or had my thought processes merely taken on an unnecessary bias?

“As for Migiwa-kun, he’s been getting up to all sorts of trouble overseas from a young age, so you may actually be seeing him more in his element here.”

Migiwa was not dressed in a suit, and was conversing fluently in English and (probably) Spanish. He was gesticulating, and had a wilder expression on his face than usual. I’d heard that the language you spoke could change your personality. Maybe it was true.

“Toriko, how many languages can you speak?” I asked.

“Huh? Why are you asking that so suddenly?”

“I’ve heard you speak English before, but French is an official language of Canada too, right? I seem to recall.”

“Well, yeah.”

“You don’t sound very confident.”

“Honestly, I never really picked it up.”

“Really? You didn’t learn it in school?”

“I had Core French, which is one thirty minute period a day, but that was it.”

“Yeah, you’re never going to pick it up with just that.”

Despite all of the English we were forced to learn in school, most Japanese people couldn’t speak the language, so it was probably about the same for Canadians. Here I was, starting to feel a sense of kinship on that, but…then I remembered Toriko was a bilingual speaker of Japanese and English. We weren’t

even on the same playing field.

"Why did you suddenly ask?"

"Huh? Err. I just wondered what you were like speaking French. Do you know any phrases or anything you could say?"

"You sure do ask for unreasonable things sometimes... Hmm."

Toriko thought for a little while, then bashfully began to speak.

"Emesunepasurugyaruderanruuto. Serugyarudeonsonburudolamendirekushon."

"Ohhhh." I had no idea what any of that meant, but I clapped. Toriko hung her head and took a drink from her can.

As I was thinking, *I'd heard people say it before, but French sure does sound a lot like Touhoku dialect...* Tsuji cocked her head to the side.

"Who wrote that again? Saint-Exupéry?"

"Pfft!" Toriko spewed her Budweiser, making me and Runa both reflexively jump back.

"Whoa, what gives?!" I protested.

"You're making a mess!" Runa complained.

Toriko stared blankly at Tsuji, beer dripping from her chin.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you like that," Tsuji said, half smiling, as she handed Toriko a whole container of wet wipes. "Don't worry. I'm not going to say anything."

Toriko nodded as she wiped her mouth. She wouldn't make eye contact with me.

Based on her reaction, whatever she said was pretty embarrassing... Well, whatever.

I stopped thinking about it, and took another sip. Even knowing it was harmful, nothing could beat a cold beer and sausage dripping with juices in the middle of summer.

5

Even after all the beers, the Torchlight people eagerly went to work after lunch was over. They carried the lumber from the trucks to the Cattle Barn, and the sound of electric tools immediately began to echo through the building.

"You can keep resting a little longer. Your job isn't until later."

Deciding to take Sasazuka up on that offer, we stayed under the canopy tent where we shifted to afternoon nap mode. With some shade and cool drinks, we could beat the heat for now. The

mountain breeze felt nice against my skin, which was flushed from drinking beer.

About an hour and a half later, the sound of tools ceased, and one of the operators came for us. We left the canopy tent, crossed the yard under the beating sun, and entered the Cattle Barn. It had been completely transformed.

The smell of fresh lumber hung in the air, while the original cattle enclosures had been sectioned off into simple rooms using plywood and rectangular lumber. It looked obviously hastily built, and there weren't even doors. Still, it was good enough for our purposes. This area, taking up two thirds of the Cattle Barn, would be our kill house for the training.

Sasazuka came over, and led us to the corridor connecting the rooms.

"Will this do?" she asked.

I took a peek inside. In the first room, there was just a torso mannequin, like you might see at a clothing store. The next room, across the corridor diagonally, had a urinal lying on its side. The room after that had a dirty vinyl curtain hanging in the middle of it. The trend continued, and each of the rooms had a single object inside. If I came here not knowing any better, I might've thought it was a modern art exhibit.

"I don't know, but let's see if we can work with it," I replied.

"Understood."

These objects had been taken from the second floor of the Cattle Barn. This building, like the Residence Building, had a number of rooms where they had been recreating the scenes from different ghost stories. If we could use the tools as catalysts, I thought we might be able to artificially create an interstitial space.

That meant what we were trying to do here was experiment with controlling the interstitial space in order to create a training field for battles against the other world. That was also why we'd brought Runa.

"Come along, Runa," I turned and called back to her.

Runa lethargically walked over. It was probably awkward for her, having to walk in between these burly operators, but she wasn't scared. If anything, she seemed to enjoy the attention.

At a glance, she looked like a heinous criminal being escorted to review the scene of the crime after her arrest. But Runa herself probably didn't see it that way, because she knew that, if

it came to it, she could use her Voice to unleash utter chaos.

I might be the only one here who understands that feeling.

"What do you think?"

Runa looked around the room, then scowled.

"Just one torso? Is that it?"

"If we get too crazy with the set pieces, we'll end up opening a gate, right?"

"Yeah, but it's hard to get excited about this."

"We don't want to get *too* excited. These are rookies we're dealing with here."

With a *"yeah, whatever,"* Runa went to check out the next room. "Hrmm..."

"Listen, I know how you feel," I said.

"Right?"

I could just tell Toriko was looking at us dubiously as we talked like this.

"Why didn't a gate form on the second floor? The Residence Building was full of them."

"We weren't trying to make gates in the first place. I mean, we didn't even know that those were a thing."

"Oh, that's true, now that you mention it..."

The first time Runa went to the Otherside would have been when she attacked DS Research. Up until then, she only had a vague concept of the "Blue World," so there was no way she'd have had the idea to open gates.

"The idea wasn't to go to where Satsuki-sama was. I thought we had to call her to this world. That's why we started renovating this place, and this was the first building that we worked on. Next we moved on to the one beside it. What did you call it? The Residence Building? And we did the same thing there. As the work continued, everyone gradually got better at it, so I just thought we'd managed to get the mood right. Every once in a while, someone would go crazy, and turn into one of the Gifted—but they'd be good once I talked to them."

She was talking about the Fourth Kinds who had been on the Farm. I'd heard about all of this from Migiwa, so it wasn't new information to me, but as I listened to Runa talk about what she'd done in such a unemotional manner, it made me see once again how abnormal her actions had been. Runa had interacted with the Fourth Kinds at DS Research without any feeling of repulsion, despite the horrific changes they had undergone, but

perhaps that “lack of discrimination” was something that came from the same lack of morals that had let her to carry on without feeling any guilt even when one of her followers transformed into a Fourth Kind.

“You said you had no idea gates were a thing, but what about the Round Hole?”

“Ohh, that’s another thing that everyone started building without me knowing. You know how we had that one kid? With the big head. And the fluffy hairs growing out of it.”

She was referring to the Fourth Kind whose head had been enlarged and had gained the ability to open and close gates. He was killed by Satsuki Uruma, along with the Fourth Kind who had lots of hands.

“That kid told me we could go to the other side of the Round Hole. It was super convenient, but y’know, there were limited situations when I could, right? If I just appeared in the middle of a place with people, I’d stick out like a sore thumb. That’s why it went largely unused until we decided to drop in on DS Research.”

“Hmm, is that right?”

I had figured anyone who got their hands on the ability to teleport like that would use the heck out of it, but when she put it that way, maybe she was right. It would’ve been one thing if she could have moved through it on her own, but if she’d shown up in town with a big gate like that and a Fourth Kind, she’d have caused mass panic.

“Besides, the Round Hole could only move us around in this world. That’s why it never occurred to me that the rooms we’d made were connected to the Blue World until you told me they were, Kamikoshi-san.”

Runa’s tone had an *“if only I’d known”* vibe to it. But I think it was a good thing she hadn’t. Because there was no way she’d have used it for anything good.

“Well, whatever,” I said. “So, how did you go about doing those renovations?”

“I don’t think we were doing anything that unusual,” Runa said, stepping into the first room. “It was basically like decorating a haunted house. You find some things that fit the vibe, and arrange them in a way that feels right…”

As she continued speaking, she seized the torso by the hips and lifted it up. “Like you’d expect, we weren’t very good at it at first, but we gradually got the hang of it. You know the way that

how scary a ghost story is can change completely based on who's telling it? It was kind of like that."

Runa carried the torso to the corner of the room, and set it facing the wall. She moved away a little to look at it, then went and changed the angle slightly. Turning around, she looked up at the light hanging from an electrical cable.

"Do you think we can change the position of that?"

One of the operators fetched a stool, and adjusted the light as Runa instructed. The change in lighting made the whole floor a little bit darker. Finally, after making some more slight adjustments to the position of the torso, Runa let go of it, seemingly satisfied with her work.

"Hmm, that about does it," she said.

I let out an involuntary, "Huh?"

Even though she had only made minor changes, it was fair to say that the atmosphere in the room had completely changed.

Looking in from the door, my eyes were naturally drawn to the torso against the wall. There should have been nothing unusual about it, but it stood facing the wall, facing slightly downward, as though it were staring at something with the head it didn't have. It was frightening to imagine what it might be looking at, or to imagine it suddenly turning to face us.

"Urumi-kun, you're amazing. You could be an interior designer," Tsuji said behind me with admiration.

"There you go, joking again... Don't just say things you don't mean."

"No, I'm totally serious. Don't you think so too, Kamikoshi-kun?"

I nodded.

"You surprised me," I admitted. "You could make a living as a haunted house designer."

"Hmm, could I? I'm not really feeling it. I mean, I could do so much more, but there's limits when this is all I have to work with..."

It had been an earnest compliment, but Runa wasn't happy about it. The way she was grumbling with a difficult look on her face was just like a professional artisan.

"No, if anything, it's incredible you could extract so much atmosphere with so little. I never thought you'd be so talented."

"I don't think it's talent or anything like that... And hold on, if you didn't think I could do it, why'd you let me?"

“I thought you’d been doing something with your Voice. But it turned out that wasn’t the case at all, so…”

I looked at the room with my right eye. There was no silver mist. But I could definitely sense the presence of the interstitial space. It was a tingling sensation, like there was only a thin skin separating us from touching things that were not of this world.

Toriko’s translucent left hand stroked the air.

“Well?” I asked.

“It’s chilly… And though it’s faint, I feel something like a breeze too.”

There wasn’t any wind in here, so what she was feeling wasn’t of this world. Toriko could perceive the Otherside as a cold flow using her left hand. That settled it. Runa’s renovations could turn an ordinary space into an interstitial one.

I turned to Sasazuka, who had been watching from behind, and said, “I think this is going to work. You can start getting ready.”



Runa's skill for spacial design was the real deal. Just by changing the position of the urinal, she turned that room into the site of a horrific murder, and by adding a little more grime to the vinyl curtain, she made it seem like there was something on the other side that you wouldn't want to look at directly. With her masterful hand, the makeshift kill house was transformed into a haunted house. It was frankly amazing how she could create so much atmosphere when she had nothing actually scary to work with. If Kozakura were here, she'd have probably run away screaming.

It made me think about how you never know what talents might lie sleeping inside a person. It was a mystery to me how she couldn't understand her skill for herself. She'd never made it as a streamer, the cult she'd built got crushed, and even the object of her worship had betrayed her, so I never imagined she'd blossom like this. I had to wonder how her life could have been if she'd found out before she went off the rails, but unfortunately this was the kind of talent she could only have discovered once she did.

We returned once she had given all of the room a rework and found Torchlight ready to go. They had no fixed uniform, so they used their Tomoshibi Engineering work clothes as a base, and added vests and helmets over top of that. They looked heavily armed, with rifles and shotguns, but because of the earlier explanation I knew they were all electric airsoft guns. Even if we got raided by the police, they could pass themselves off as a group of overenthusiastic survival gamers. The only ones who couldn't pass ourselves off that way were Toriko and me.

"Let's give it a once through to start off," Sasazuka said, then gave orders to the first team to go in. "Clear all of the rooms, and then return. You don't need to fire. Just go through the basic motions, like always."

"Yes, ma'am," said the team leader.

The team of five pressed themselves against the wall near the hallway. Sasazuka pressed the button on a stopwatch.

"Go."

The five quickly entered the hallway. The way they moved smoothly despite their large builds was so professional. For me, it was just a *"Wow, that's awesome,"* but Toriko was observing them more closely with obvious interest.

When the operator who was taking point peered into the first

room, he stopped moving for a moment, like he was intimidated. I saw the second had the same reaction, pulling back a little. From there on, they moved through the tight corridors bunched together, and I couldn't see them very well from outside, but it made me think, *"Even the pros can get scared."* As for Runa, she didn't seem satisfied with the reaction. She had a difficult look on her face and was thinking about something. I never expected her to have the disposition of an artisan.

The team returned, and Sasazuka pressed the button on the stopwatch.

"That was pretty slow. How was it?"

"Yeah... That was scary. We thought we were ready, going into it, though. It's like a haunted house made by a minimalist."

The leader glanced in our direction, then shook his head in an exaggerated manner. "You gave it one hell of a renovation. I didn't expect to get scared like that."

Runa said nothing. She just smiled.

"You think they're looking at me with some deference?" Runa said somewhat proudly once the first team left.

"They have since the beginning, Runa."

"Wha, do you really think so?"

"Everyone knows what you're capable of. I think everyone in Torchlight is constantly thinking about how they can neutralize you the moment you start saying something strange."

"Yikes. That's scary."

She said that, but Runa was grinning.

The remaining operators split into two teams and charged in. When they returned, they all said it had been scary, and they looked at us—Runa especially—with a sense of horror.

"Especially that kid in the last room! How the hell did you pull that off?"

"Kid?"

"There was an Asian kid. What even was that? I thought I was gonna wet myself."

The operator who had been bringing up the rear in the third team said that as he was leaving. The object in the last room was a metal locker. With Runa's masterful touch, it had been left open at the perfect angle to make it look like someone might poke their head out of it at any moment, but apparently they'd experienced more than just that atmosphere: they'd seen a kid who couldn't exist. Even though I didn't think it was possible, I

still felt like I had to go check. There was no child, obviously. I felt like I'd just witnessed the birth of a ghost story.

"Oh, thank goodness. I was worried that Kasumi had tagged along without permission," Toriko said, sounding relieved.

The possibility had crossed my mind too. With her talent for appearing and disappearing, maybe she could come all the way from Shakujii-kouen to Hannou.

"Now then... I do believe we can call this first experiment a success," said Migiwa.

Sasazuka nodded in agreement. "Phase 1 is a bigger success than expected. We have a means of building a kill house specialized for anti-UBL training, and after some testing, it seems like it will stand up to practical use."

"It truly was unexpected that Urumi-san would have such skills. Thank you for your efforts."

"Uh, sure, it was no big deal, really." Runa apparently didn't know how to react to these words of gratitude.

"When it comes to the actual training, I believe they will enter the same setting repeatedly in order to raise their degree of proficiency. What do you think about that point?" asked Migiwa. "If the objects of fear are the same every time, then even if they find them frightening at first, might they not develop a resistance to them from the second time onward?"

"We'll want to run some tests and see how that goes," Sasazuka agreed. "Even with ordinary training, we make subtle changes to the positioning of the enemies and furniture so that it doesn't become simple routine work. It may be necessary to ask Urumi-san to handle that sort of engineering. The other thing I'll want to see is whether they build up a resistance to fear. And even if they do, if it will be transferable to other objects of terror."

"The question becomes whether there can be a generalized resistance to fear, one that is not limited to a specific object. What do you think, Kamikoshi-san?"

I was just listening to them talk, so when Migiwa suddenly threw the question over to me, I panicked and wasn't sure how to answer.

"Uhh, well... Wh-What do you think, Toriko?"

"Huh? Me? Let's see... We've had a lot of scary experiences, but each time it happens, how do I say this...we're properly frightened, I think."

“Ah, yeah, that’s right. We get frightened every time.”

“So, in that sense, I don’t think we’ve gotten used to it, and as long as the Otherside is using fear as a means of making contact, there’s no way to avoid getting scared. Because they’re poking at our human weaknesses. But in our case, we don’t get paralyzed by fear anymore. Whether we fight or flee, we’re able to take some kind of action despite how scared we are. A large part of that is because of my hand and Sorawo’s eye, and because we have guns, but I think the biggest thing is that we’ve figured out that our fear is something that the other party is making use of. It feels like it should be possible to train them so that, even if they haven’t built up a resistance to each kind of fear, they can still avoid panicking.”

“I see. That was quite easy to understand.”

Migiwa and Sasazuka nodded.

“If I might add one thing,” I interjected, “I think that how we operate together plays a big part in it too. If I go down, I know that Toriko’s there to help. And when Toriko can’t act, I can do something.”

“Ah-hah,” said Migiwa.

“Even when I’m really scared, when I think that my partner might be in trouble, I find I can keep hanging in there in ways I wouldn’t have expected I could. Maybe because it makes me feel I have to get my act together. There have been several times when it would have been all over for me if we weren’t together. I don’t even think braving the Otherside alone is an option anymore.”

“S-Sorawo…!”

Oh, wow. I felt like I could see hearts flying out of Toriko in my direction. Maybe I shouldn’t have said all that stuff. Hopefully none of them could see the hearts.

If Sasazuka did notice Toriko suddenly firing her Love Beam at me, she didn’t let it show.

“It’s not at all common for the team to have to take note of the other members’ mental states and act accordingly, so that was a blind spot for us. The more coordinated a professional team is, the more they act with an implicit trust in their teammates, so they wouldn’t think their comrades might do something abnormal out of fear. For anti-UBL operations, we may be able to apply some of the training methods used to teach how to deal with a comrade who loses morale due to high

stress, or how to handle a situation where the team has taken casualties.”

I didn’t really know about any of that professional stuff, but I was glad that my comments had given her some sort of hint.

“Now then,” said Migiwa. “Shall we move on to the next experiment? If you don’t mind, Tsuji-san.”

It was time for Phase 2 of the plans we had discussed in advance.

6

Phase 1 had been an experiment to control the interstitial space and create a training field.

Phase 2, which was to follow, was an experiment to see whether Tsuji’s magic could be used as a countermeasure against the interstitial space. Runa’s remodeling had been an unknown variable, but I had just as little idea whether this was going to work or not, so I was personally fascinated to find out.

“Now, will it work, or will it not?” Tsuji said in a tone that lacked any sense of tension as she entered the kill house.

We followed behind her. Heading through the first door, she stopped in the middle of the room. It was still creepy in here, even though this was the second time we were seeing it, and I didn’t want to go anywhere near that mannequin torso by the wall.

“Should we stay out?” Migiwa asked. Tsuji just casually waved her hand in response.

“Makes no difference to me. Having people around would be a change, so that could be fun.”

Since that was the case, we filed into the room, and stood by the wall to watch.

“Hmm. Maybe I’ll start with something basic.”

Tsuji raised the index finger and middle finger of her right hand.

“Nishina-kun, Nishina-kun. Stick your hand out.”

“Huh? What?” Toriko extended her hand suspiciously. Her right hand, the one that hadn’t undergone the change.

“This here, it’s a steel dagger.”

“Hm…?” As Toriko looked at her with blank confusion, Tsuji touched her two fingers against the palm of Toriko’s hand.

“Wha?!” Toriko pulled her hand back, like it had been repelled

by something.

“What? Why’d you do that?” I asked.

“Th-They were metal.”

“Wha?!”

I took another look. They were still just fingers. No matter how I looked, I couldn’t see them as a steel dagger. Smiling, Tsuji returned to the center of the room.

“Let’s see... This way’s east.”

Tsuji turned to face one of the walls. She exhaled, and as she did I could see the tension melt out of her shoulders. It suddenly made me feel a little sleepy. No, that wasn’t quite an accurate way to describe it; it just made my consciousness hazy for a moment. It was like my own body was slackened and drawn in by her.

Tsuji pressed the two fingers she was holding together against her forehead, then lowered them to her chest. Moving her hand like she was making the sign of the cross, she began to chant fluently.

“Aaaaatehhhhh, Malkuthhhhh, Ve-Geburahhhhh.”

There was an incredible vibrating quality to her voice. It wasn’t the muddy sound of a person reciting sutras, but it was a bit similar, maybe. It was a manner of vocalization that I associated with religious rituals, like a sort of song without melody.

“Ve-Gedulahhhhh, Le-Olahhhhhm, Aaaaameeeeen.”

Tsuji drew a star shape in front of her eyes, then thrust her fingers through the center.

“Yod-He-Vau-He!”

She turned clockwise ninety degrees, repeating the same gesture in each of the four cardinal directions.

“Adonai!”

“Eheieh!”

“AGLA!”

Turning to the east once more, she spread her hands wide.



“Before me, Raphael. Behind me, Gabriel. On my right hand, Michael. On my left hand, Uriel. For around me shines the pentagram, and within me shines the six ray star.”

Once again, Tsuji made the sign of the cross, like she had at the beginning, and then she lowered her hand.

That seemed to be the end of it. I felt like I’d been shown a musical performance, or some improvised acting, and the silence afterward made me feel restless. I felt like maybe I ought to clap.

“Whew.”

Moments before I could act on that impulse, Tsuji took a breath and twisted her neck around. “Ahh, it’s been such a long time since I did this.”

“What was that?” I asked, lowering my hands which no longer had anything to do.

“LBRP—the Lesser Banishing Rite of the Pentagram. It’s the Golden Dawn’s most famous ritual, and also the simplest. I performed a banishing, that is to say an exorcism, in order to remove the influence of the spell that Urumi-kun cast on this room.”

“What spell? I didn’t do anything like that,” Runa protested, but Tsuji smiled at her.

“If you’ll pardon the expression, I’d say your renovations were a perfectly valid form of magic. You should be careful what you do with it.”

“Huh? How…?”

“But the more important thing is if it had any effect. What do you think?”

Tsuji retreated to the entrance, then surveyed the room. We all took another look around as well.

“Did something change? I feel like Tsuji-san’s ritual didn’t do anything.”

Runa was the first to speak her mind. Honestly, I felt the same. Tsuji’s performance had left an impression on me, but the room was as creepy as ever. I couldn’t imagine that the ritual had had any effect.

“Yep, I agree! It didn’t work!” Tsuji sounded rather chipper, considering we just told her that her ritual had failed. “Wow, you’re really something, you know that? Let me just say, I was totally serious there, but I guess the LBRP just isn’t enough to destroy the domain that you created, Urumi-kun!”

“I have no idea what you’re even talking about.”

“I’m telling you, this is *super* cool.”

While Tsuji was getting worked up, Toriko hesitantly raised her hand. “Umm… If you want to change the atmosphere in this room, I feel like there’s a simpler way.”

“Oh? What?” asked Tsuji.

“Why not just move that torso, or smash it?”

Tsuji grinned and pointed at Toriko. “So sharp! Yes, that’s right. That’s what you’d normally do. If you want to harm a space that was created with an intended purpose, you should just destroy the elements that make up that space. No need for any suspicious rituals. However…”

Tsuji placed a cautious hand on the torso, then effortlessly knocked it to the ground.

“Hey!” Runa protested. But Tsuji carried on.

“A space that was constructed with a negative purpose in mind won’t stop functioning easily. In fact, destroying it can sometimes make it stronger. You know, like when delinquents sneak into haunted spots and then deface them with graffiti. Their scribbles may seem out of place, but they don’t do anything to make it less scary, right? This is the same way.”

It was just like Tsuji said. Even now that the torso was on the floor, the room retained its creepiness. It felt like toppling it had added a hint of violence to the situation.

“Well, what if we cleaned up instead?”

“You really are sharp, Nishina-kun.”

Tsuji was full of compliments, but her tone was always teasing, so it was impossible to take any of them as genuine.

“You’ve actually got it,” Tsuji continued. “Cleaning and tidying up are the simplest forms of exorcism that we do in daily life. If we put this torso out with the trash, vacuum the room, put up some wallpaper in a nice, bright color, and install some stylish lighting, it’d completely change the vibe of this room.”

“Uh-huh…” said Runa. “Is that really good enough? If cleaning counts as magic, maybe my remodeling does too.”

“Yep, you can have confidence in that, Urumi-kun,” Tsuji said, grinning in the face of Runa’s sarcasm. “But if that was all it took, then there wouldn’t be what we call stigmatized property. No matter how much you pretty the place up, there are spaces where that can’t remove the underlying nastiness of them. That’s what exorcisms are for.”

“They’re just a way of making people feel better, aren’t they?” countered Runa. “I mean, that ritual just now didn’t do anything, now did it?”

“The thing is, practical magicians are always looking for results. When it looks like the magic hasn’t had an effect, we can’t just let it end like that.”

“Well, what do you plan to do next, then?” I asked.

Tsuji considered, then answered, “Well… I was initially planning to test a number of things, but now I wonder what I should do next. Maybe Peter Carol’s pentagram ritual… No, maybe it needs to be more abstract than that. Okay!”

Tsuji nodded to herself, convinced. “I’ve got it. I think I’m going to go with a real simple one.”

Having said this, Tsuji headed back to the center of the room, and we watched to see what she was up to this time. Tsuji took a deep breath, and then—started laughing out loud.

“Ahhhhh ha ha ha ha ha ha ha haaaaa!”

Everyone recoiled in shock. It was an explosive laugh that went from zero to one hundred in an instant. Tsuji kept on laughing in our direction. She clutched her belly, looking deeply amused, and went on roaring with laughter as though she was resolved to expel all of the air from her lungs at full force. I’d never seen a belly laugh like this before. I couldn’t have been the only one feeling overwhelmed. Runa, for one, had gone quite pale.

It went on for maybe a minute, then stopped as suddenly as it started. It was like she’d flipped a switch, from one hundred back to zero again.

“You okay? Urumi-kun,” Tsuji asked with a level of composure that had to be fake. Runa was covering her mouth with her hands, her face turned downward.

“Ah, her nose is bleeding,” Toriko observed. Blood dripped from Runa’s nose, ran down her hand, and fell.

“Sorry. So this is what happens, huh?” Tsuji approached and held Runa’s shoulders to support her. Sasazuka produced an antiseptic tissue from the pouch at her waist, and offered it to them.

“What…was that, just now? It made me feel sick…like I was gonna puke,” Runa, able to speak now, said as she held her nose with the tissue.

“You got hit with the effect of the banishment.”

“Banishment…”

“This one was effective. Whew, good to see, good to see.”

Come to think of it, the atmosphere of the room had clearly changed. The stagnant air had cleared, and the lights seemed brighter somehow. Even though, physically, nothing had changed…

“You’re telling us that was an exorcism just now, Tsuji-san? When all you did was laugh?” I asked, only half believing it.

“Yep. Because laughter has an incredible power to drive away demons. Any burst of emotion can work, but laughing’s way more fun than raging or crying.”

“Is it a question of fun?”

“You bet it is. Everyone who is into practical magic is a bit off in some way or another, so those who forget how to have fun turn into scoundrels in no time. Urumi-kun, are you all right?”

“I’m appalled… The whole time you were laughing like an idiot, it was ridiculously upsetting.”

“You thought it was you I was laughing at?”

This question made Runa look up, as if she’d had a moment of realization.

“The way you renovated this room, it was like you placed a curse on it. I had no specific target, and there was no malice involved, so I thought you’d be fine, but if I destroy it with you there watching, yeah, of course it was going to rebound on you a little bit. Sorry.”

“Could you stop talking nonsense…?”

“Well, we don’t have to go into the details. For now, I think it’s safe to say that my magic isn’t completely ineffective in a battle against the UBL. That good enough for you, Migiwa-kun?”

Migiwa bowed his head. “Thank you. With this we have successfully completed up through Phase 2 of the experiments we planned out in advance, so I believe that is enough for one day.”

“We’re done already?” I asked.

“Yes. Sasazuka-san, could you handle the rest?”

Sasazuka stepped forward and said, “For the rest of the day, my people will be training here, so the rest of you are free to relax. But before that…and this is hard to ask, but…” Sasazuka trailed off, glancing in Runa’s direction.

“Huh…? What is it?”

“The trick in this room has changed, so if you could return it

to how it was before, for the benefit of our training…”

Runa’s eyes widened, as if she were questioning Sasazuka’s sanity. “Uh, well… It’s fine, I guess…”

“We’re much obliged.”

“You sure don’t go easy on people. Seriously.”

Runa walked over to the fallen torso. Then, after looking at it for a while, she lowered the hand that had been covering her mouth, and slathered the mannequin with blood from her nose.

“Is that good? Okay, I’m going to go wash my face now.”

Runa left the room, leaving behind an atmosphere that was suddenly sinister. All she’d done was add a splotch of blood, but it had been incredibly effective.

“Wow, she’s pretty amazing, huh?” Toriko said, completely defanged.

“Whew, such youth, such potential.”

I felt like Tsuji’s old man comments cheapened the atmosphere in the room ever so slightly.

7

Torchlight’s operators spent the rest of the afternoon training in the Cattle Barn. We intermittently heard BBs hitting the plywood walls. Freed from our responsibilities, we returned to our tent, and got ready to camp out.

That said, I hadn’t brought any heavy-duty equipment, so it was just a matter of getting the fold-out chairs out of the luggage we’d tossed into the tent, and then pulling out a table, the camp stove, and some tableware. Toriko, meanwhile, had gone all out, and was pulling one unfamiliar tool out of her bag after another. Apparently she’d been shopping while I was busy with my exams and supplementary lectures.

“When did you buy that frying pan?” I asked.

“It’s a skillet,” she replied.

“Ohh, there were a whole bunch of them in the camping magazines. So, what’s the difference?”

“A skillet’s what they call a small, cast-iron frying pan.”

“So, it *is* a frying pan!”

“Yeah, but still!”

Runa and Tsuji came over to look at us setting up shop.

“You two look like you’re having fun,” said Runa.

“How’s the nosebleed?” I asked.

“It’s fine now.”

“This is *really* something,” said Tsuji. “We didn’t bring any camping gear at all.”

“If they’re loaning out the basics, you’re fine turning up empty-handed.”

The fact was, as long as we could eat and sleep, that was enough to meet the bare minimum. We could do what we liked for anything beyond that. For me, exploring the Otherside was my main goal, so if I was left to my own devices on this side, I’d probably end up having a dry and boring camping experience. Toriko wasn’t like that. She was the type to find every possible way of enjoying herself, even on an occasion like this.

“To tell you the truth, we’re not exactly coming to you empty-handed.”

Tsuji’s comment got Toriko to raise her head. “What’d you bring?”

“Tea, wine, and so on. Oh, and some light snacks.”

“Oh… Nice.”

“If you don’t mind, we’ll join you.”

“Really? Thanks.”

It looked like Toriko intended to talk with Tsuji, so that was a bit of a relief. If she retreated into shy mode, and just spent the whole time smiling, I’d have had to do my best to keep a conversation going. I was used to it now, but having to deal with both Runa and Tsuji all by myself would still have been exhausting.

“Sorawo, what do you want to do for a campfire?”

“Isn’t it too hot to be lighting a fire?”

“Wah, but I even went to the trouble of bringing firewood.”

While Toriko was sounding disappointed, Runa interjected. “I think it’ll get chilly.”

“Oh, yeah?” Toriko replied.

“It’s still hot because it’s daytime, but it cools down real fast here once the sun sets.”

“Hrmm. Well, sounds like it’s fine to light a fire, then.”

Wow… Toriko was talking to Runa too. Still a bit awkwardly, sure, but she was managing to be civil.

Who did I think I was, acting all impressed? I wasn’t in any position to comment on other people’s communication skills.

Even as I was privately poking fun at myself, I thought about it again, and I think that Toriko was doing her best to talk with

Runa as part of the effort to reform her, which was something that Toriko was on board with as well. I wasn't going to go out of my way to ask if that was what she was doing, but Toriko had that sort of sincere side to her.

"Maybe here's good." Toriko began digging up the ground using the shovel she pulled out of her luggage.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

"Preparing to light a campfire. We can light it directly on the ground here, right?"

There were many campsites which prohibited lighting your campfire on the ground, and required you to use a fire-resistant sheet, but this wasn't a campsite, and I was the facility's manager.

"Seems fine to me..." I said.

"Well, I'm gonna go ahead, then."

Tsuji said she would make tea, so we boiled water over a single burner. Once she poured the fresh-made tea over some ice from the cooler, we had iced herb tea.

The three of us sat in outdoor chairs, sipping our iced tea as we watched Toriko hunched over, digging a mystery tunnel. Toriko turned to us to complain.

"Hey! I thought it was quiet, but what are you all doing?"

"You were so focused, we thought it'd be wrong to disturb you," I replied.

"Something smells nice... Is that tea? No fair! I want some too!"

I'd been thinking she was like a kid so focused on playing in the sand that they'd lost sight of everything else around them, but now that she was actually sounding like a child I laughed.

"There's enough left for you, Toriko, so don't worry. But you have to wash your hands first."

As the sun started to go down, the heat rapidly abated like Runa had said it would. A cool wind blew in from the forests around the Farm. *This is the perfect temperature,* I thought, but it didn't stay that way long, as the cool air started to feel chilly.

"Isn't it kinda cold?" I griped.

"I warned you it would be," said Runa, who had put on a cardigan at some point. We both hurried to get coats out of our luggage.

The training in the Cattle Barn seemed to have wrapped up, as the operators filed out into the yard. They were all carrying

rugged-looking firearms, even if they were airsoft guns, so the scene looked really intimidating.

It looked like Migiwa had joined in the training, since he was dressed in some borrowed kit. He'd mentioned he'd gotten up to some mischief in Central America when he was younger, and it showed in how bizarrely well he fit in here. Migiwa went to return his equipment to the canopy tent in the middle, then he came over to us. He was dripping with sweat.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting. The training has concluded for today."

"It looks like everyone worked really hard. I see you got in on the action yourself too, Migiwa-san," I pointed out.

"Yes, I am embarrassed to admit. They offered to lend me the equipment, and I couldn't help but get in the mood. Although, I was no match for the professionals. They really put me through the ringer, and at my age too."

His manner of speech wasn't much different from usual, but I could tell he was pumped up. Before our departure, he'd said he might head back early because he had paperwork to do... It looked like he'd forgotten all about that. Maybe Migiwa was enjoying this camp in his own way.

"What'll they be doing after this today?" I asked.

"After this, they will just eat and then sleep. It would appear that Torchlight's preparations for a barbecue are proceeding apace, so it could get a little noisy."

A group of Torchlight operators whose work clothes were opened to expose their chests shouted to Migiwa as they were headed towards the Factory. Migiwa waved in response, then turned back to us.

"Pardon me, I am going to go take a shower. I will see you later."

Yeah, the Farm had a large shower room. That was one of the reasons holding this camp here had been viable. With a large number of people like this, going without anywhere for them to wash up in the middle of summer would have been way too tough. According to Runa, she'd simply preserved the preexisting facilities that were in the Factory. Despite being a cult princess, with her lair in an abandoned building, she hadn't been able to stomach any lack of cleanliness in her believers.

After Migiwa went, Sasazuka, Michelle, and a couple other female operators came over. Looking down at the hole Toriko

had dug in the ground, with a hint of amusement, Sasazuka asked, “Was this…Nishina-san?”

“Yeah.”

“Nice, you’re really getting into it… Ohh, and Urumi-san, thank you again. We had a really good training session.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Was what I did really useful?”

“Yes, very.”

“Um, I know you said you’d be repeating the training over and over. How did that go? Did it get less scary over time?” I asked out of curiosity.

“It’s strange,” Sasazuka replied, shaking her head, “no matter how many times we repeated the same course, there was always a certain level of fear. I thought we’d get used to it a little, so it’s an unexpected result.”

That was fascinating. There were ghost stories like that sometimes too. Bizarrely frightening tales, which set my spine tingling no matter how often I read them. Perhaps, for us humans, the fear that such stories bring is like hot or cold, a change in the environment which we have no way to resist. Maybe the interstitial space was the same way… Or was that too much of a leap?

“That being the case, it looks like we won’t need Urumi-san to constantly maintain things. If we can make regular use of the chimera house, it will be incredibly helpful.”

“Chimera house?” I repeated.

“Ah, pardon me. I don’t know who started it, but we all started calling the kill house the chimera house…”

“What does that mean?” I asked, but Runa just gave me a look of exasperation.

“You don’t know, Kamikoshi-san? It’s an urban legend from the US.”

“Huh? It is?”

“It is, yeah. The legend goes that there are these big buildings, packed full of every horror imaginable, called chimera houses, and no one who enters them ever comes out. Isn’t that right, Sasazuka-san?”

“So I’m told. I hadn’t heard of it before either,” Sasazuka replied with an awkward smile. Runa took her chance to try and lord it over me.

“Why don’t *you* know about it, Kamikoshi-san?”

“Urban legends aren’t my area of expertise!”

“Wha? What a shame. I’ve lost faith in you,” Runa said.

The hell?

The chimera house—like I’d just said to Runa, I had no interest in urban legends, so it was the first time that I was hearing the name, but for the word “chimera” to come up now…it unsettled me as one half of the Nue. Was it a coincidence, or…

“This kind of thing is the hardest to deal with,” I murmured as we watched Sasazuka and the others go off to shower.

8

When the Torchlight folks came back from the showers, they immediately got to work on preparing for a barbecue. New charcoal was added to the grill they’d used to cook sausages during the day. There was a new massive cooler filled with ice water, keeping beer and carbonated drinks cool. Once I saw the spare ribs and bone-in chicken come out from their previous unopened luggage, I knew very well that lunch had just been a prelude to what was to come.

Before the first round of meat was done cooking, we all gathered for a toast. Sasazuka looked around to see that everyone had their drinks before she began.

“Good work on your first day of training, everyone! Cheers!”

Good work, everyone! Cheers!

It would be tough having to engage in social situations like this with people I didn’t know very well…or so I had feared, but after that first toast things settled down a little, and everyone naturally broke off to party in their own little groups. We, the four indoorsy types, snatched some food and drinks, then headed back to the front of our own tents. There was music playing from a speaker somebody had brought along. This was probably the liveliest the Farm had ever been.

“Do you think most of Torchlight are Americans? This barbecue’s on a whole different scale from what Japanese people would do,” Tsuji remarked between bites of a kebab. Toriko cocked her head to the side.

“I wonder. Listening to them talk, I feel like they’re more multinational.”

“Though, isn’t it very Japanese of them to start the toast with a ‘good work’?” I noted.

That got a laugh out of Tsuji. “True that. Maybe that’s

something that slowly seeps in if you're running a company in Japan."

Migiwa and Sasazuka wandered over to see if we were having any trouble or needed anything, but they generally hung around in Torchlight's circles. And the operators didn't go out of their way to come see us.

Given that we were the ones who'd made that creepy training site, maybe it wasn't all that strange that they would avoid us. But if anything, it felt less like we were being shunned, and more like they were leaving us alone. They probably had no more idea how to strike up a conversation with us than we did with them, so that went both ways. Sasazuka and Torchlight had known Migiwa for a while, so maybe they were somewhat used to strange events like this one.

The area quickly darkened as the sun dipped below the tree branches. The floodlights were hooked up to the generator, lighting up the yard. As Runa had predicted, the temperature rapidly dropped at sunset. We lit up our own lanterns, and started preparing the campfire.

We put the logs into the hole Toriko had dug, added some kindling, and set it alight. It was apparently something called a Dakota fire hole, which helped the fire to burn better because a second hole provided a draft of air.

"Mama taught me when I was a kid. I'm glad I remembered how to do it," Toriko explained happily as we watched her skillfully start the fire.

Once we started cooking the food Toriko and Tsuji had brought over the fire using a skillet, delicious smells that rivaled those of the barbecue filled the air. Toriko apparently wanted to take this opportunity to try out all sorts of things, because she'd brought *two* skillets with her. I was sitting there with nothing to do until she asked me to cut the ingredients, so I took out my knife and started cutting sausages and deep-fried thick tofu. It was the knife Toriko gave me as a present. I had to question if it was all right to use it like this, even if it was meant for daily use, but Toriko looked happy when she saw it in my hands, so I guess it was fine.

Sausage and Camembert fried in garlic oil, deep-fried thick tofu wrapped with bacon, dumplings fried with the grease from chicken skin, and cheese fondue with brussels sprouts. Everything was delicious, and paired well with the red wine that

Tsuji had brought. Tsuji was drinking too, but it didn't change how she acted.

"C'mon, Urumi-kun, have some more. You're still young."

"I *am* eating. I told you, I've got enough! I want to lose weight!"

"What're you talking about? Don't try to lose weight when you're still just a minor."

"What's with this person? Save me, Nishina-san."

"Huh? Me?"

"If I ask Kamikoshi-san to save me, she'll just ignore it."

"Looks like you finally clued in, Runa."

"Please don't talk like this doesn't concern you, Kamikoshi-san."

"Sorawo can be so awful, can't she?"

"Huh?! Wait, why are you pouring wine on the meat?!" I protested.

"It's flambé. Flambé."

"Ahh... The meat I raised..."

"You don't raise meat."

"I was watching over it until it was cooked just right!"

With our stomachs filled, the conversation turned to Tsuji's magic as we were drinking what remained of the wine.

"That ritual you did first. What was it called again? L... LG..." asked Runa.

"It's LBRP. Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram."

"Why do you suppose it had no effect? Even with such an impactful performance."

"I know, right? If I was to hazard a guess at the cause, I might note that the LBRP is a ritual to purify the caster themselves. Not a place or object."

"So the target was wrong?"

"No, it wasn't. The basic idea in modern magic is to bring about an effect in reality by rewriting the perception of the caster. By purifying my own perception of the room, I purify the room itself. But it had no effect. Although, I somewhat expected that."

"You went into it thinking that it wasn't going to work?"

"No, I went in with every intention of making it work. If I were to give another reason, I think a big part of it is that the ritual is too dependent on a preexisting system of symbols, and it didn't mesh with the context dominating that place."

“By a preexisting system of symbols, you mean…”

“It’s based on the Jewish Kabbalah and the Old Testament. Before me, Raphael. Behind me, Gabriel. And so on, and so forth. That’s powerful, in a way, but not against the spell you cast, Urumi-kun. Because it’s not like you pulled out some preexisting spell or chant, you did all those renovations using your own sense of taste.”

“Well, yeah. And?”

“That’s powerful. It leaves me no openings to attack. If you were like, ‘I’m going to summon the demon So-and-so and curse this land!’ or, ‘I’m going to call up the spirits of animals to possess it!’ that would have made things simple. I’d use a technique that was in line with the images you borrowed, and overwrite them with something even more powerful. Like, ‘Pfft, animal spirits? Step aside. I’ve got the angels of the four cardinal directions, and the name of God which must not be spoken, Yod-He-Vau-He.’ But what would you think if I said that, Urumi-kun?”

“Huh? I don’t know any of that stuff. Piss off. That’s what I’d think.”

“I’ll bet. You’ve created a domain of your own, which doesn’t waver in the face of authority. That’s why I needed to use a more primitive method. I needed to whack that space with something that would make its creator falter.”

“And that’s why the explosive laughter…?”

It seemed as dubious as ever, but it was still fascinating to hear the logic behind Tsuji’s magic.

“But isn’t what you’re doing kind of violent? You’re invoking the names of angels, but it’s essentially just trying to scare things and chase them out,” Runa said, not seeming very amused.

“Right! That’s exactly it. I was trying to see what’d scare something that didn’t scare easily. The LBRP is powerful because it’s a who’s who of tough guy names from the Old Testament. It’s like, ‘What school’re you from? We’re from Kabbalah Middle School, and we’ve got lotsa scary senpai, so get lost, ya nasties.’”

“Is that sort of magic based in your religious beliefs?” Toriko asked, but Tsuji shook her head.

“Nah, not at all. Like most Japanese people, I’m not particularly religious, but practice elements of both Buddhism and Shinto in my everyday life. This sort of practical faith is something the concept of ‘religion’ which assumes a monotheistic faith can’t encapsulate, so Japanese people may

think of themselves as irreligious, while at the same time people from overseas see us as believing ‘a religion called Buddhism.’ It causes misunderstanding on both sides.”

I thought the alcohol wasn’t affecting her, but maybe she’s a talkative drunk.

“Regardless, you’ve gotta question why even a Japanese person like me who doesn’t believe in the faith would be able to use the LBRP. I’ll jump straight to the conclusion and say that it’s because Kabbalistic magic is a very convenient library to draw from. The evocative power of the images is sufficient, they are also powerful even against other domains, and stable on top of that. It’s what an IT Engineer might call ‘mature technology.’ That ritual, the LBRP, was created by a society of magicians called the Golden Dawn in nineteenth-century England. But while their magic was based on the Kabbalah, they were also heavily influenced by Egyptian mythology, which was experiencing a boom at the time, and even added elements of Greek mythology and the tarot willy-nilly. Talk about a hodgepodge. Modern magic in the west began with the Golden Dawn, and has been used all around the world for its convenience, which has probably severed it from its original religious roots.”

Either because of the alcohol, or because of my full belly, I gradually lost track of what we’d been talking about as I listened to Tsuji speak.

“Y’know, I’ve been frustrated all this time. Thinking about how my renovations were nullified by that stupid laugh.”

Runa’s brow furrowed. Tsuji grinned. “You’ve got more of an artisanal spirit than I’d have expected. It’s a good thing.”

“Oh, shut up. If that hadn’t worked, did you have anything else to use against it?”

Tsuji picked up just one chopstick, and pointed it at Runa before shouting, “Expecto Patronum!”

“Wait, Harry Potter?!” Runa said.

“If I didn’t go with that, a Kamehameha would work too!”

“Are you messing around?”

“I’m messing around, and I’m also serious. You can use any concept that works. Because I am a sister of disorder, a lady of chaos.”

“I have no idea what you’re even talking about!”

The barbecue ended around eight o’clock, and all there was to do after that was sleep. When the speaker was turned off, and

the music cut out, the Farm was suddenly quiet. The campfire died down too, and the logs that had turned to charcoal just kept burning slowly.

We used the faucets outside the Factory to wash our cookware and cutlery, and to brush our teeth. We were sweaty, and smelled of smoke, so I'd have liked to use the shower, but Toriko and Runa said it would be a pain to dry our hair afterward, so I took their opinions into account and agreed we would go in the morning.

We said goodnight and went to our own tents. After a whole day surrounded by people, it was a relief to be back to just the two of us. In place of a shower, I used wet wipes to wipe the sweat from my forehead and under my clothes.

"You did good today, Sorawo."

"You too, Toriko."

We were whispering. Now that it was time to sleep, it was so quiet you wouldn't believe all the noise earlier was real. We could occasionally hear movement and people talking with their voices lowered, whether that was from Runa and Tsuji's tents, or from the Torchlight tents.

"I thought we wouldn't need our sleeping bags with how hot it was, but I'm glad we brought them along just in case," said Toriko.

"Yeah, it's actually cold," I replied.

"Can we cuddle?" Toriko asked, bringing her face closer, so I held up a hand to stop her.

"We're in a tent, remember? With the lights on, they can see us as silhouettes from outside."

"Then hurry up and turn the lights off," Toriko whispered teasingly.

"..." I did as she said, and the tent went dark. Toriko's arms wrapped around me in the darkness. She was so close I could feel her breath. Our cheeks brushed together, our lips seeking the other's. I felt her silky hair in between the fingers I had behind her head.

"Want to hook up our sleeping bags?" I suggested, earning a giggle from Toriko.

"That'd clearly get hot."

"Clearly."

"I don't know if I could keep being a good girl."

"You dummy, what are you talking about?"

I was surprised at the gentleness in my own voice. I pulled away. *Hahh,* a yawn escaped. I couldn't see her, but I could tell that it made Toriko yawn too.

"Good night."

"Good night, Sorawo."

Sleeping on top of a thin mat shouldn't have been comfy, but I was asleep in no time.

9

"Please, wake up."

"Nnngh…"

"Please, wake up. Hurry, please."

The voice called out to me when I was sound asleep, forcefully dragging me back to consciousness. I managed to force my eyes open, and looked up to see someone's face peering in through the door of the tent.

"They're not here, please get up."

"Huh? What? Who…?"

As I squinted, my eyes finally came into focus.

I didn't know this kid.

There was an unfamiliar kid's head poking into the tent.

"Huh?!"

Its eyes had no whites. They were totally black.

Looking at me emotionlessly as I lay there in shock, the kid said, "It's your turn."

"Wha…?" came a muffled voice of protest from beside me.

"T-Toriko! Wake up!" As I turned to Toriko, I realized something.

It was still night. The tent was wrapped in darkness, so even Toriko in her sleeping bag just looked like a dark mass to me. There was a faint light seeping in from outside the fabric, but not enough for me to be able to see someone's face.

When I looked back, the kid's face had vanished. But the tent's fastener was left open halfway.

I didn't remember anything more than it having been a kid. Not its gender, its facial structure…not one single other thing.

As I felt around for the lantern left next to my pillow, Toriko groaned and covered her face with her arm.

"What…? Bathroom…?"

"Th-There was a kid."

“A *kid*…?”

“It wasn’t human, though.”

I hesitantly poked my head out of the tent. The air felt too cool, even in light of the fact we were up in the mountains. It was totally dark outside, with the exception of the bare minimum of light illuminating the area around the canopy tents, and there was no sign anything was out of the ordinary.

Looking to the side, I saw Runa and Tsuji’s tent.

The entrance was wide open.

“Toriko, something may be up after all.”

“Huh…?”

I turned to look back at her. Toriko was kneeling, but still half asleep. Her eyes were closed, and she swayed slowly from side to side.

“Wake up.”

“Ngah!”

Pinching her nose got her to open her eyes. I ignored her defiant look and put on my shoes.

“I’ll go check on our neighbors.”

“Ah! Wait, wait.”

Following my usual habit, I grabbed the pouch that had the bare minimum of tools I’d need, and headed outside as I put my arms through the sleeves of my jacket. I approached Runa and Tsuji’s tent and poked my head inside. There were two sleeping bags there, side by side, but they were both empty. Their shoes had gone missing too.

“Where’d they go…?”

“The bathroom, don’t you think?” Toriko said, rubbing her eyes, as she caught up.

“Even if they did, would they really leave the tent open like this? I’d understand more if it was swelteringly hot outside.”

“Weren’t you just saying something about a kid?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, that’s right.”

Once I explained what I had seen, Toriko frowned.

“I don’t like it. Was the kid a ghost or something?”

“I don’t think it was a ghost, so I guess it was a ‘something.’”

“Can you see anything with your right eye?”

I swept the area with my eye, then shook my head.

“I don’t see anything. Not around here, at least. I mean, in this darkness, I can’t even—”

“Hm?”

While I was in the middle of talking, Toriko suddenly turned around.

"Huh? Just now..."

"What is it?"

"I felt... Ah! There it is again!" Toriko said, sticking her arm forward in a half-hearted way. "It's tugging on my arm! It's weak, but I'm not just imagining it...!"

I looked at the area around her left hand with my right eye. I couldn't see anything—the same as when something had pulled on her hand in Satsuki Uruma's research room at DS Research.

"Don't tell me..."

"Nah, this is different. Unlike that time, it's incredibly weak, or more like restrained."

She'd answered before I could ask the question. Apparently we were both thinking about the same thing.

"It's like it's trying to take me somewhere... You think it's okay to go?"

I thought back to what the child's face had said. *"They're not here, please get up."* Had it been in reference to Runa and Tsuji?

"I guess we see where it takes us..." I said. "It's the only lead we've got at the moment."

"Okay..."

Toriko let her arm go limp as she began walking. I followed. I pulled a light from my pouch, and flipped it on. A white light lit our way.

We crossed the yard, led by who-knows-what. The three-story Residence Building was a darkened silhouette against the night sky, towering over us like a wall. All was quiet in the Torchlight tents, and no one challenged us. I feel like they should've had a guard standing watch, though...

"Huh? Here?" Toriko murmured as she came to a stop. We were at the entrance to the Cattle Barn. Through the gaping entrance, the light of my flashlight shone on the corridor that had been hastily assembled out of plywood.

"It wants us to go in here? Inside the chimera house?"

"You've gotta be kidding me," I groaned.

We both stood there awhile, sharing a mutual distaste for where this was going.

"Toriko. We're going to want guns..." I said after composing myself.

"Yeah, you're right."

As Toriko reached to pull her gun out of her bag, she let out a small groan of realization.

“It’s gone,” she said.

“Huh? The thing pulling your hand?”

“Yeah. When I moved my left hand, it was like I shook free.”

Toriko groped around in the air for a while, but eventually gave up and lowered her hand. “Looks like it’s no good. I can’t feel it anymore.”

“I guess we’ll have to go it alone from here,” I replied.

Toriko took out her gun, and checked the magazine and safety. “What will you do, Sorawo?”

“Sorry, but do you think you can handle it? It’d be pretty bad if I accidentally shot Runa or Tsuji.”

“Got it.”

“Hold up, there’s a light switch here, isn’t there? Where was it again?”

“On the wall...somewhere around there?”

We followed the power cord to the switch, then flipped it. The lights didn’t come on.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this... Sorawo, don’t you think something’s wrong here? My left hand is tingling. Like when Runa did her renovations during the day.”

So this place is turning into an interstitial space, then?

Runa had only remodeled the individual rooms inside the chimera house. But if their influence had spread this far... This could be bad.

“Let’s go. We gotta find the two of them.”

We steeled ourselves, then stepped into the chimera house.

We already knew what was in here. But now that we were the ones entering it, it was really scary. I held the flashlight, and Toriko held her gun, as we proceeded down the corridor. The first room had a mannequin torso lying on the floor. In the light of the flashlight, it didn’t even look human-shaped, but it still gave off an ominous aura that made me want to run away immediately. Once we checked that there was no one in the room, we continued down the hall.

The second room had a urinal lying on its side. There had definitely been a murder in here. The feeling of an incident of violence hung in the air, even suggesting that the killer might well still be in the room. I couldn’t turn my back on this place until we had cleared the whole thing, down to every dark corner.

The third room had a vinyl curtain hanging from the ceiling, dividing the room into two. The once-transparent sheet was dark and dirty, making it look like someone was standing on the other side. When the curtain swayed, the person even seemed to move...

It really feels like they're moving.

I perked up my ears, and I heard slight breathing, and the rustle of clothes. There was someone else here!

"Runa?" I called out.

Toriko's gun was still lowered. We couldn't pull the same kind of stunts we would on the Otherside here.

"Ahh... You finally made it," came a muffled voice from the other side of the curtain.

"Tsuji-san?" I called out.

"You're both late."

I cautiously pulled back the curtain, and sure enough, there was Tsuji. Oddly, she wasn't facing this way. It gave me flashbacks to my mujina encounter. I kept the flashlight focused on her.

"Are you really Tsuji-san? Turn and face us, please."

"Uh... What?" Tsuji slowly turned...then raised her hand towards the light. "Whoa, you're blinding me."

I lowered the flashlight, relieved. Tsuji had a normal face.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

"I woke up to find Urumi-kun walking away on unsteady feet, so I followed. And when I did, this is where she led me. I was scared here, all by myself, until you arrived."

"You say that like you knew we would be coming," Toriko said, mystified.

"Uhh, yeah. Because I called you."

"You called us?" Toriko looked down at her left hand, then back at Tsuji. "That was you, Tsuji-san?"

"Yeah. It was a tulpa. So technically not me, but something peeled off of me."

After saying all of this in a tone that suggested she wasn't all there, Tsuji turned her back to us once again. Her eyes were on the stairs that were in this room. These concrete steps, which had suddenly been installed in the Cattle Barn, were the only route up to the second floor.

"Where is Runa? Upstairs?" I asked.

Tsuji slowly nodded. "She is, yes, but...there's something

abnormal about her.”

Something abnormal...?

“I felt threatened, so I put off going up there. I had a feeling it could get bad without some expert help.”

I followed her gaze to the top of the stairs. The second floor was pitch-dark. If Runa was in that darkness, then I could assume she wasn’t in any normal mental state...

As I thought about it, gazing upwards, the lights on the second floor went on like someone flipped a switch. A pure white light, like the sort that came from fluorescent lights, shone down the stairs. The change wasn’t like the power had suddenly come on, but more like our impression that the second floor was dark had been instantly removed.

“Did you match channels?” Tsuji said, seeming to have understood from the surprised looks on our faces. “Well, take a moment, and tell me what you think. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

Tsuji was half smiling, but there was an undeniable tension underneath that smile.

There were lights on the second floor of the Cattle Barn, yes, but only LED lights that we had rigged up using power cables, like on the first floor. They weren’t the kind of lights that cast a thin, even light over whatever they shone on. Besides, this was way more light than they could provide.

So what is this light, then...?

Toriko and I nodded, then started up the stairs. My flashlight was meaningless at this point. I focused with my right eye, climbing one step at a time. Tsuji followed behind us.

When we poked our heads out onto the second floor, we looked around as if in a daze for some time.

It was huge. No, endless. It was a pure white space that seemed to stretch out to infinity. The floor and walls all shone white. Was there even a ceiling at all? There were no boundaries in the white space, so it started to feel like we were floating in it.

We climbed the remaining steps. The floor was solid under our feet, at the very least, but it didn’t feel like standing on wood or concrete.

Originally, the only things in the Cattle Barn were a single hallway connected to the stairs that went down to the lower level and a number of rooms with incomplete gates. That was all there should have been. Even if you knocked down all the walls,

it wouldn’t have been this large.

Runa was there, in that space. She sat on the floor, messing with things that were scattered around near her. Like a child playing with toy blocks. We were close enough she could have noticed us, but she didn’t turn around.

“What do you make of it?” asked Tsuji, who had come up behind us. “This space… What do you think it is?”

I had no more of an idea than she did. The most I could venture was that maybe it was some type of interstitial space.

“Did you call Runa’s name?” I asked.

“Not yet,” answered Tsuji.

“Well, let’s start by trying that.”

I called out at the top of my lungs. “Runa! What’re you doing in a place like this?!”

Runa made no move to respond. My voice echoed until it was absorbed by the endless space around us.

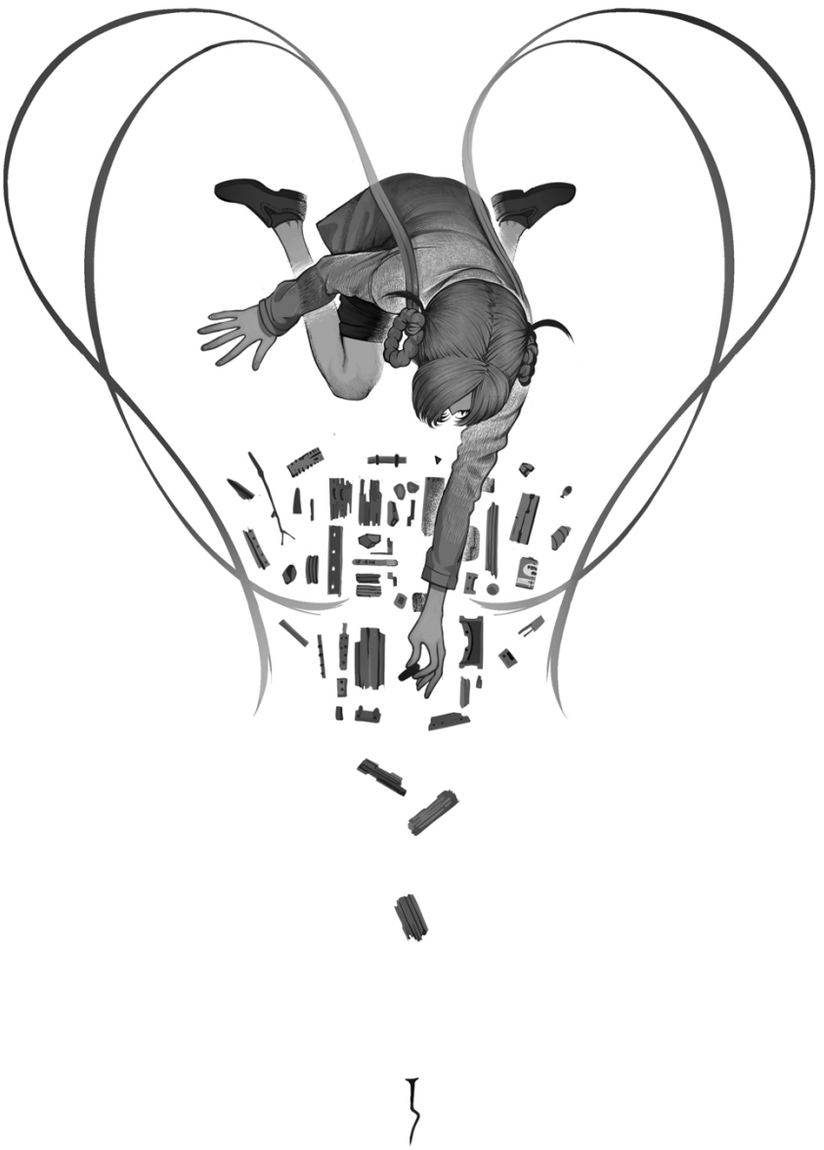
Guess we’ve gotta go…

I stepped forward hesitantly. It was hard to judge distance in the vast whiteness, but I reached her in about ten steps.

“Hey, Runa. What’re you doing?”

I peered over her shoulder. What she was playing with…looked like a toy house to me. It wasn’t put together well enough to really call it a house, but a three-dimensional floor plan was about the only thing I could think that the scraps of metal and wood on the floor might represent. It wasn’t that far from my initial impression of toy blocks.

“There was a Buddhist altar here, you see,” Runa said all of a sudden. “This was dad’s room. And this was grandma’s. And this was my room. And mom’s bookshelf was here.” Runa went on as she added parts to the floor plan.



“There were lots of books on fortune telling and improving your luck. She had always had an interest in that sort of thing. But once dad left, the number of books just kept growing. More strange people, like her, started coming to the house. I hated it, but couldn’t do anything.”

“This was Runa’s house…?” Toriko murmured.

No.

I shuddered as I looked down at the floor plan.

When Runa spoke, it probably was about her own house. But the miniature she was assembling was eerily familiar.

It was the floor plan of *my* house.

“I didn’t want to see her face, so I stayed in my room, streaming as much as possible. Then, one day, I noticed our Buddhist altar was gone. Mom said she’d donated all of our belongings, and I had to move out with her.”

In Runa’s hands, nondescript stones and twigs took on the form of my house. It was an abstract representation, but reproduced with unbelievable accuracy.

“So I told her I didn’t want to. I already had Satsuki-sama at that point, so mom would do what I said.”

Runa picked up a black stone, the size of a piece of chalk, off the floor.

“So, once I put this in my room, it will be all finished.”

I understood. The black stone was “Satsuki-sama.” Runa’s hand approached the miniature house. Heading right towards my room.

I reflexively kicked the house, sending all its carefully arranged parts scattering. In an instant, “my house” was reduced to a pile of rubble.

Despite having her work destroyed moments from completion, Runa didn’t react. Her hand kept moving, placing the black stone where “my room” had been. When she moved her hand away, the stone fell over.

There was a long pause.

“What’re you doing, Runa?”

That was the most I could manage. I felt like I had found her in the middle of doing something horribly sinister.

“Kamikoshi-san,” Runa said without looking up. “What do you think I’m doing?” Her voice was coherent enough, but she wasn’t making sense.

“I just asked you that,” I said.

“I don’t know why I’m here.”

“So…what? You’re saying you were in a daze, and just suddenly found yourself here?”

She didn’t answer the question. After staying silent for some time, Runa opened her mouth again.

“I feel like I’ve hit a dead end.”

“How so?”

“I mean, I have, right? Looking at it from any objective point of view, I did some really awful stuff. Getting all sorts of people caught up in it, making their lives worse. I have so many people with a grudge against me that I wouldn’t be surprised if one killed me.”

“Well… Yeah.”

“I can’t stream anymore. I sure as hell can’t show my face, and even if I went the VTuber route, I’m sure that they’d figure it out from my voice. My natural voice’s pretty cute, after all.”

“Sure…”

“I can’t stream, and I have to be careful not to brainwash anyone. I’ve been prevented from doing everything I wanted to do, so what am I even doing here?”

“…”

“You asked me during the day, right? Why did I make this place? I tried to remember. But I couldn’t. There was no clear reason. If I could think someone was controlling me, like Satsuki-sama, that might have made it easier, but I think the fact is, I just went with the flow, and at some point things went like they did. I never put forward the idea myself, but I also can’t blame anybody else for it…”

“Well, I guess you just have to take that for what it is, don’t you?”

“But it’s the same way now.”

“Now?”

“So, here I am. Sneaking off on my own in the middle of the night. Was I in a daze, maybe? I think I was awake, though. I mean, I remember the scenery I saw on my way here, crossing the yard, entering the Cattle Barn, climbing up the stairs. But why did I do it? All I can say is that I was just following some vague flow of things, and it brought me here somehow.”

Runa touched the wreckage of the “house” as she continued speaking.

“I’ve been trying not to use the Voice because of my promise

with you, but then the next thing I know, I'm doing something like this. I know you complimented me on my skill at remodeling, but it just doesn't feel real to me. I mean, it's just something I've been doing all this time without really understanding it. If this continues, eventually I might just go with the flow and do something bad again, making people miserable without knowing why. Maybe it would be better if you just killed me."

"I'm not killing you..."

"Yeah, I know. I mean, you never blame me for what I did, Kamikoshi-san."

Runa raised her face and looked at me.

"You don't get mad, and you don't blame me. Then, on top of that, you take me outside, and you try to have me do things with you. If it was just Satsuki-sama's funeral, I'd get it. But all of us camping together? What gives? It's not like you haven't considered that I might change my mind and stab you in the back, or try to take you down with a desperate suicide attack, right? But it's like you...trust me, for some reason. I don't get it. It's not even just you. Nishina-san, and Tsuji-san, and Migiwa-san, and the Torchlight people, they're all being nice to me for some reason. Although, Nishina-san scares me, and Tsuji-san's annoying..."

"Am I really that scary?"

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

Runa carried on, ignoring the comments from the two she'd just denigrated.

"I can't understand why they're being nice, so it's creeped me out this whole time. It'd make more sense if you just killed me and buried my corpse in the mountains."

"Already told you, we won't be doing that."

"But you don't even tell me to reflect on what I did."

"That's not the kind of thing you do because someone told you to."

When I said that, Runa sulkily replied, "I guess it just means that, in the end, no one's that interested in me."

"Huh?"

That was such a leap I couldn't follow it. I was annoyed she could say that because she didn't know just how many hours we, and the folks from DS Research and Torchlight, a large group of adults, had spent discussing how to handle her.

But I guess since she didn't know, I couldn't blame her. And I'd

have felt like I was trying to force her to feel grateful if I came out and said it now.

"Is getting other people interested in you that important?" I asked, sighing.

"Of course it is!!!" Runa immediately shouted in response. "Is that wrong? Wanting people to be interested in me?!"

"Uh, no, I don't think it's wrong, just..."

As I faltered, Runa glared at me. "Yeah, that's right. *You* don't need to worry about that, Kamikoshi-san. There are always people around you, paying attention to you. Yet you carry on like it's such a nuisance that they care. I'm jealous. You have so many friends, and you're trusted, and you have a partner like Toriko-san. How can you be so blessed and not even realize it?!"

Runa picked up pieces of the "house" and threw them. They bounced off the ground, scattering all over.

"When I talk to you, it makes me feel so miserable. My dad left, my mom turned into an idiot, and my streaming went nowhere. There was no one interested in me. Once I encountered the Blue World, and Satsuki-sama gave me the Voice, a fan club formed around me, but...that all fell apart too, and now everyone hates me. Even Satsuki-sama, who I thought was a god, turned out to be nothing of the sort. She was a monster."

Runa's voice trembled.

"You may not realize it, but I have nothing. Seriously, nothing. Is it that weird to just want someone to take an interest in me?!"

"Well..." I hesitated.

I did feel sorry for her. While Runa had done some awful things, she wasn't the only one responsible for the path that brought her there. It sounded like she'd had a bad family situation, she was still a minor, and most important of all, she had done what she did under the influence of the Otherside.

But I still couldn't sympathize with her on a fundamental level. I was never motivated by the desire for people to take an interest in me.

I don't think it's that I was completely bereft of any desire for attention. Although, whatever desire I did have for it was weak. If she wanted to say that that was because of the privileged position I found myself in, then maybe she was right. My family situation wasn't the greatest either, but I think my mom probably cared a lot about me, and now I had a lot of people, Toriko and

Kozakura foremost among them, who were my anchors. If I tried to claim I didn't care at all what anyone thought of me, she'd say I was being ridiculous. And I'd understand.

Well, what can I do, then? What should I say to her?

"I don't hate you," said Tsuji, but Runa didn't show any sign of happiness.

"But you don't *like* me either."

Desperate, I tried to say something too. "B-But you said it yourself, didn't you? Everyone's being nice to you."

"Listen, I'm not an idiot. I know they're not being nice because they want to. They don't know what to do with me, but none of them wants to get their own hands dirty. Every time they show me kindness, it really hurts. When people are nice to you out of obligation, it's way too miserable. If I'm going to be treated like an open sore for my whole life, and never be liked by anyone, then I'd rather just die."

Runa's head whipped around to face Toriko. "Nishina-san, could you shoot me with that gun?"

Toriko shook her head. "I'm not going to do that."

"I didn't think so. Because you're nice too."

Runa hung her head.

"Well, how about this, then?" she continued, raising her face. "Please, shoot me, Nishina-san."

Flowing silver stretched from her mouth, then slid into Toriko's ears like a living creature.

"Ah...!" I cried out in surprise.

"Kamikoshi-san, I'm sorry."

Despite her verbal apology, her expression was relieved, peaceful.

"I broke my promise to you."

I turned to see Toriko, raising her gun with a blank look on her face.

"Toriko! No!"

"Huh? But she asked me to shoot her," she said as if it were the most obvious response. Her hands didn't stop. The barrel pointed straight at Runa, and her trigger finger—

Reflexively, I stood in front of Runa. Toriko's eyes widened, and she lowered the gun.

"That's dangerous!" she objected.

You took the words out of my mouth.

While I was blocking her line of sight, Tsuji seized Toriko's

arm.

“Whoa, what? Let go of—”

“Now, now, now, calm down,” Tsuji said, trying to soothe her.

I approached Toriko to help Tsuji.

“Sorawo, don’t get in the way. I’m telling you, it’s dangerous.”

“Yeah, it is,” I agreed. “So let go of the gun.”

“But…”

“Would you be okay with shooting me by accident?”

“Uhh… No.”

“Yeah, I know you wouldn’t. So give me the gun. You can have it back later, okay?”

“Really? Please give it back, okay? Because I gotta shoot her.”

“Sure, sure.”

Somehow, I managed to calm her down and get her to give me the gun. That was nerve-racking.

“Thanks. Sorry about this.”

I put my hand over Toriko’s left hand and guided it to the side of her head.

“What?” she asked, confused.

“There, now squeeze,” I said.

“Squeeze… Yuck, there’s something there?!”

“Go on, pluck it out!”

In my right field of vision, I saw the Voice being dragged out of Toriko’s ear. As she clenched her hand, the phosphorescent light shattered and vanished.

Tsuji supported Toriko as her legs gave out from under her.

“Are you okay, Nishina-kun?”

“Aughhh, this is the *worst*.” Toriko got up shakily, and brushed her hair back behind her ear. “I’m fine now… Sorry.”

Toriko’s words were dripping with frustration over having let Runa’s voice control her.

“Well, that didn’t work.”

I heard a voice filled with self-mockery behind me. I turned and looked down at Runa.

“Runa, you little…”

“Kamikoshi-san, you really are lovely when you’re angry,” Runa said as she looked up at me. “You show an intensity of emotion you wouldn’t usually. There’s this glint in your eyes, like there’s flames burning inside them. That’s what draws everyone to you. When someone who usually doesn’t pay them any mind looks at them, well yeah, of course that’d make them happy. If they could

get emotions other than anger out of you, that would make them even happier...but for those of us who can only make you mad, it's the only thing we can do."

"I'm not that big of a deal." I said as I tried to quell my temper. Runa let out a hollow laugh.

"Too bad. I managed to set the fire, but it went out in no time."

After saying this, she clapped as though realizing something.

"Oh, that's right," she continued. "I'm so silly. It was a mistake, trying to get her to shoot me. If I really wanted to get you mad, I should have had her turn the gun on her—"

"Runa," I said in a tone so low it surprised me. "Finish that sentence, and I won't let it go."

"And what happens if you don't let it go?" Runa said, challenging me.

She knew I wouldn't try to kill her. Knew that in her current desperate state, where she actually wanted to be killed, I had nothing left that I could threaten her with.

I crouched down in front of Runa. Got down on her level, like I was dealing with a child.

"Listen... You're right, I'm not interested in others' opinions of me. But that's because my interest is taken up by things I care about more. It may seem unpleasant to you, but in my case, it's just that I'm just lacking in the ability to take an interest in others."

"You're trying to say it's not your fault because of that?"

"I'm just saying I'm looking at other things. If you're sad that people aren't interested in you, then what else can you do but chase after the things that interest you instead? Who are you interested in, Runa?"

"..."

"Don't you have anyone like that?"

Runa looked at me like she had no idea what to say. Her gaze went past me, to something over my shoulder. There was a pleading look in her eyes.

I heard a sigh behind me, and Toriko knelt down next to us.

"I get you," Toriko said to Runa. "It feels awful when the person who you want to notice you won't even take you seriously, right?"

Runa hung her head in silence. It kind of looked like she'd nodded.

Huh…? Are people communicating without me being able to pick up on it again?

I thought Toriko would be steaming mad after she'd just been controlled, so her unexpected sympathy for Runa confused me.

Behind us, Tsuji spoke. "Urumi-kun, we're not nearly so uninterested in you as you seem to think. We're all adults here, so we're still searching for the appropriate way to interact with a minor. Everyone is more concerned for you than you realize."

"And what about you, Tsuji-san?"

"I wouldn't go to all the trouble of being your guarantor if I wasn't interested."

"What about me interested you?"

"I thought you were a neat kid. Do I need any more reason than that?"

"…"

Hopefully this will get her to settle down…

"See? There's no need to be so down on yourself. There's more people who care about you than you think. It may not feel real to you, but everyone wants to help you get your life back bit by bit. So…"

"Even if that's true…!" Runa tore herself away from me. "If what you're saying is true, that's even worse. Because I haven't solved the problem with me."

"The problem with you?"

Runa looked around. There was fear in her eyes as she surveyed the vast whiteness.

"Where *is* this place? I came here on my own, started making the layout of a house I don't know, and only came back to my senses when you called my name. That's weird, right? It's gotta be. If it happens again, I might betray you all without even knowing it, and that scares me."

"Did you really come here without realizing it? Just going with some sort of flow?"

"It pisses me off how much it sounds like a lie now that I say it, but yes."

As I thought about it in silence, Runa gave me a dubious look. Because I was crouching next to her, our eyes were at the same level. Yeah, just like you'd do when dealing with a kid. I had taken this action naturally. Just sort of going with the flow of things.

Was it something I had truly done of my own will?

"What…?" Runa asked, unable to bear the silence any longer.

I looked her in the eye and said, “You know, I don’t like kids.”

“Huh?”

“But when there’s a kid in front of me, I sort of switch into kid-handling mode. I crouch down, meet them at eye level, and talk softly so as not to scare them. Even though that’s not what I want to do. It never sat right with me. Why should I have to act so artificially kind to kids when I don’t even like them?”

“Uh… Right.”

“Toriko, I want you to think back… Remember how you showed me that movie from your past? The one from the shooting competition.”

“What’re you bringing that up for *now*?!”

Her voice was shrill, reminding me of the exact circumstances of that situation. Well, it wasn’t like anyone else would know, as long as we didn’t say anything…

“Neither of us had a sense of self. Yet we both kept on talking in a way that seemed right. We woke up in the middle of it, and realized we’d been talking automatically the whole time.”

“Ohhh… Yeah.”

“Even thinking about it after the fact, the conversation that we were having at that time still stands up as a proper conversation. Our sense of self was just absent from it. I think my attitude towards children is the same way. When there’s a kid in front of me, some sort of switch gets flipped, and I automatically shift into that sort of mode. It’s probably the same for Runa too. She was conscious, but had no sense of self, and was just proceeding automatically.”

“I don’t get it,” said Runa. “Huh? I was conscious? But had no…”

“No sense of self.”

“You’re saying that’s the kind of state I was in?”

“Yeah. That’s when you were influenced by the Otherside, and you ‘didn’t really think much about it’ as they used you to create a foothold for them. I think when you were trying to summon ‘Satsuki-sama,’ there was more of your own will in play, so they were more able to get you into doing it.”

The more I talked, the more excited I got about it. I could feel all these disparate thoughts I’d been having coming together inside my head.

“That’s how ghost stories are. Things are scary, and the people involved should understand that the events going on are

abnormal, but for some reason they are unable to pull themselves away before it's too late. Once we're set on a course, it's incredibly hard to escape. Our thoughts and actions become automatic."

"Uh-huh..."

"Romance is the same way too."

The words slipped out of my mouth. My understanding only caught up to them once they had. A shudder ran down my back. I felt like I had finally gotten to the core of the matter.

"That's how it is... I'm sure romance is the same way!"

I continued my rant, ignoring the confused look on Runa's face.

"Romance is scary, like a planet with immense gravity. It tries to pull any human that gets close to it into the context of 'romance.' If you get pulled in, everyone can only interpret everything you do in the context of romance, and the way you talk and act ends up that way too. That's always bothered and scared me... Yeah, that's one point where romance and ghost stories are the same. People try to force things into their context! And just like the context of romance takes people over, the Otherside tries to get humans into the context of ghost stories! How's that? Do you get it?"

"I'm scared."

"I know. It's scary, right?"

"You scare me, Kamikoshi-san."

"Huh? Why?!"

"I get it, Kamikoshi-kun," Tsuji said out of nowhere. I turned to see her looking down at me with a peaceful smile. "What you're talking about is something that any magician has to realize during her training. Because the sort of intervention into our thoughts that you're talking about is something that disrupts magical consciousness."

Before I could figure out what Tsuji said, Runa spoke.

"You want to say I'm doing this because of the influence of the Blue World? Even if that's true, if I'm not conscious of it happening, there's nothing that I can do about it."

"No... We might be able to do something," I said, turning to look at Toriko. "A while back, we had a conversation about what Toriko's left hand touches. We thought it might be the framework of the ghost stories. If that's right, and she were to touch the 'framework' of the ghost story that's affecting you, I

think she'd be able to pull it away."

Toriko looked down at her own hand and said, "Maybe your logic is sound, but it doesn't seem like there's anything I can touch right now. Can you see it, Sorawo?"

"I can't..."

I took a fresh look at Runa with my right eye, but nothing caught my attention.

But when I thought about it, that was strange in and of itself. If Runa's actions were being influenced by the Otherside, then I should have been able to perceive something. Or was it like Tsuji said during the daytime, and something was going on outside my threshold?

As I was mulling the question, Tsuji spoke. "Then why not have Urumi-kun do it herself?"

"Do what?" asked Runa.

"Perform an exorcism on yourself. Like I did, with the LBRP. By purifying your mind, you can overwrite reality."

"I don't even know what to say... I can't perform that kind of weird ritual, though."

"You have the Voice, right? I seem to recall it doesn't just have the ability to control people, but can also scan the area around you. Or did I misremember?"

She was right. When we were doing Satsuki Uruma's funeral, we'd had her use the Voice to do something akin to tuning for our Kokkuri-san.

Runa was visibly confused. "I can try it, but...isn't that kind of different from an exorcism?"

"There's no need to get caught up on form. You can do something like my roaring laughter too."

"I can't laugh like you, Tsuji-san."

"Didn't I tell you? You can use any release of powerful emotion. Voice is the ideal medium for carrying emotion. Try taking your feelings, your frustrations, and just letting them all out."

Runa hung her head and was silent.

"How about it, Runa?" I asked, but instead of answering, Runa took a deep breath and—

She shouted.

It was incredible. The shout raced out of Runa's throat, carrying anger, sadness, discontent, and every other kind of emotion. In my right eye, I saw a pale light shining in the back of

her throat, and lines of shining silver exploded out of it. They pierced through all of us, spreading all throughout the endless white space.

It was a scream. Runa was crying out with her entire being, *“Somebody, come help me.”*

It wasn’t us that were affected by the Voice.

The silver lines changed course in midair, and just as they seemed to trace the outline of something, it happened. The space around us warped and twisted, as if it had been caught on thousands of needles, and some invisible mass, of which all I could tell was that it was incredibly massive, was pulled out of the air.

“Wh… What?!”

As we all looked on in shock, the massive invisible lump fell and bounced. The thing that had been caught by Runa’s Voice thrashed around inside the white space like it was a living creature. There were three red lights on top of the mass, and they were pointed towards us. In the center of the equilateral triangle formed by the lights, a hole opened, like the space was falling into it. And from that hole, there came a voice I could ascribe two possible meanings to.

Itowashi yanou. (How I loathe you.)

Itoshi yanou. (How I love you.)

“The Shishinoke…?!”

“So this was it!” Tsuji shouted. “This is what I’ve been sensing! We’ve been inside this thing ever since we came to the Farm!”

Runa was still screaming. Maybe she’d fallen into a trance state, because the whites of her eyes were showing, and her body had been pierced by many thin thorns. They were the thorns growing out of the Shishinoke.

“Toriko!”

Reacting quickly, I offered her the Makarov I’d taken away earlier. Toriko accepted the gun, and disengaged the safety. I ran towards the thrashing mass, and Toriko along came with me.

The hill-like head of the Shishinoke looked down at us. I glared back at it with my right eye, and the Shishinoke which I hadn’t been able to see before gradually appeared. Our channels matched—we had it now!

“Go ahead, Toriko. Shoot!”

Holding the Makarov with both of her hands, Toriko pointed it at the Shishinoke’s pitch-black hole and opened fire. The shots

rang out continuously, and the Shishinoke's massive body convulsed.

Once she'd dumped the entire magazine into it, the Shishinoke's body grew haze around the edges, and then it dissipated into mist.

With the disappearance of the thing her Voice had caught, Runa's scream faded out too. Tsuji caught her as she slumped forward.

"Ah...wha...? I...?"

"You did good. Real good."

As Runa came out of her trance state, Tsuji gave her a pat on the back as a reward. I couldn't see the thorns of the Shishinoke piercing Runa's body anymore.

"Urumi-kun, do you know the etymology of the Japanese word 'Itoshii'?" Tsuji asked Runa. "It comes from 'Itou,' meaning to hate, or dislike. It started to be used towards small, weak things, in a pitying sense, and then eventually took on the meaning of beloved. In short, the word meaning of loathing is always inside our word for something beloved."

"What are you talking about...?"

"I'm saying that 'like' and 'hate' isn't as simple as you think."

Tsuji took Runa's hand and helped her to her feet. Runa looked at me and Toriko, as if she were about to say something, then started coughing. It was hard to blame her after she'd just screamed her lungs out like that.

"What...even happened? I..." as Runa spoke with her hoarse voice, a single tear ran down her face.

"Huh? That's weird," Runa said, confusedly rubbing her eyes.

"It's fine, you don't need to hold them back," I said, feeling kinder than I usually would be, but Runa sniffed and stopped her tears.

"I won't cry. I'm not you, Kamikoshi-san."

"Huh? I'm not crying, though."

"But you did, while using my lap as a pillow—"

"You little?!"

Realizing her slip, Runa covered her mouth. "Sorry, it was nothing."

Don't apologize!!!

Reflexively, I looked beside me. Inevitably, my eyes met with Toriko's. She looked straight at me.

"What's this about a lap pillow?"

Works Referenced

This work uses many preexisting true ghost stories and pieces of net lore as its motifs. In particular, this section will note those which have been used directly. This will touch on the content of the main book, so if you are concerned about spoilers, please tread carefully.

■File 27: The Lion's Divination

The "Shishinoke" in this chapter comes from the "Hen na Mono wo Mite Shimatta" [I Saw Something Strange] thread (2010/4/12) on 2channel's Breaking News (VIP) board, where the story was told by the first poster. The poster's story of an encounter with a three-eyed giant slug covered thick hair concluded in another thread of the same name (2010/10/10) with a poster claiming to be the son of the Shinto priest he had consulted reporting the original poster fell down the stairs and was now comatose.

The description of the giant slug as three-eyed with needlelike hairs is reminiscent of Glaaki from Ramsey Campbell's short story "The Inhabitant of the Lake."

■File 28: Kaidancraft

This chapter has no particular ghost story as its motif.

The ghost story featuring ice pop sticks that Sorawo mentions in her conversation with Kozakura is "Aisu no Mori" [Ice Cream Forest] which was told in Night 5 (2) of the ghost story Twitcast "Magabanasi." Likewise, her mention of a story where a kettle shows up while experiencing sleep paralysis is in reference to Miki Tori's *Ai no Sakaagari* (Chikuma Bunko, 1995) where it is depicted as an experience had by Yutaka Izubuchi. Furthermore, currently as of 2024, if you search for "金縛り やかん" [sleep paralysis, kettle] on Twitter (which now calls itself X), you can also find an experience report by the film writer Ningen Tabetabe Kaeru. The fact that there are at least two reports of sleep paralysis involving a kettle speaks to the depth of an "everyday"

phenomenon like sleep paralysis.

■File 29: The Fourth Kinds' Summer Holiday

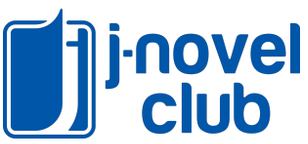
This chapter has no particular ghost story as its motif.

The name "chimera house" mentioned in the work comes from an American urban legend. This thirteen-story haunted house, packed with every kind of fear, demands payment on entry, and refunds a certain amount with each floor cleared. However, no one can clear every floor, and no challenger has ever returned from it.

It's an interesting story, where you can sense both the desire to kill off the challengers, and to make money in the process, but only the name itself is referenced in this work.

I know I always say this, but I would like to give my thanks to the people who reported the many other true ghost stories and net lore from which I have taken direct or indirect influence.

Thank you for your continued enjoyment and for being frightened. I hope this book can repay my gratitude in some small way.



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Otherside Picnic: Volume 9
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First published in Japan in 2024 by Hayakawa Publishing Corporation
The book is published by arrangement with Hayakawa Publishing Corporation
English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: March 2025