
4
Yushi Ukai
Illustration by
Nekometaru
●REC
PLAYING DEATH GAMES TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE
20:25:08:12

SCHOOLMATE

A Day in the Life of Yuki

16:45 | Wake up. Rush to get ready after having overslept somewhat.

17:30 | Arrive at night school. Struggle to follow the lessons.

21:30 | Leave school. Go on a meandering walk while heading home.

22:00 | Return home to find no new game invitation.

22:10 | Head to the park after changing into a tracksuit. Lightly exercise to renew instincts in preparation for the next game. Stop at a convenience store to buy dinner.

23:00 | Return home again. Eat dinner while fiercely battling a math textbook. Fail to comprehend the material.

0:00 | Give up at the stroke of midnight. Laze around while watching favorite sitcom on a streaming app.

2:30 | Savor time set aside for absolutely nothing. Stare off into space and reflect on past games.

3:30 | Make a trip to the convenience store after feeling hunger pangs. Stuff face with ice cream while walking home carrying a light meal in hand.

4:00 | The time of day when a night owl drifts in and out of drowsiness. Take a bath, despite thinking it to be counterproductive.

5:00 | Resist the pull of sleep. Make two round trips to the garbage collection site to throw out accumulated trash bags.

5:10 | Toss and turn in bed before



Yuki Sorimachi

ultimately falling asleep.



"...I can't just
turn a blind eye."



Yuki

Shortly after clearing Cloudy Beach, Yuki is informed of Garbage Prison, a game that took place around the same time in which over 90 percent of participating players lost their lives. She sets off on an investigation to learn the full truth, but where will it lead her?

CITY SCENARIO



CITY SCENARIO



Keito

A player from Yuki's tenth game, Scrap Building, who continues to find success in death games. Her sketchy, salesman-like aura is as prominent as ever. In the course of conducting her own investigation of Garbage Prison, she once again crosses paths with Yuki.

"...Ha-ha. So you came all this way with no clue, huh? You're a real **lucky** *gal, Yuki."*





“My name is Haine.”
“My name is Kokone.”

Haine

A pair of twin high school–age maids employed by Kirihara who have distinctively ramrod-straight postures.



"We are servants of this household."
"If you may, please inform us of the reason for your visit."

Kokone

They are deeply devoted to their employer and are highly conscientious in their duties.

CITY SCENARIO

HALLOWEEN NIGHT



Yuki

Yuki takes on her forty-fifth game, oblivious to the fact the homicidal maniac from Garbage Prison whom she was chasing is also participating. Something begins to

change with her right eye, which was injured in that fateful game long ago…

Shion

The girl who carried out the massacre in Garbage Prison. As a consequence of her actions, other players begin targeting her in the real world. She escapes her pursuers by joining a game, which forces her to confront the curse of the death-game industry—the Wall of Thirty.



"You're here for revenge, yeah? So what? You think killing is any different if it's for revenge? If it's in a game? If it's to settle a duel? If it's for someone else's sake? Like hell it is!"

HALLOWEEN NIGHT

Tamamo

A plump girl and novice player who projects an aura of naïveté. After being rescued by Yuki, she makes a request of her savior...



"Um... I'll *give* you...half my treats."

HALLOWEEN NIGHT

HALLOWEEN NIGHT

Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table

4

Yushi Ukai
Illustration by | Nekometaru

YEN ON
New York

Copyright

Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table, Vol. 4

Yushi Ukai

Translation by Kevin Yuan
Cover art by Nekometaru

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Even in a world of outcasts, there are those unable to fit in.


0. Cloudy Beach: Day 8

"—The game has ended."

Maguma's agent delivered the news.

Maguma was on board a rescue ship sent by the organizers on the eighth day of Cloudy Beach, her forty-third game. Since she had cleared the game without noticeable injury, she had been guided directly to a cabin. She had been asleep when the sound of approaching footsteps awakened her, and upon opening her eyes, she saw her agent sitting in front of her. Those four words formed the first sentence out of her agent's mouth.

"Yeah?" Maguma replied.

"Would you care to hear the outcome?"

"Lay it on me."

"Essay has met her maker," her agent said casually. "Apparently, she attacked Yuki but lost her life in the ensuing clash."

"Huh. And Yuki?"

"She survived. In fact, she boarded this vessel moments ago and does not appear to have suffered any major injuries. I imagine this news must come as a relief."

"…What's that supposed to mean?"

"Why, haven't you taken a liking to her, Maguma?"

"Don't put it like that…" Maguma pressed a hand to her forehead. "I just feel a sense of kinship between us 'cause we've run into each other a decent number of times and our playstyles are similar. That's all. I don't give a shit who survives. It's me, myself, and I—that's my motto."

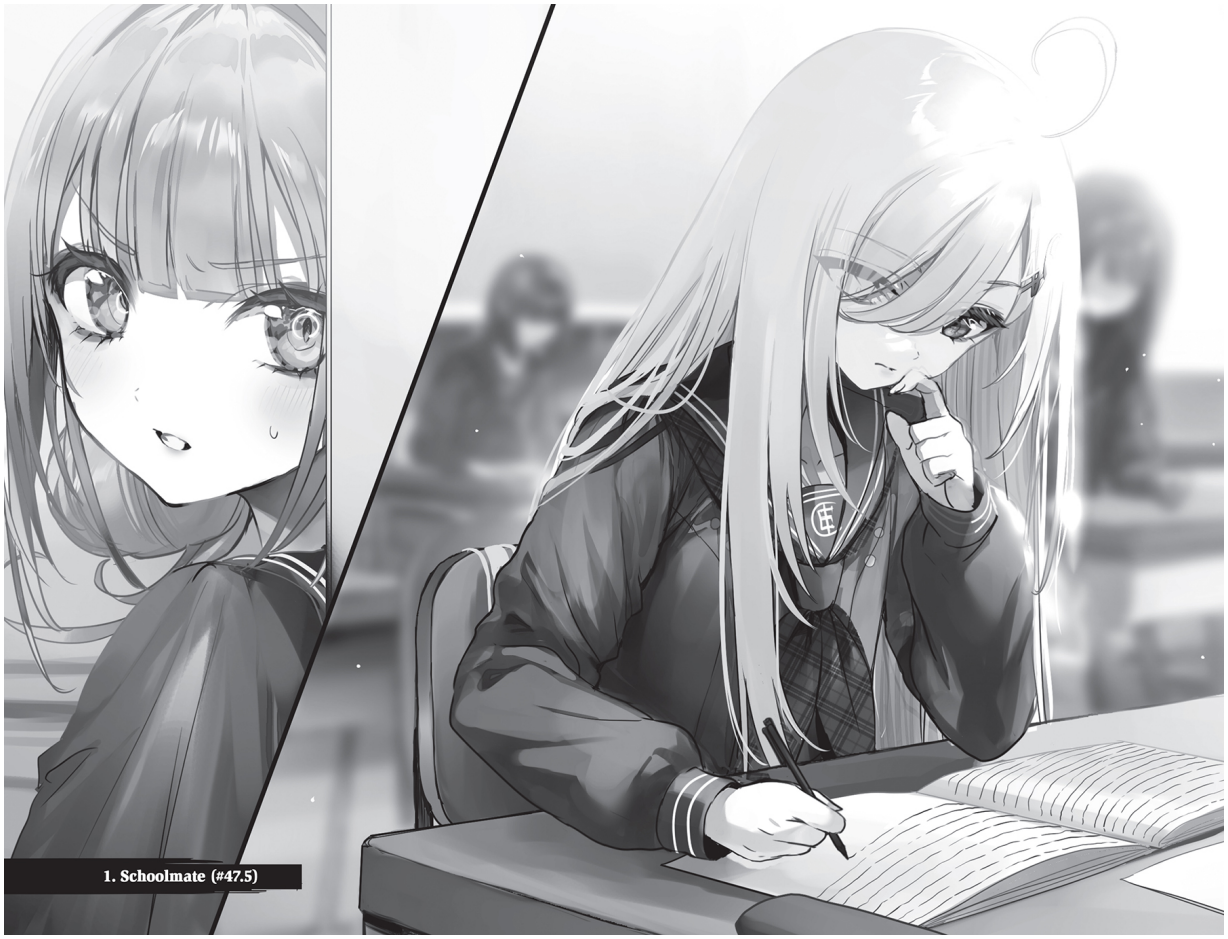
However, Maguma couldn't deny that, if she had to choose, she would have been rooting for Yuki to win against Essay. After all, Maguma had a strong distaste for the strategy Essay had adopted, which had come to light during the game.

"I see," her agent replied.

"Well, it's not like I wasn't worried for Yuki. But if she managed to survive, *that* must not've been a problem for her."

"?"

"Her right eye." Maguma tapped below her own eyeball. "Looked a little whiter compared to the last time we met, so it got me curious. She never brought it up, though, so I guess it's nothing serious."


1. Schoolmate (#47.5)

(0/18)

An all-black vehicle was driving on the dark, evening road.

"Thank you, as always," Yuki said from the passenger seat.

Being both carless and a stranger to using taxis, Yuki had few opportunities to ride in a car. She would only find herself in one when being chauffeured by her agent to and from the venue of a game or the prosthetic craftsman's residence.

In this instance, a game had just concluded. After surviving Cloudy Beach, the game after that, and two subsequent games, Yuki now had a grand total of forty-seven victories to her name. As she had cleared her most recent game without injury, she was being taken straight home rather than to the hospital. During the ride, Yuki had delivered those words of gratitude to her agent in the driver's seat.

"…Where did that come from?" her agent asked with a puzzled expression.

"I mean, I was just thinking about how thankful I am," Yuki replied. "No one can go about life all by themselves. Like, even a brilliant businessperson might find themselves utterly useless after changing companies. Sure, a lot depends on a person's capabilities, but their environment and surroundings are no less important. I haven't made it this far on my own; it's only been possible with your help. I wouldn't be who I am today without you as my agent. I really am grateful."

Yuki ran out of breath and stopped there. She sat waiting for a reply, but contrary to her expectations, a lengthy silence filled the air. It did not seem as if her agent was simply processing her words and preparing an appropriate response. Her agent's stone-faced expression offered no clues as to what she was thinking. Yuki even

wondered if the woman was ignoring her, but soon enough—

"I am happy to hear that," her agent responded. "However, receiving thanks from out of nowhere naturally makes me suspect an ulterior motive."

"…You can tell?"

"Of course." Her agent shrugged. "Is there something you find difficult to bring up?"

"I've run into a bit of a problem…"

"Oh?"

"Someone's been watching me at school lately."

Her agent tilted her head, as if the meaning of the word *school* confused her. Moments later, however, her expression transformed into one of understanding.

"Yes, you did inform me that you have been attending school."

"Mm-hmm, in the evenings."

Shortly after Yuki became a death-game player—to be precise, after the end of Candle Woods—she had started attending night school, as she believed acquiring a bare minimum education was necessary to succeed as a player. For someone who barely had the academic ability of a preschooler, she'd had a rough go of it at first, but she'd managed to push through and overcome those difficulties and had now been taking classes for over a year.

Her agent asked, "Do you mean that someone is *monitoring* you?"

"Yeah, but that's not all. They've even searched my bag and desk a couple of times. I think one of my classmates is trying to pry into my background…"

"Have you done something to draw suspicion?"

"Not really, but I *do* wear two hats as a student and a player. I have to miss school whenever I'm in a game… I can't get health checkups because of the Preservation Treatment… And while my major game injuries get fully healed, that doesn't apply to cuts and scratches, so I'm always showing up at school with scars on my body."

Yuki stuck out her left hand. Of the five fingers in front of her, the middle, ring, and pinkie fingers were prosthetics she had received

around half a year ago.

"I've been trying to hide my prosthetics at school as much as possible, too, but it comes across as unnatural."

"So even acting normally is enough to make you seem suspicious?"

"Yep."

"Do you have an idea as to who is responsible?"

"No clue. I've tried to track them down myself, but they're as sly as a fox…"

"You mentioned that they searched your bag and desk, yes? Is there any possibility they could have discovered something related to the games?"

"No, not a chance. I make it a point to never bring anything incriminating to school."

Players were bound by a strict duty of confidentiality and were prohibited from disclosing the existence of the games to ordinary civilians, with the exception of those in related industries like prosthetic craftsmen. As such, Yuki endeavored to act like an ordinary student while at school. Not once had she discussed her profession, not once had she left school by jumping out a window when the stairways were crowded, and not once had she practiced the most efficient ways of wielding a pen as a weapon while bored in class.

"That's why it's fine if they only monitor me at school, but…"

"…It will be an issue if their snooping extends *outside* of school," her agent said, inferring the rest of Yuki's sentence.

"…By the way, what would happen if a normal person found out about the games?"

"We would need to take immediate action to *make them forget* before rumors could spread."

"Killing them is the only way, huh…?"

Naturally, that was how Yuki interpreted "make them forget," but to her surprise—

"…? No, there's no need to go that far. We would simply, and quite literally, make them forget." Her agent took one hand off the steering wheel and tapped the side of her head. "We have the

technology to erase memories."

The revelation took Yuki aback. The game organizers had plenty of unfathomable technologies at their disposal, including the Preservation Treatment and other advanced medical support procedures, but she never would have thought them capable of manipulating memories, too.

Even in the worst-case scenario, no innocent civilian would need to lose their life. Yuki felt somewhat relieved, but as if driving a stake into that relief, her agent continued—

"However, that does not mean it's acceptable for word to get out. Should it come to that, you'll have to abandon your schooling to prevent another such occurrence from ever happening again."

"…Figures."

The organizers' biggest fear was that the games would be exposed to the public. They were certainly not so naive as to allow Yuki to continue her student life while cognizant of that risk.

Yuki couldn't afford to let information slip about the games. She needed to identify and put a stop to her stalker as soon as possible.

"I have to do something…," Yuki muttered.

"Would you like my assistance?" her agent offered.

"Yes, please."

(1/18)

Yuki Sorimachi was a death-game player.

Under the player name of Yuki, which was derived from her real name but spelled with different characters, she repeatedly put her life on the line in deadly competitions. Her in-game feats—escaping from a bomb-filled room within a designated time limit, fleeing from an armed serial killer for a specific duration of time, and killing other players to secure her survival, among others—were all broadcast to an audience, and as compensation, she received comparatively paltry sums of prize money. That was how Yuki made a living. To be perfectly clear, she belonged to the underworld, which made her someone undeserving of praise.

Of course, Yuki kept her identity hidden at school. She was prohibited from speaking about the games to ordinary civilians, but regardless of these stipulations, Yuki had no interest in talking about herself anyway. Her classmates would occasionally inquire about her background, but she always deftly sidestepped their questions.

However, no matter how hard she endeavored to hide her identity, some things were impossible to conceal.

And some people would notice things they had no business noticing.

(2/18)

The night course of one particular high school offered students meals during break time between second and third periods, and around 70 percent of students took advantage of that perk.

Inside the cafeteria, whose windows peered out at the dark scenery outside, students sat in front of trays containing balanced meals of miso soup and three side dishes. Some wolfed down the food as fast as they could, while others slowly ate while chatting with friends.

Among them was a group of female students. One of those girls, Hitomi Honezuka, sat with her gaze fixed at the table. She was staring not at her tray of food, but rather at the cell phone lying next to it. After catching up on all her social media feeds, she looked at the two girls sitting across from her.

"—What do you think of *that girl*?" Hitomi asked.

The other two paused in the middle of scooping food into their mouths.

The girls, identical twins, shared the same hairstyle, clothing, accessories, carefree appearances, and even eating speed. To an outside observer, it would appear as if two copies of the exact same person were sitting side by side, but as someone who had been acquainted with the twins for quite some time, Hitomi could tell that on the left sat Hiyori Amano, while on the right was Kazami Amano.

"Who do you mean—" "—by 'that girl'?"

The first half of the sentence came from Hiyori, and the latter half came from Kazami. The two would typically speak in turn, as if they shared a single brain.

"There's only one person in our class I'd be referring to—Yuki Sorimachi, duh."

Although it would be dubious if everyone in their class had that common understanding, the twins reacted with expressions of realization.

Hitomi scanned the cafeteria. After confirming *that girl* was nowhere to be seen, she asked the twins, "Who do you think she is?"

"Hmm… I dunno. Maybe the girlfriend of a gangster? There's something intimidating about her. Actually, she could be a gangster herself."

"Or a phantom thief. She's drop-dead gorgeous, isn't she?"

The twins gave utterly moronic responses. Although that was to be expected from them, other students in their class would likely have given similar answers. In fact, Hitomi herself could only come up with theories on the girl's background that seemed straight out of a fairy tale, such as Yuki being a mercenary who had returned from a war-torn region, or a death god who had been reincarnated in modern times.

That just went to show how enigmatic Yuki Sorimachi was.

The mystery of that girl had started a little over a year ago, when Hitomi and the Amano twins had been first-year students. Yuki Sorimachi had transferred to their school, and no sooner had the girl had finished writing her name on the blackboard and introducing herself than Hitomi was convinced she was an indecent person. The girl resembled a phantom, but that was not the only reason—she also had the aura of someone who existed beyond the boundary that separated ordinary people from unordinary people.

One got this impression from both Yuki's aura and actions.

First of all, the girl made no effort to connect with anyone in class. She would respond when spoken to but never struck up a conversation of her own accord. On top of that, she would always clam up when asked about her age, occupation, or reason for

attending night school.

Second, she was absent around two or three times a month. Since night schools brought together students with all sorts of special circumstances, absences were far from a rarity, but it was bizarre how *regularly* Yuki took off from school. Sometimes, she would return after a day away, while other times, she would be out for several consecutive days. Just last month, she had been absent for more than an entire week. What had she been up to all that time?

And third, she would often return from her absences with some sort of injury. She almost always showed up to class with bandages plastered all over her face, arms, and legs. Where did those wounds come from? Every last facet of the girl intrigued Hitomi.

"Hitomi, what's your take?" Kazami asked.

"Beats me," Hitomi replied. "Which is why I recently started looking into her."

"How so?"

"Following her around at school. Looking through her bag when she's out of her seat. Subtly asking our teachers about her. I've done pretty much everything I can think of."

"…You've gone that far?" "Why?"

Both Hiyori and Kazami looked put off—a perfectly natural reaction. If the twins hadn't been her trusted friends, Hitomi never would have brought this up with them.

"I'm just curious," Hitomi explained. "Aren't you, too?"

"I guess…" "What did you find?"

"I wouldn't be asking you stuff if I had learned anything. Yuki didn't have any spy tools in her bag, and she hasn't been shooting up in the bathroom during breaks. The teachers are totally out of the loop, too. She hasn't brought anything connected to her identity to school."

"Huh…"

"That's why I'm thinking of taking my little investigation outside." Hitomi took a sip of her milk carton through a straw. "I'm planning to tail her after class today. No matter how slick she thinks she's being, there's no way she can fully hide her identity in the outside

world.”

“……”

The twins looked increasingly put off.

“…But isn’t that—” “—illegal?”

“Does it look like I care?”

Hitomi hadn’t looked into the specifics, but to the best of her knowledge, anyone not operating a detective business would run afoul of the law by following someone. Even though Hitomi was a minor, she would be in serious trouble if she was caught.

Still, she couldn’t care less about the legal ramifications. She had already strayed into a gray zone with what she’d done at school. In for a penny, in for a pound. Hitomi intended to go as far as she could.

She couldn’t exactly put her finger on the reason, but she felt as though it was her mission to uncover Yuki’s identity—an urge that could only be described as *an uncontrollable itch.*

(3/18)

Class was dismissed for the night.

Yuki Sorimachi swiftly gathered her things, got out of her seat, and left the classroom. Naturally, a friendless girl like her never lingered to chat.

Hitomi had to act fast. She dashed out of the classroom—not to follow Yuki, but to head to the bathroom in order to don a disguise before engaging in pursuit. After pulling out her everyday clothes from her bag, Hitomi dressed herself at a speed that would impress even quick-change magicians. She put on a face mask and hat to hide her identity, left the bathroom, and chased after Yuki. By the time Hitomi caught up to her target, the girl was changing into her loafers at the shoe lockers by the school entrance. Yuki then left the building and began walking along the main road. Hitomi followed after her.

Hitomi’s objective was to tail Yuki outside of school. Although they were on a main road, there were hardly any pedestrians out

since it was nighttime. Still, the risk of being detected here was far higher than at school. Hitomi had changed into a disguise to mitigate that risk, and she took ample precautions while in pursuit. Suppressing the sound of her breathing and footsteps as much as possible, and keeping far enough away that she even risked losing sight of her target, Hitomi fixed her gaze on Yuki.

Yet even with those precautions—

Yuki shuddered.

Before the girl could look back, Hitomi leaped into the shadows.

Hitomi placed her hand over her heart, which had suddenly started pounding at nearly twice its normal speed. Her sweat-covered face teamed up with the chilly night air to drain the warmth from her body.

How could she tell? Hitomi wondered. It was the same as when she had been monitoring Yuki at school: The girl would always instantly sense Hitomi's gaze, forcing Hitomi to take cover. Considering the sizable distance that currently separated the two of them, Hitomi was baffled that Yuki had detected her presence. This occurrence served as ultimate proof that Yuki Sorimachi was no ordinary individual.

Faint footsteps, likely belonging to Yuki, echoed through the air. Hitomi readied herself for the possibility that Yuki was heading in her direction, but fortunately, the sound grew fainter and fainter. Had Yuki simply chalked up Hitomi's gaze to her imagination, or had she been unable to pinpoint where her stalker was hiding? Regardless, Hitomi breathed a sigh of relief.

Nevertheless, the fact that Yuki had looked back clearly indicated she suspected someone was following her. Thus, if she really had something she didn't want getting out, she would take care to avoid doing anything on her way home that could expose her secrets.

What, then, was Hitomi to do? Try again another day?

Hitomi took out her phone to check the time—nine forty-five PM—before immediately putting it away.

(4/18)

After confirming nobody was behind her, Yuki faced forward again and continued walking down the main road.

Nobody was there, but she was certain she had sensed a gaze directly behind her, albeit at a fair distance away. Whoever had been watching her was almost certainly somewhere on this road. They must have concealed themselves the moment she'd turned to look back.

Yuki attempted to scan for signs of someone behind her. She was still being watched—or at least, that was what she thought—but she wasn't entirely sure, as the person's presence had somewhat faded. It was possible her stalker had called it a day. It was also possible they had grown more cautious and were continuing their pursuit.

It's finally come to this, Yuki thought. The classmate who had been watching her was doubling down on their surveillance efforts. Yuki had been concealing her identity at school, but that wasn't doable outside. She couldn't let anyone witness her meeting with her agent and getting picked up to go to a game, and it would be a huge problem if she revealed her address to her stalker. Whoever her stalker was, they had been brazen enough to look through her bag and desk, so there was a good chance they wouldn't hesitate to search Yuki's apartment when she was away. And there were plenty of things in her apartment that could expose the existence of the games: the outfits stored in her closet, the notebook she used to keep records of her games, the bankbook indicating she had an unfathomable amount of savings for a student, and so on. If the stalker got their hands on any of these, it would be game over, and Yuki would have to bid farewell to her life as a student.

Yuki desperately wanted to catch her stalker before that happened. But if that was possible, she would have done it a long time ago. Her pursuer was skilled in the art of trailing, something that Yuki had realized when she was being monitored at school. Yuki had not taken the situation lying down and had made efforts to identify the stalker, but not once did they slip up. As a death-game player, Yuki had been tailed by many before, but this person's skills were a cut above the rest. They were no amateur. Part of her was perplexed as to why such an expert snooper was at her school.

Her stalker's skills were no less sharp on this day. Since they had maintained a considerable distance, it would be difficult for Yuki to run up to them and catch them in the act. Entering an alleyway would probably force them to close the gap somewhat, but even then, they would be unlikely to come within striking distance of Yuki.

And so Yuki concluded she would be unable to apprehend her stalker on her own. She pulled out her cell phone and messaged her agent.

"Sorry for contacting you so late.

"I'm being followed by the person I mentioned before. Can you come to my location?"

Yuki thought it was quite the outrageous request, but to her surprise, she got a reply in mere seconds.

"Very well. I'll be there within an hour."

(5/18)

In the end, Hitomi went back to pursuing Yuki. Giving up after her target had just once shown suspicion of being followed would be the cowardly thing to do. Forging on was the right move. Since Yuki Sorimachi would have her guard up from here on out, there was little chance she would slip up and expose her secrets, but at the very least, she would have to return home sooner or later. At a minimum, Hitomi wanted to nail down the girl's address before the night was over.

Unfortunately, Yuki seemed to have seen through Hitomi's plan. The girl stepped into an alleyway off the main road and began to wander around the area. Sometimes, she would stop in the middle of an intersection, and other times, she would repeatedly walk down the same path. Her behavior clearly indicated a reluctance to head home. She had to be trying to slip away from her pursuer. Hitomi had prepared herself for a drawn-out operation, so without the least bit of panic, she continued to patiently follow Yuki.

Hitomi checked the time on her phone. It was nearly eleven PM. Over an hour had passed since the start of her pursuit. Yuki had

scanned her surroundings several times, but on every occasion, Hitomi managed to skillfully conceal herself. Although Hitomi had yet to acquire a single clue as to Yuki's identity, she succeeded in keeping a reasonable distance from her target, without once being spotted or losing sight of the girl.

Hitomi had previously followed Yuki multiple times at school, but none of those missions had ever lasted so long. She was shocked at her own unyielding persistence. *Have I always had a knack for this?* she wondered.

Hitomi brought a hand to her chest. Earlier, her heart rate had nearly doubled, but now it was back to normal.

She was *calm*, despite being engaged in the illegal act of tailing another person.

Thinking back on it, Hitomi had experienced the same feeling multiple times lately—while monitoring Yuki from behind in class and while searching Yuki's desk when switching classrooms, for instance. Ordinarily, those would be nerve-racking situations, but for some reason, Hitomi would always feel oddly at ease. Why was that? Was this what they called being "locked in"? If so, then why would she be in that state of mind while in the middle of stalking a classmate?

Do I actually have the skills to be a detective? As soon as that thought crossed Hitomi's mind—

"—Hello?"

A voice called out to her from behind.

Hitomi spun around. A woman in a black suit stood directly behind her.

The sight flustered Hitomi. She had been so focused on following Yuki that she hadn't sensed the woman's presence.

"Wh-who are you?" Hitomi reflexively asked.

"I…" The woman paused for a second to think. "I'm a friend, I suppose. Of the person you are following."

That's an utter lie, Hitomi immediately thought. There was no chance someone wearing a suit that imposing would be merely "a friend." Nevertheless, Hitomi figured the woman was almost certainly connected to Yuki in some way.

The woman continued, "Judging by your stature, I take it you are

indeed one of Yuki's classmates."

She looked Hitomi up and down. Hitomi was wearing a face mask and hat as part of her disguise, but she couldn't hide her physique. One look was all it took for the woman to conclude Hitomi was a school-age girl.

"I am unaware of your motives, but regardless, let me get a good look at your face." The woman extended her arm toward Hitomi.

Shit, Hitomi thought. The woman emanated the same aura as Yuki Sorimachi—that of someone who belonged to a different world entirely. She, too, existed beyond the boundary that separated ordinary people from unordinary people.

What's going to happen to me? Hitomi thought back to what the Amano twins had said in the cafeteria. *If Yuki Sorimachi really is a gangster's girlfriend or a phantom thief… What would happen to someone who tried to uncover her identity? What's she gonna do to me?*

Hitomi stood there, frozen in fear. Her mind went blank.

A strange sensation came over her, as if the world had flipped upside down—

—yet for some reason, her heart remained calm.

Hitomi grabbed the woman's outstretched arm. She wrapped her free hand around the woman's dress shirt, necktie and all, pulling the woman in while rotating her own body. Hitomi lowered her center of gravity and thrust her arms forward, lifting the woman into the air.

She was performing a judo shoulder throw.

Wham!

Unable to adopt a defensive posture, the woman slammed against the asphalt and crumpled to the ground the moment Hitomi released her grip. She lost consciousness immediately.

Hitomi panicked at the sight of the upside-down woman.

Wha—what did I just do? Did I just throw her? I totally did. I still feel it in my hands, and how else would she be unconscious right

now? I definitely threw her. My body moved on its own. *I've never done judo or read a single martial arts manga, but somehow, I was pulling off a shoulder throw before my mind could even register it. How is that possible? Since when was I a martial artist?*

The sound of footsteps snapped Hitomi back to her senses.

Hitomi intuited they belonged to Yuki. The girl was coming closer. Hitomi dragged the woman to the side of the road before rushing away from the scene.

(6/18)

Wham!

Yuki turned around.

Behind her was a fork in the road. The noise had come from beyond it. Yuki broke into a dash and rounded the corner to see—

—a woman collapsed on the side of the road.

It was Yuki's agent.

Yuki ran up to the woman. She was unconscious. Her suit had drag marks on it, which suggested she had been brought over after collapsing in the middle of the road. That noise from earlier must have come from her agent making contact with the asphalt.

Yuki reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone. Her messaging app was already showing a single message from her agent: "I have located your pursuer."

That meant her agent had approached the stalker and attempted to uncover their identity, only to be met with a counterattack.

The situation had become clear. Since Yuki's agent was unconscious, she could have suffered a blow to the head, so time was of the essence. Yuki opened up a different app to hail an ambulance when suddenly—

A hand wrapped itself around her wrist.

"Wah!" Yuki shouted.

Her agent had regained consciousness.

"G-good morning," Yuki said, despite it being the middle of the night.

After a brief moment of silence, her agent replied, "…Good evening."

"Are you okay?"

"For now, at least…" Her agent was clutching her head, a sign that she was still in pain. Without changing her posture, she asked, "Were you thinking of calling an ambulance?"

"Well, yeah…"

"That cannot do. Legally speaking, we agents do not exist. Seeing a doctor is out of the question."

Really? Yuki wondered. Apparently, the organization needed to keep even details of an agent's death or injury out of the public eye. Yuki put away her phone.

"I apologize, Yuki. Your pursuer overpowered me."

"Seems like it, yeah…"

Yuki looked around the vicinity, but there were no other signs of life. Her stalker must have long fled the scene.

"But you did run into them, right? What did they look like?"

"Yes, well… They were wearing a mask and a hat, so I was unable to catch a glimpse of their face. However, judging by their stature, I believe they are most likely a girl…"

"Well, that narrows it down by half."

Yuki intended that remark to be a joke, but her agent didn't show a hint of amusement.

"I am ashamed of myself," the woman said in a quiet voice. "I do not wish to make excuses… But she was quite skilled and threw me with great ease. Would there happen to be a judo expert among your classmates?"

"Not that I know of…"

So her agent had not been kicked or beaten, but rather had been thrown to the ground. One couldn't pull off that sort of technique without rigorous training, especially against an agent of the games. Yuki had no idea how strong her agent was, but since she did help facilitate death games, she had to be quite capable. Only a professional could have made a woman like her hit the pavement with such ease.

Along those same lines, whoever her pursuer was, she had to be

an expert in the art of stalking. Now Yuki was even more intrigued as to her identity.

Her agent pressed a hand to her chin. She appeared to be adopting a thinking pose, but since her palm had been scratched, she winced with an "Ow…"

"You…can't go back like that, right?" Yuki said. "Please, stay the night at my apartment."

"I cannot bear to intrude." Her agent shook her head.

"Don't worry about it. I just so happened to buy a guest mattress the other day…"

(7/18)

Shortly afterward, Yuki returned home to a run-down apartment that was perfect for a phantom. She stepped into the complex, bringing along the woman in the suit. Then she stopped by the mailboxes at the entrance and peeked inside the mail slot assigned to Apartment 107.

From the shadows, Hitomi carefully watched the scene play out.

(8/18)

After the two vanished into the apartment, a nearby shadow began to move.

It was Hitomi.

She had continued her pursuit with the utmost calmness, but now her heart was fluttering. *I did it. I really did it. I outsmarted her. I figured out where she lives without her noticing.*

After knocking out the woman in the suit, Hitomi had fled the scene. However, she had not abandoned her operation. She had merely pretended to leave and secretly followed after them, as she had deduced Yuki would return home to administer first aid to the woman, who seemed to be an attendant of sorts. And Hitomi's

prediction was right on the money. Yuki Sorimachi had let down her guard and failed to sense Hitomi's presence. The girl had led Hitomi straight to her apartment.

Learning Yuki's address was huge progress. It was far different from searching the girl's bag and desk. There was no question Yuki's apartment would hold secrets she didn't want getting out. Hitomi would have the ammunition needed to strip Yuki of her facade—

All of a sudden, Hitomi trembled at her own train of thought.

In no time flat, she had cooked up a scheme to infiltrate someone's residence. That was crazy. That was crossing the line. While stalking and searching through another person's possessions were illegal, sneaking into someone's home was on a completely different level, one that could land her in deep trouble with the police. Besides, hadn't she learned her lesson from earlier? What would happen to Hitomi if she was unmasked as Yuki's stalker classmate? She wouldn't be let off easy, that was for damn sure. In fact, she could come up against something far more frightening than being punished by the law. Sneaking into Yuki's apartment while being aware of that risk would be akin to a moth flying into a flame. It was abundantly clear that calling it quits here would be the wise decision.

But despite that—why was a part of Hitomi balking at the idea of giving up?

(9/18)

Hitomi went home. Since her place was a great distance from Yuki's apartment, it was past midnight when she got back. Although the weather was beyond chilly, Hitomi's whole body felt flushed. Even after she unlocked the entrance to her residential complex, walked up the staircase, reached her apartment, opened the door, entered her room, and turned on the lights, the fire inside her refused to settle down.

Hitomi lived in a studio apartment. Unlike Yuki's run-down building, Hitomi's place was neat and tidy and decorated with high-

quality furniture. If she showed a photo of her apartment to random people on the street, ten out of ten would peg her as the daughter of a rather affluent family.

As a matter of fact, Hitomi *was* the daughter of an affluent family.

Her parents were wealthy, but they had kicked Hitomi out and instructed her to live on her own after she'd had a long streak of fooling around and playing hooky. The years had flown by since her parents had broken off contact, and at present, Hitomi could only vaguely recall what they even looked like. They had given her a large sum of money, so she had no struggles living on her own at first, but she couldn't keep living this lavishly forever. She had enrolled in night school to at least earn a high school diploma. That was the kind of girl she was: a good-for-nothing dumbass who was too ashamed to share her upbringing.

So how did that square with her exploits this past night? And it wasn't just that night; something had been *off* about her lately. Ever since she first started chasing that phantom girl, Hitomi felt like she had been possessed by an alien presence, like she was slowly transforming into a different being.

Hitomi decided to lie down on her bed. She tried to calm herself but to no avail. When she'd been tailing Yuki, it was like she was dreaming. Now she couldn't help but fall into a state of utter anxiety.

It took little time for her negative emotions to orient themselves toward Yuki Sorimachi.

If I can just expose her identity… As long as I achieve that, this anxiety will run its course.

That thought fired up Hitomi's spirit.

Tomorrow.

I'll sneak into her apartment tomorrow.

(10/18)

Hitomi skipped school the following day.

When the sun had completely set, around the time when they would be having a break between first and second periods at night

school, Hitomi got into gear. First, she contacted the Amano twins, who were probably in the middle of eating their school-provided meals, and confirmed that Yuki Sorimachi had shown up to class today—and had therefore left her residence unoccupied. Like the previous night, Hitomi donned a hat and a face mask before heading for Yuki's apartment.

Naturally, Yuki's building was in the same place it had been yesterday. Hitomi knew Yuki lived in Apartment 107, since the girl had peeked inside the mailbox bearing that number the previous night. Hitomi entered the complex and scouted out the location of Yuki's apartment. Unsurprisingly, the door was locked, so she went around back to the window of Apartment 107.

Next, she pulled out a screwdriver from her bag and thrust it into the gap between the windowpane and the frame. She repeatedly struck the same spot, forming a crack in the glass. She then moved to attacking a different spot, which made the crack grow larger. When it was of a sufficient size, Hitomi pried off the glass with her hands and reached into the room, unlocking the window from inside and opening it.

Last night, she had researched how to break a window. The method she had used was said to be the most efficient and silent. Hitomi had made some noise during the process on account of her clumsiness, but none of the other residents had likely heard, and even if they had, they wouldn't imagine it to be the sound of a window being broken. Even if someone had called the police, it would take several minutes for them to arrive at the scene. That was more than enough time to search Yuki's apartment.

The moment the window broke, Hitomi genuinely felt no misgivings whatsoever, despite the fact that she had become a full-fledged criminal, guilty of property damage along with breaking and entering. It was the same as when she had been devising her plan during the night and when she had gone to procure the necessary tools earlier that day. Although it was her first time committing such an act, she felt not the least bit nervous. Her heart was as calm as if she had been listening to her favorite music, just like when she had been tailing Yuki the previous night.

Do I have the skills to be a burglar, too?

Hitomi entered the apartment. Light from the streetlamps outside streamed in through the broken window, casting a dim glow over the interior. The apartment was, like Hitomi's, a studio, but it was several magnitudes inferior to hers. That assessment was based not only on its decrepit appearance but also on the messy interior and the bare minimum furnishings. Yuki Sorimachi was a good-looking girl, but in sharp contrast to her otherworldly aura, her room had a notably lived-in feel. By all appearances, she lived a slovenly lifestyle.

However, a secret of that level was not satisfying enough. Hitomi was after something far more consequential. She quickly scanned the room to find the most likely hiding spot for such a thing.

Her gaze fell on the closet.

The closet was built into the wall of the apartment. Hitomi felt her intuition telling her that was it. As if pulled forward by a powerful magnet, she flew at the closet door and grabbed the handle before her mind could react, but before she could jerk it open—

"—That's enough."

(11/18)

A cold hand wrapped around Hitomi's wrist. It was like she had been touched by a phantom. The temperature of the skin immediately clued in Hitomi to the identity of the newcomer, yet she still turned in the direction of the outstretched arm.

Standing there was the phantom girl, Yuki Sorimachi.

"Wha—?!" Hitomi fell speechless for a second. "Why are you here?"

"I mean, I live here," she replied.

"Weren't you at school? There's no way you could've rushed here that fast…"

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but that was my *standin*," Yuki said. "I figured you'd try to sneak in here while I was away, so I had her attend class in my place… Did you ask your friends to check if I was at school? Seems like they didn't notice it was actually someone

else."

Right—this girl had an attendant. In which case, Hitomi should have considered the possibility the other woman might take her place. Why hadn't she thought of that? Why hadn't she instructed the Amano twins to make extra sure of the situation at school?

With her free hand, Yuki ripped off Hitomi's hat and mask.

"Hitomi Honezuka—is that your name?" Apparently, Yuki remembered her from school. "I sensed you following me all the way home yesterday. Since you managed to overpower *her*, I figured I would have to take care of you myself, so I intentionally lured you here… You've given me a lot of trouble, but you messed up in the end. But the fact that you missed school out of the blue essentially told me you were the one stalking me. You should've thought to get a double."

Hitomi was at a loss for words. The idea of pouncing while Yuki was away had dominated her mind and had prevented her from considering that the opportunity might be a setup. *Even if I did uncover her identity, what was I planning to do after that? You're such a moron*, Hitomi cursed at herself.

"Anyway…" Yuki strengthened her hold on Hitomi's wrist. "I only have one request: Back off."

Due to Yuki's tight grip, Hitomi could feel her own pulse.

"I won't ask why you're sticking your nose in my business. I don't care about you following me around, fishing around my desk, breaking my window, and sneaking into my apartment. I'm willing to let all that slide. But don't you dare go any further. If you refuse to lay off, I'll have to take matters into my own hands. And I will use *any means necessary*."

Any means necessary—what exactly did that mean? Hitomi felt no need to ask for specifics.

"Do yourself a favor and accept these terms."

Yuki's tone was neither oppressive nor docile. She had simply made a proposal. There was nothing to read between the lines. Hitomi understood that Yuki had no need to say anything more. The girl had the ability and confidence to eliminate Hitomi as easily as sweeping up dust off the ground.

That much was abundantly clear to Hitomi.

She felt like she had been extended a hand of salvation. *This is great. Now I can finally call it quits. I'll be free from whatever's been possessing me recently.*

Hitomi raised her head and locked eyes with Yuki Sorimachi. She had indeed resolved to express words of surrender.

—However… It was then that *it* came over her once again.

"Fine," Hitomi said. "I'm sorry for everything. I just let my curiosity about you get the better of me."

Hitomi let go of the handle. She took a few steps back, distancing herself from the closet.

"As long as you understand," Yuki said, loosening the grip of her right hand.

Hitomi seized the opening. She yanked back her hand before Yuki fully released her grip, pulling the girl forward by her arm. With her other hand, Hitomi grabbed Yuki's shoulder and thrust her even farther in the same direction, sending her falling exactly as she'd anticipated. To facilitate Yuki's fall, Hitomi pressed her elbow against the girl's back. Again, as Hitomi had predicted, Yuki lost her balance and tumbled onto the floor.

Hitomi had pushed Yuki aside. With the obstacle removed, she quickly strode ahead, reaching for the closet, when all of a sudden—

"Not on my watch!"

Yuki grabbed Hitomi's legs. She had stretched out her right arm and hooked it around Hitomi's ankle while lying on the ground. Resisting the girl's attempts to pull her back, Hitomi crouched down and tried to pry off Yuki's hand, but Yuki then used her left hand to thwart her.

Yuki's left hand.

When it touched Hitomi's hand, she realized that the texture of the girl's fingers was all wrong. She blurted out the first thing to come to mind—

"What happened to your fingers?"

A second after those words filled the air, Yuki became visibly shaken. Her expression was one of panic.

A second later, Yuki vanished into thin air.

Another second later, a sharp pain ran through Hitomi's left temple. She collapsed onto the ground, and as her world went sideways, she saw Yuki lowering her leg. The girl had moved to Hitomi's left flank and landed a kick. Hitomi tried to sit up, grimacing as her head throbbed from the scrape she had incurred, but Yuki was waiting to greet her with a straight right punch.

At that moment, Hitomi noticed Yuki had left her own right flank slightly vulnerable.

Hitomi countered Yuki's attack with a kick of her own. She landed a clean hit on Yuki's right side, completely neutralizing the girl's punch while also pushing her backward. With little space to spare in the cramped studio apartment, Yuki slammed against the wall at full force. Unlike the woman in the suit the previous night, she clung to consciousness and quickly looked back up. However, from the way she was clutching her side, anguish coloring her face, it was clear she was unable to immediately go back on the offensive.

Hitomi looked away from Yuki and walked toward the closet.

"…Why are you so persistent?!" Yuki yelled from behind.

Hitomi shouted from the pit of her stomach. "—That's what I wanna know!!"

She grabbed the handle and jerked it back, revealing the contents of Yuki's closet.

(12/18)

The closet was filled with an eclectic collection of outfits.

A maid uniform. A bunny-girl costume. A white dress. Gym clothes. A blazer from a school uniform. A swimsuit, a cheongsam, and a witch's hat and robe. At the far end, for some reason, hung a towel. Had Yuki left it there to dry after washing it?

Hitomi did not think these were cosplay costumes.

She knew they were game outfits.

In that moment, Hitomi fully understood who Yuki Sorimachi was.
In that moment, Hitomi fully remembered who she was herself.

(13/18)

It all came back to Hitomi.

Memories of her first game.

Out of all players, Hitomi thought she had the most frivolous reason for participating: A friend had invited her. After getting fired from her previous job, Hitomi was searching for a new place to work and joined a game without much thought. Although she was shocked to learn death games actually existed, after giving one a go, she found it surprisingly easy. Hitomi cleared the game without fuss and earned a cash prize that seemed unbelievably large to someone who had been barely scraping by until then.

Memories of when she had barreled down the path of a player.

Hitomi and her friend had talent. Whenever they took things seriously, they were invincible. The pair were also blessed with good fortune. They found someone early on who agreed to be their mentor and share their expertise. Hitomi and her friend racked up victory after victory and made a killing along the way. They watched plenty of players die, unable to mirror their success, which instilled in them the belief that talent and fortune were everything. Success came down to whether you were lucky enough to stumble upon deals that were almost too good to be true. Whenever Hitomi noticed children coming home from cram school alone late at night or office workers in raggedy suits, she would shoot them a glance and mentally give them kudos for their unyielding efforts.

Memories of a harrowing experience.

Her friend died. While that was not an unexpected possibility in the world of death games, at the time, Hitomi had been in utter disbelief. That was how frivolously she had been treating things. Apparently, her friend had lost in her thirtieth game. Hitomi learned a painful lesson about the Wall of Thirty, the mysterious phenomenon wherein players' odds of death spiked dramatically

around their thirtieth game.

Memories of when she quit being a player.

With her thirtieth game approaching, Hitomi determined that it would be impossible to surmount the Wall of Thirty. Only those who had resolved to continue down the path of a player till death were capable of overcoming the obstacle. A half-hearted player like her would face the consequences if she were to confront it head-on. That was why she decided to quit.

Upon her retirement, she asked her agent to tinker with her memories. She had a guilty conscience about living on while her friend had died, her attitude about money had gotten warped due to her substantial winnings, and after coming so far, she still felt a lingering attachment to the games, which were almost too good to be true. Unless she forgot about their existence, she believed she would continue playing and fall into ruin. She was convinced she needed to sever her connection to the games. She resolved to start anew and lead an earnest life.

At least, that was how it was supposed to go.

(14/18)

A hand latched onto Hitomi's shoulder.

She fell to the floor. The next thing she saw was a close-up of Yuki's face; the girl had knocked her off-balance. Lost in a trance, Hitomi could not muster any semblance of resistance. Yet even if she had been in a normal state of mind, she probably would not have resisted. There was no need for her to do so.

"—So," Hitomi said, "you're a player, huh?"

Yuki's eyes shot open. "You know about the games?"

"Yeah. I remembered everything just now."

Hitomi rubbed her left temple, which had started bleeding from Yuki's kick. The light streaming in from outside illuminated the blood on her palm.

The fluid had turned ever so slightly white.

Hitomi understood the reason: It was an effect of the

Preservation Treatment. Before participating in a death game, players were required to undergo a procedure that eliminated their body odor, prevented their bodies from rotting, and transformed any blood that left their veins into white fluff. In the time since Hitomi had turned her back on her life as a player, and her body replaced its cells, the effects of the Preservation Treatment had gradually faded, but evidently, some still remained.

"I was a player until a little while ago," Hitomi explained. "I almost reached thirty games… But I quit because I didn't think I could go any further without getting cocky."

Realization dawning on her face, Yuki muttered, "Oh, so you had your memories erased…" Evidently, the girl was aware the organizers had the ability to manipulate memories. "What a coincidence that we go to the same school."

"Seriously." Hitomi glanced at Yuki's left hand. "Did you lose a hand?"

"Sort of."

Yuki pulled the light cord to brighten the room and showed her left hand to Hitomi. Although it was difficult to perceive, as they were made to resemble normal body parts, three of the girl's fingers, from her middle finger to her pinkie, were artificial.

Yet the light also exposed another truth: Yuki's eyes, peering out from beneath her bangs, were *different colors*. The hue of her right eye was fainter than that of her left.

"…Your right eye…"

"Oh yeah…" Yuki brought her hand above the eye in question. "I forgot to wear my colored contact. That's how I hide it at school. I messed it up in a game long ago. It's not causing any major problems for now, at least…"

Hitomi glanced over at the closet. Numerous outfits were hanging inside. Although she couldn't tell the exact number, there were most likely more than thirty sets.

The girl also had injured her left hand and right eye.

Those two facts served as proof—proof that Yuki had confronted and overcome the Wall of Thirty, which Hitomi had been unable to face.

“You’re amazing,” Hitomi said in praise. “You have my respect. I can’t believe you’ve been able to keep playing even after all that.”

Yuki fell into an extended silence. Hitomi’s words appeared to have struck a chord in her.

While turning off the light, Yuki replied, “I think knowing when to call it quits is an admirable skill, too.”

(15/18)

After Hitomi left, Yuki tried stretching her back inside her room but quickly stopped after sensing pain in her right side where she had been kicked. While reflecting over how strong her opponent had been, Yuki called her agent.

The call connected after one ring.

“Yes?”

“It’s Yuki. I took care of the situation.”

“Is that so?”

Her agent sounded somewhat distant. While finding that to be a little odd, Yuki explained about the identity of her stalker: Hitomi Honezuka, a player who had previously had her memories erased by the organizers and was now living as an ordinary member of society.

“*I see*,” her agent replied. “*That explains how she was so skilled in martial arts.”*

Hitomi had used a shoulder throw to defeat Yuki’s agent in a single move and managed to evade Yuki’s detection with masterful tracking skills. The girl must have acquired those techniques during her time as a player. Though her memories had been erased, her muscle memory remained. Hitomi had said she’d nearly reached thirty games, which meant she had been an adept player when she was active in the industry.

“Um, there is one other thing,” Yuki said. “I’m not sure how to bring this up…”

“What is it?”

“She saw inside my closet and discovered my identity as a player. Will that affect my ability to keep going to class?”

"…Well, she is a former player. We will need to confirm the facts for ourselves, but I expect there won't be an issue. You are free to continue attending school."

"That's a relief. Will anything happen to Hitomi?"

"No, not really. She'll simply continue her life as a student with her regained memories. She may request that the organizers erase her memories once more, but that is not our concern.

"*However*," Yuki's agent continued, *"if at all possible, I would like for her to forget everything. Especially how she threw me onto the ground…"*

(16/18)

The day after the scuffle at Yuki's apartment, Hitomi went to school. During the break following first and second periods, she sat down at a cafeteria table with the Amano twins for mealtime.

"—I mean, glass cola bottles barely have anything in them, right?" The elder Amano twin, Kazami, was speaking. "It'd be a total rip-off if it's exactly the same drink as canned cola. That's why I'm positive cola in glass bottles is made to be tastier. Otherwise, why would anyone buy the glass bottle version?"

"No way," the younger twin, Hiyori, rebutted. "Then how do you explain the two-liter plastic bottles? They're all made in the same factory, so they're exactly the same. They only taste different because they're packaged in different ways."

Directly across from the twins sat Hitomi, silently picking at her meal while watching the argument play out.

"Hitomi…" "What do you think?"

The twins dragged her into the discussion.

"No clue," Hitomi replied. "But I *have* heard Mexican cola tastes amazing."

"Huh?" "Really?"

Shoot, why did I grab their attention? Hitomi was forced to explain how Mexican cola allegedly tastes better due to being made with pure cane sugar.

After the Amano twins resumed their argument about cola, Hitomi looked around the cafeteria. Yuki was nowhere to be seen. That was to be expected, as the girl did not get the school meal.

Yuki Sorimachi had been in class during first and second periods. She appeared to be conscious of Hitomi, but they did not exchange any words. Yuki likely considered everything that happened the previous day to be water under the bridge. Hitomi thought she should at least pay for the window repair but found it difficult to bring up. As long as Yuki did not broach the topic herself, Hitomi decided to pretend as if nothing had happened.

The mysterious sense of mission she had felt about exposing Yuki Sorimachi's identity must have resulted from her mind subconsciously realizing Yuki was a player. The world Hitomi had once turned her back on had pulled her back in. Evidently, she still felt a lingering attachment to it.

Hitomi had the option to embrace that attachment and return to being a player, but she had decided against that. Although she possessed the talent to be a player, she lacked the resolve to go through with it. Without resolve, she would not be able to follow the path of a player. The wiser decision would be to continue attending school and find a different, brighter path.

Hitomi also chose to retain her memories. If she had opted to have them wiped, she might go after Yuki yet again. Beyond that, however, she had matured enough to be able to confront her past.

After finishing her meal, Hitomi looked at the Amano twins. The two of them had switched to a different topic. Now they were discussing why people felt an intense desire to eat ice cream when sick with a cold.

"I'm glad to be around you two," Hitomi said.

"Where'd that come from?" "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Take it as a compliment."

(17/18)

Upon returning home that day, Hitomi suddenly remembered that

during her days as a player, she'd had a mentor by the name of Kirihara. Like Hitomi, Kirihara had also cleared close to thirty games, but she had retired after suffering a major injury and became a guide for new players. Hitomi hadn't seen her mentor since having her memories erased, but now that she had them back, she was curious as to how Kirihara was doing.

I should reach out, she thought.

There was no time like the present; Hitomi called her mentor despite it being the middle of the night. Although Kirihara was not in her contacts, Hitomi had memorized her mentor's home phone numbers.

Riiiing… Riiiing… After a few rings, the call connected.

"Yes, hello?"

The voice did not belong to Kirihara, but it was a familiar one to Hitomi, nonetheless.

"Hello," Hitomi said. "Um… Kokone?"

"…Yes, this is Kokone."

I knew it, Hitomi thought. *That reminds me, the Amano sisters weren't the first pair of twins I was acquainted with.*

"Might you be Hitomi?" Kokone asked. The girl only knew Hitomi from the games, so Hitomi assumed Kokone had just referred to her by her player name, which was pronounced the same as her legal name but spelled with different characters.

"Yeah," Hitomi replied.

Kokone responded, "It has been quite a while. Why are you calling this late at night? Wait a second… Did you not have your memories as a player erased?"

"Right, well, it's a long story…" Hitomi decided to spare Kokone the details. "Anyway, I felt a sudden urge to call. Can you put my mentor on the line?"

"……"

Kokone didn't respond. From the lack of noise and voices on other side, it did not seem as if she was calling Kirihara over, either. Hitomi wondered what was going on, but Kokone's next words pierced her mind like a bullet.

“Kirihara—Kanami Kirihara has passed away.”

Hitomi was completely bewildered.

“It happened last month. I’m afraid you are a little too late.”

“Wha…?” It took a few seconds for Hitomi to untangle her tongue. “How? I thought she retired as a player.”

“Yes.”

“So what happened?”

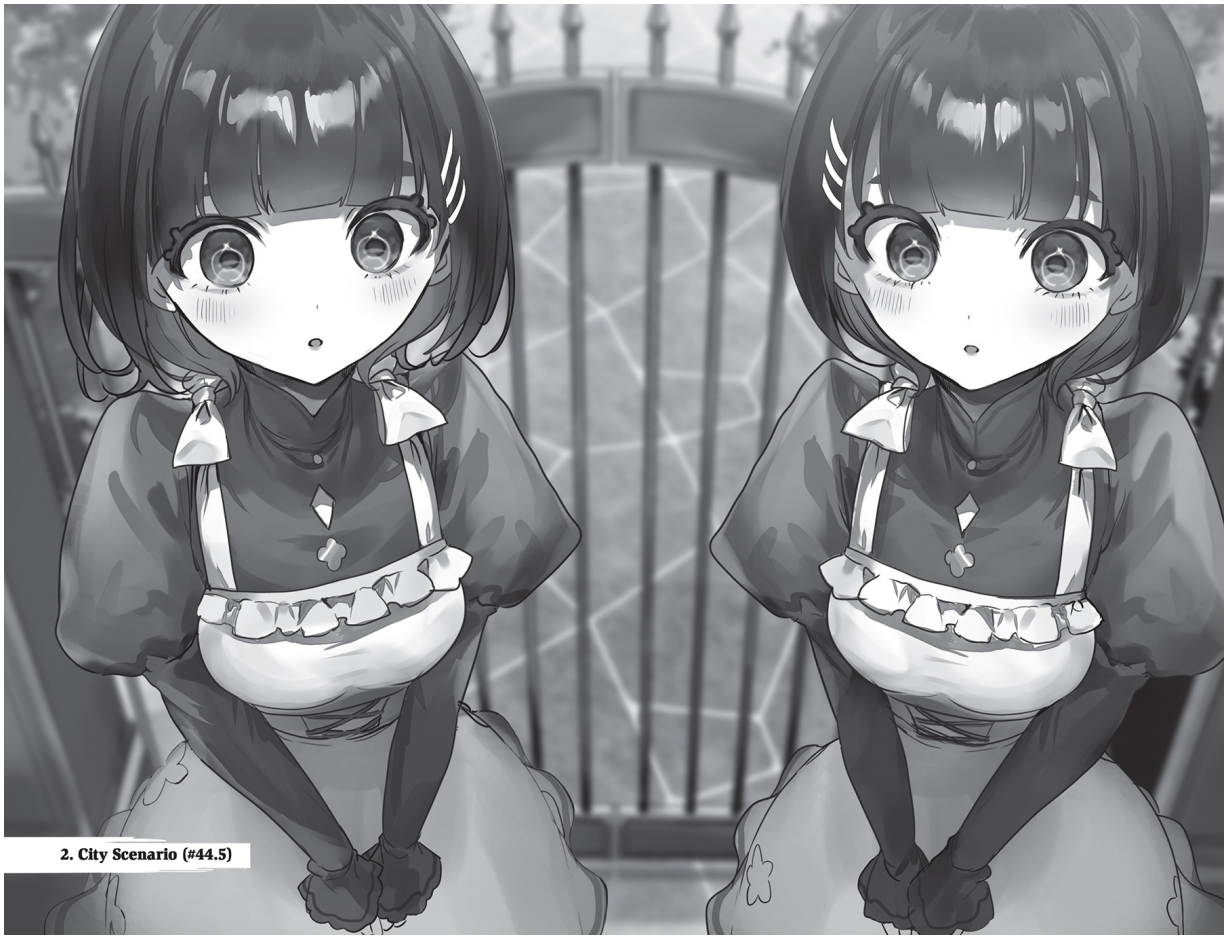
“She was *murdered*.”

Hitomi sensed a hint of rage and frustration in Kokone’s voice.

“Would you care to hear the details?”

Hitomi did not hesitate in her reply. “Yes, please.”

(18/18)



2. City Scenario (#44.5)

(0/22)

Yuki arrived home.

(1/22)

She had come back from school.

Her most recent game, Cloudy Beach, had lasted an entire week. Since Yuki had skipped an extra day of school to meet with her mentor, it was the first day in a while since she had gone to class, and to little surprise, the lessons went right over her head. She already had the sense she was falling behind in several of her classes, and she figured she would need to set aside a considerable amount of time for studying.

Unfortunately, academics were not her only problem. Lately, she had sensed someone watching her at school. One of her classmates was prying into her life. Yuki took great care to act like an ordinary student, but if those prying eyes followed her outside of school, problems would arise. Thinking she would soon need to take matters into her own hands, she stepped into her pitch-black room and pulled on the cord hanging from the ceiling.

The fluorescent light illuminated her tiny studio apartment.

It was a complete mess. The innumerable stains on the floor and walls made it feel thoroughly run-down. In direct proportion to the tiny dimensions of the room, there were few pieces of furniture. Yuki only owned one set of bedding, a refrigerator, and a small desk. Previously, many trash bags had been strewn across the floor, but now there were none, since Yuki had acquired the life skills to stay on top of garbage disposal day. Despite that, her living environment

had grown no less cluttered, as evidenced by the tracksuit lying on the floor, the textbooks she was too lazy to put away splayed across her desk, the insect repellent and disinfecting wipes stationed within arm's reach of her bedspread, and the various valuables stored underneath her desk to be readily accessible at any time.

Yuki had forgotten exactly how many years she had lived in this apartment. She could easily move to a better place thanks to the prize money she had saved up, but the fondness she felt for her current home kept her from leaving.

After plopping her schoolbag on her desk, Yuki took off the sailor-style uniform that, after a year of wearing, no longer embarrassed her, and changed into the tracksuit lying on the floor. Then she opened up the built-in wall closet of her apartment to hang up her uniform.

The closet was stuffed to the brim with various outfits.

Yuki kept a collection of costumes she had been required to wear in the games. Cloudy Beach had been her forty-fourth game, which meant she had worn forty-four different outfits. She had thrown away a few of them in her early days, so the outfits in the closet did not number forty-four exactly, but there were still over forty inside.

Naturally, included among them was her swimsuit from Cloudy Beach. The sight of it caused memories of the game and its aftermath to flash into her head. She had reunited with her mentor after a year and a half, then received an urgent call from her agent while on her way home—

"…I can't just turn a blind eye," Yuki said while putting away her uniform.

She would have to put off studying and dealing with the mysterious stares until later.

(2/22)

Cloudy Beach—set on a secluded island in the middle of the ocean, this game had presented Yuki with quite a challenge. During the climax, she had gone head-to-head against Essay, a player far

above her caliber, and somehow managed to survive. And so Yuki achieved her forty-fourth victory. She was nearing the halfway point of the goal she had inherited from her mentor: clearing ninety-nine games.

However, a certain incident had put a damper on her accomplishment. It had happened while Yuki had been fighting for her life in Cloudy Beach, and it was only after she met up with her mentor at a magic bar that she caught wind of the details.

"—Are you sure of that?" Yuki had asked, pressing her phone against her ear.

She was speaking with her agent. Yuki had previously given her agent her number, but it was rare for the woman to actually call. After picking up with great curiosity, Yuki felt as if a giant hammer had come swinging down at her.

"No," her agent responded. "As I mentioned, the details have yet to be corroborated. I only heard the news from another agent…who learned of the incident from a different agent. This is merely hearsay, and there is no factual evidence at present.

"However," her agent continued, "if the results were really that catastrophic, we should be concerned."

According to Yuki's agent, eighty players had participated in a game that had ended in disaster. Typically, games had a survival rate of around 70 percent, which meant fifty to sixty players should have survived. However, in actuality, only three players had come out alive. That could not be chalked up to mere happenstance—the result was a clear anomaly.

"What caused it? Was it simply an accident or…something else?"

Yuki was so flustered that she asked a pointless question.

"I don't know," her agent said, responding with the obvious answer. "I have only been informed of what has occurred… The designers may have made an error with the difficulty balance, or maybe the players were exceedingly incompetent. Or perhaps…"

"—One of the players was a homicidal maniac, like in Candle Woods," Yuki said, finishing her agent's sentence.

That would be the most frightening case. Candle Woods had essentially become a legendary game in the industry, because a

psychopath by the name of Kyara had gone berserk and killed over three hundred players. If this new rumor hinted at the second coming of that game—

"I will contact you if I receive any further information," her agent said before ending the call.

Yuki removed the cell phone from her ear and stared at the now-silent hunk of metal in a daze. The catastrophic game was on her mind. She hadn't received any more details. The rumors had yet to be confirmed. Still, Yuki's heart overflowed with worry. The mere possibility of such an incident occurring was enough to inspire fear. There was no guarantee that disaster would not strike twice. A similar incident might take place in her next game. For Yuki and her goal of clearing ninety-nine games—no—for *all* players, it was an unwelcome situation.

I have to do something, Yuki thought. *I have to get to the bottom of the catastrophe.*

(3/22)

"Still…"

Yuki opened her eyes. The ceiling of her familiar run-down apartment filled her vision.

Although she felt compelled to take action, that urge had led to nothing tangible. At the moment, all she was doing was twiddling her thumbs in her apartment. Yet that was not the result of laziness; she had no idea how to begin launching an investigation into that disastrous game. Upon reflection, Yuki realized she knew astonishingly little about her industry, beyond the fact that the games were held for entertainment. She had no knowledge of the audience demographics, the total clientele, the market size of the industry, the history of the organization running things, the number of games that took place annually, or the cumulative number of player deaths. Additionally, she lacked any means of obtaining information about games she had not participated in.

The only useful channel Yuki had—her only link to the organizers

—was her agent, but the woman hadn't contacted her since. That was to be expected, as Yuki had only learned of the incident the previous day, but she also didn't anticipate getting any news in the next several days. Despite working for the organizers, her agent had little authority. Her knowledge of the game in question likely differed little from Yuki's. Although Yuki meant no offense to her agent, she would consider it a lucky break if she received a follow-up call.

Next, Yuki considered the idea of taking advantage of her network of fellow players; she could go down the list of names she knew, searching for someone who had allegedly survived the catastrophic game, and ask them about it directly. If the principle of "six degrees of separation" held true, then such a search would not end up fruitless. Though it was a brilliant idea, there was one glaring issue—Yuki did not know the contact information of even a single player. While she had begun to make a name for herself in the industry as a forty-plus-game veteran, she had not maintained a friendship with any of her peers outside the games. Such was a consequence of her playstyle of not depending on others. Although it was theoretically possible for her to contact Koyomi and Hakushi, Yuki was reluctant to do so, as Koyomi had apparently retired from the industry, and she wasn't too keen on the idea of calling on her mentor for help.

There were dead ends everywhere she turned.

Just before the stroke of midnight, however, a ray of hope shone down on her seemingly bleak situation.

"…Right, I almost forgot about him," Yuki said while staring at her left hand.

The middle, ring, and pinkie fingers of her left hand were prosthetics. Yuki had needed to visit a prosthetic craftsman to replace her missing digits after sustaining irreversible damage in Golden Bath, her thirtieth game, which now brought back feelings of nostalgia.

She had never thought about it before, but the craftsman had to be awfully well-informed about the industry. His profession placed him in constant contact with many players. It was possible he had met a survivor of the catastrophe.

There was no time like the present to act. Yuki grabbed her cell phone and pulled up her call history to dial her agent—when she realized that it was currently the dead of night. Curbing her enthusiasm, she decided to send a message instead.

"Sorry for contacting you so late.

"I want to go visit the craftsman. Could you drive me there?"

A reply came right away. Yuki's phone vibrated in her hands before she could toss it onto her desk.

"Understood.

"When shall I pick you up?"

(4/22)

All players were assigned a dedicated agent. The workload of each agent varied by person; some only had detached relationships that went no further than inviting players to games and driving them to venues, while others maintained closer relationships.

Yuki's agent fell into the latter category, but Yuki still felt somewhat awkward about ordering her agent around like a chauffeur. Alas, she had no choice, for her destination was deep in a forest inaccessible by any means of public transportation. Yuki did not have a driver's license, and she could not rely on anyone else to bring her to the craftsman, as he was associated with the underworld. Calling her agent was the only solution available to her.

In any case, the agreed-upon day arrived, and Yuki's agent drove her to a mansion built deep inside a forest—the residence of the prosthetic craftsman. Owing to the remote location of his home, the craftsman left the entrance unlocked, and visitors were allowed to freely wander in. Yuki opened the door, walked down the hallway, and knocked on the door to the craftsman's workshop.

There was no response.

"……"

Yuki stepped into the workshop without saying a word.

The room looked exactly the same as it had during her last visit. Despite the countless items inside, everything was extraordinarily

organized; the room was the polar opposite of Yuki's apartment.

Nobody seemed to be present. Yet Yuki was convinced the craftsman had to be in the room. During her last visit, the diminutive craftsman had pretended to be absent and hidden himself in a small sack, before raising his voice out of nowhere to scare Yuki. Surely, he would try to pull off a similar surprise this time.

You're not going to fool me twice, Yuki thought. She opened her eyes wide and searched for signs of the craftsman. There were plenty of places where someone of his size could hide—not only in a sack, but also behind a shelf, inside a machine, beneath the floorboards, or in the ceiling. However, even if the man could conceal his body, there would still be clues as to his presence: his breathing, the rustling of his clothes, his body temperature, or his body odor, for instance. Yuki focused her senses so as to not overlook the slightest trace—

—when something clattered behind her.

Yuki turned around. In the same moment she realized the sound had come from a pencil falling off the desk, her left elbow hit something. Looking ahead, she noticed a tool that had previously been hanging on the wall was falling; it had gotten caught on her left elbow when she had turned around. The rest came down like dominoes. Tool after tool fell, until ultimately the entire shelf collapsed. In less than ten seconds, an entire corner of the room had transformed into an unsightly mess.

"…What are you doing?"

The voice came from the workshop entrance.

It was the prosthetic craftsman. The steam rising from his body indicated he had just gotten out of the bath.

(5/22)

"Welcome." The craftsman gestured for Yuki to sit on a guest chair. It was tall enough for Yuki to comfortably sit on.

"Thank you." Yuki took a seat.

She looked at the craftsman sitting in front of her. His body was

just as small as before, and his face just as bearded. Neither his hair nor beard had fully dried from the bath.

"Um, I'm sorry for…that." Yuki glanced over at the messy corner of the room.

"Did you think I was hiding like last time?"

"Yes…"

"Don't worry about it, then. It's my fault to begin with," the craftsman said, handling the situation graciously.

"Sorry…," Yuki repeated.

She was embarrassed. Not at having been mistaken about the craftsman hiding, but at having bumped into the tool with her elbow. She had failed to fully grasp her surroundings. While this wasn't a game venue, she had been far too careless.

"Anyway… You here for your regular maintenance?" the craftsman asked.

Yuki clenched her left hand into a fist on her knee. "Yes, but there's also something I wanted to ask you. Sir, you hear rumors that go around this industry, right?"

"Well, it comes with the job."

Yuki explained the situation. About how a catastrophic game had occurred. About how the craftsman was the only one in her circle of acquaintances who might know something. About how she wanted to ask if he had any insight.

The craftsman's reaction was unexpected.

"What, you too?"

Yuki's eyes opened wide.

The craftsman stroked his wet beard. "Thing is, everyone who's come by recently has been asking me the same thing. Not surprised you're all curious about it."

Of course, Yuki thought.

Yuki was not the only one who was aware of the catastrophe. Other agents had told their players, who in turn had spread the rumor to other players, practically ensuring it had become common knowledge by now. And naturally, other players had gotten the same idea as Yuki. Although Yuki had figured the craftsman had a wealth of connections, she hadn't imagined the others would seek out his

wisdom, too.

"I'll give you the same answer as I gave the rest," the craftsman continued. "I don't know a thing. I've been doing this work for ages, but I'm just an ordinary old man. There ain't much I know about the games themselves. Heard there were a few survivors of the game you're asking about, but none are among my clients."

"…Really?" Yuki's voice was tinged with gloom.

She felt defeated. The craftsman had been her only ray of hope.

"What, does everyone think I know the ins and outs of the industry?" The craftsman laughed.

"I don't know about everyone else, but I sure saw it that way…"

"I doubt I know more than any of you. I ain't a member of the games' audience, and I've never worked for the organizers. And 'cause I'm a man, I've never been a player, either… Are things really that serious? With that catastrophic game."

"I think so. It could be the second coming of Candle Woods… Do you know anyone who might know more about the industry? I'd greatly appreciate it if you could introduce me…"

"Sorry, can't help you there. Livin' in a place like this, making acquaintances doesn't come easy. I've only got you players as—"

The craftsman suddenly cut himself off. Even more wrinkles formed on his already-wrinkly face.

He resumed speaking. "Actually, I may know someone. Not sure if she's still alive, though…"

"Who?"

"A former player who switched over to working behind the scenes like me."

The craftsman made a gesture as if scraping away at his arm.

"She's a tattoo artist. Maybe she can help. I only see her every once in a while for her regular maintenances, so I don't know if she still lives in the same place… But do you want her address?"

There was no reason to refuse. Yuki nodded.

After obtaining a lead about where to go next, Yuki had the craftsman check her prosthetic fingers. Not much time had passed since her previous visit, so there were no issues of note, but…

"Oh?" the craftsman remarked in the middle of the checkup. "What happened to that eye of yours?"

"Huh?"

The craftsman was staring straight at Yuki's right eye—the one that was slightly fainter in color compared to her left.

"Oh, this?" Yuki rubbed her right eyelid. "It's been like this since forever. I injured it in Candle Woods… The color's been a little dull ever since."

Yuki's right eye had gotten cut in Candle Woods, her unforgettable ninth game. She had carelessly walked up to an opponent she had assumed to be dead, only to be met with a painful counterattack. Fortunately, the wound hadn't led to loss of vision, but a scar remained in the form of a more faintly colored iris.

"There's no problem with my eyesight, so it's not an issue," Yuki added. "Wait, did you only just notice it now? After all these visits?"

"Right… Guess so," the craftsman said, bringing the topic to a close.

The immensely dour look on the man's face left an impression on Yuki.

(7/22)

Looking back on this moment from the future, the countdown had already begun. The countdown to an irreversible loss. The countdown to her time limit for clearing ninety-nine games. In fact, the timer had started even farther back, all the way back in Candle Woods. Just as how her mentor's career had ended, Yuki had also been guaranteed a future of ruin by that psychopath.

Still, it was pointless to brood over what may have been. Even if Yuki had realized the situation at this point in time, her fate was out of her hands.

Besides going to visit the tattoo artist as recommended by the

craftsman, there was nothing she could have done.

(8/22)

Player name: Kirihara. Real name: Kanami Kirihara. That was supposedly the name of the tattoo artist. She had been active as a player over ten years ago, which meant she belonged to a generation of players from even before Hakushi and Koyomi's. According to the craftsman, she had cleared nearly thirty games before losing both legs, and although she procured new limbs from the prosthetic craftsman, she still decided to retire from death games. For her second career, she chose to dedicate herself to tattooing, which she had already been doing as a hobby.

The following day, Yuki traveled to Kirihara's residence.

Since Kirihara was the craftsman's fellow tradesperson and acquaintance, Yuki imagined the woman might live in the middle of a forest, but it turned out she lived in an ordinary residential neighborhood. The house at the address Yuki had been given was a magnificent mansion. It was similar in size to the craftsman's residence, but a mansion in a forest and a mansion in the city differed significantly in value.

Yuki had learned from the craftsman that Kirihara had cleared close to thirty games. The prize money from that many games would not be enough to build a house as splendid as this. Was Kirihara's tattoo business booming? Or did she have additional sources of income? Either way, Yuki was jealous. Keeping the roof of the mansion that was visible from the edge of town in her sights, Yuki made a beeline for the entrance.

And on the way there—

"Yuki."

—someone called her name, prompting her to turn around.

Standing there was a girl about her age. For some reason, the girl emanated an immensely sleazy aura, like that of a salesman who would talk investments while slinging around fancy words at a bar, or of a survey interviewer on the street demanding people's

addresses and phone numbers for some unknown reason. It was clear at a glance that getting in too deep with her would spell trouble.

The girl was holding her right hand in the air—a typical gesture for calling out to someone. Without changing her pose, she continued and said, "Long time no see."

"…Hi there," Yuki nonchalantly replied.

She wondered who this person was. Based on the girl's greeting, they had met somewhere before. The fact that she had called Yuki by her first name rather than her surname implied that the girl was neither associated with Yuki's night classes nor her time at middle and elementary school. She had to be a player from a past game. However, Yuki had no recollection of the girl. With over forty games under her belt, she couldn't be expected to remember the faces and names of every single player she had crossed paths with.

"Your face tells me you're looking at a stranger," the girl said after a brief silence, shrugging. "The name's Keito. It's been over a year, so I'm not surprised you've forgotten me."

"Keito…?"

"Remember? We were in Scrap Building together. Your tenth game."

Suddenly, the memories came flooding back.

Keito. She had been present in the game where Yuki had first met Mishiro, the fated adversary she would face for her Wall of Thirty. While Yuki could vividly recall Mishiro, she had completely forgotten about the other players from that fateful game.

"Ah… Yeah." As Yuki's tone changed to one of realization, she pointed a finger at Keito. "Right, you were there. So you kept on playing, huh?"

"Yep, more or less. I don't play as often as you, though… I've heard the stories. You've crossed the forty mark, have you?"

Wondering where the girl had learned that information, Yuki replied, "Yeah, I guess."

"I assume you're here for the same reason as me. Makes sense someone like you would be sniffing around in the right place."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

“C’mon, you’ve heard about the tattoos, haven’t you? That’s why you’re heading to Kirihara’s place, right?”

Keito glanced at the roof of the mansion, which Yuki had been staring at up until moments ago. It was true it was Yuki’s destination, but…

“That’s where I’m headed… But what’s this about tattoos?”

“……?”

“?”

The two girls stared blankly at each other for several seconds.

Keito was the first to break the silence. “Yuki… Do you know about that game that ended in disaster?”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m here: to look into it… An acquaintance suggested I swing by.”

“…Ha-ha. So you came all this way with no clue, huh? You’re a real lucky gal, Yuki.”

“???”

“Truth is, I’ve been investigating the catastrophic game on my own as a player…” Keito made a gesture akin to scraping her arm, the same action the craftsman had performed the day prior. “Apparently, tattoos are an important part of the story.”

(9/22)

Keito explained everything on the way to Kirihara’s mansion.

Like Yuki, Keito had learned of the catastrophe from her agent. Like Yuki, she had also felt alarmed by the situation and began investigating—but that was where their paths diverged. Unlike the solitary Yuki, Keito had a large circle of player friends and was able to leverage her network to get in touch with a survivor of the game. That player was terrified, but with great effort, Keito managed to coax some information out of her.

“The game was called Garbage Prison. As the name suggests, it took place in a corrections facility,” Keito explained. “The players had to escape while avoiding detection from wardens appointed by the organizers. It was your run-of-the-mill escape game. I learned about

the rules down to the nitty-gritty, and let me tell you, the game didn't sound difficult enough to end with that few survivors."

"But here's the kicker: One of the players *had tattoos on both arms.* And just before the game was about to end, she went wild and slaughtered almost all the others."

Yuki imagined the scene. A group of prisoners lying on the floor of a damp jail as a thunderstorm raged on. Among them was a single girl, her feet firmly planted on the ground and magnificent patterns adorning her arms—

"Why would that player do something like that?" Yuki asked.

"Beats me. Didn't sound like the game had any competitive element to it… The only explanation I can come up with is *she's just that kind of person*."

That kind of person. In other words, someone who didn't balk at the idea of killing people, just like that psychopath from once upon a time.

"I hope not…" Yuki covered her mouth with her hand.

A homicidal maniac. The most dangerous kind of person in this industry that brought together outlaws of all stripes. The last time Yuki had encountered such a player—Kyara in Candle Woods—over three hundred people had lost their lives. There was no guarantee history would not repeat itself.

"I agree. The situation doesn't seem too good," Keito said. "But hey, look on the bright side. The player behind that catastrophic game had tattoos. That's a huge clue. Think about it—every player has to undergo the Preservation Treatment. That means the killer couldn't have gotten inked by an ordinary tattoo artist. Either she tattooed herself or she visited someone who was familiar with the industry."

Prior to competing, all death-game players were obligated to undergo the Preservation Treatment, a body modification procedure. The operation caused one's blood to immediately transform into white fluff upon contact with air. Since getting a tattoo came with the risk of bleeding, only an artist who knew about the procedure was safe to turn to for the job.

"So that's why you came here," Yuki said.

“Yup. I went on the hunt for a tattoo artist who was connected to the industry and stumbled on Kirihara’s name. Still, it’s possible the killer got her ink before becoming a player or simply applied temporary tattoos… But assuming otherwise, there’s a good chance she paid a visit to Kirihara.”

If that was true, then Kirihara would likely be able to offer them more information about the tattooed player. That was a hopeful prospect.

As they conversed, Yuki and Keito reached Kirihara’s mansion. The compound was surrounded by an iron fence nearly twice as tall as Yuki. There was also an intercom installed nearby. A pair of girls stood in front of it.

The two of them had similar features, which meant they were probably twins. They looked around high school age. Both of them had on subdued-colored dresses, similar to a maid’s uniform. They stood perfectly straight, as if steel rods had been implanted in their spines.

Neither of them appeared to be the tattoo artist Kirihara. Were they her children? They looked young enough for it. Yet their attire implied they could be servants of the mansion. Perhaps both were true.

“Excuse me, can I speak to you?” Keito called out.

“Yes.” “Yes.”

The twins responded nearly simultaneously. Both sounded rather serious.

“I’m here for a visit, but…neither of you are Kirihara, right?”

“No, we are not.” “Kirihara is inside.”

After speaking in turn, the twins glanced over at the mansion.

“My name is Haine.” “My name is Kokone.” “We are servants of this household.” “If you may, please inform us of the reason for your visit.”

Yuki stared at the two girls. Haine was standing on the left while Kokone was on the right, but they looked exactly alike. If the two switched positions while Yuki was distracted, she would get them mixed up. Yuki secretly resolved to not let them out of her sight for even a second.

Meanwhile, Keito explained the situation to the twins.

"I apologize, but could you please wait for a little while?" Haine responded. "Kirihara appears to still be asleep at the moment…"

"I've tried calling her multiple times, but she hasn't picked up."

Kokone took out her cell phone and made another call. However, there was no response, and she put away her phone with a troubled expression. Yuki caught a glimpse of Keito's phone and noticed it was twelve forty-five. Evidently, Kirihara was quite the night owl.

"Do neither of you have keys?" Yuki asked.

"We can open this gate, but only Kirihara can unlock the front door. She is averse to the idea of other people having a key to her residence…"

Yuki chalked that up to a former player's natural wariness. In an industry that placed little value on life, even a tiny grudge could lead someone to murder or be murdered in cold blood. There was no way to know what grudges one may have unwittingly caused and when someone might show up to kill over them.

This principle was especially true now that Kirihara's name had come up as a material witness linked to the catastrophic game—

"……"

An awful scenario unfolded in Yuki's imagination. She turned to Keito, who was coincidentally looking at Yuki at that very moment.

"It's not impossible," Keito said. "The tattooed player took out nearly eighty people in that game. She wouldn't hesitate *to go that far* if it meant destroying leads to her identity."

Yuki turned to the twins. Neither of them shared Yuki and Keito's sense of crisis, so they simply had blank stares.

"Um, would you mind opening the gate?" Yuki requested. "You have the key, right?"

"Hmm? Sure, but we will not be able to enter the house."

"That's fine. We'll force our way in."

The twins stared back with eyes agape.

"Kirihara might not be sleeping," Yuki continued. "If I'm wrong, I'll cover the damages. So please."

Yuki's explanation was lacking in details, but the twins, who were apparently no ordinary girls, seemed to pick up on the urgency of

the situation.

"Very well," one of them said before opening the gate.

Yuki, Keito, Haine, and Kokone quickly crossed the yard and reached the front of the mansion. The front door was exquisite and well fortified; it didn't seem like they would be prying it open anytime soon.

"Yuki." Keito pointed at a second-floor window. "See that? The window isn't locked."

Yuki squinted. The crescent-shaped lever meant to hold the window in place was undone. The window was unlocked.

There were very few circumstances under which it made sense for the window to be shut yet unlocked. For example—someone leaving the mansion through that window and closing it behind them to disguise that fact.

"Let's enter through there," said one of the twins. The two of them had brought over a ladder from somewhere. They graciously set it up beneath the window in question, allowing Yuki to climb up to the second floor.

Yuki pressed her hand against the windowpane and peered inside. She couldn't see the interior, as the curtain was drawn, but she was able to confirm that the crescent-shaped lever was undone. The window was indeed unlocked. Yuki slid open the window sideways, pulled the curtains aside, and entered the room after making sure the coast was clear.

She found herself inside a study. The four walls were lined with bookshelves. Yuki stuck her head out the window and instructed the other three to come up. Yuki waited, repressing the urge to explore farther, and Keito and the twins arrived a minute later. The four girls then stepped out into the hallway.

"That way," one of the twins said. Yuki could no longer tell one twin from the other.

"Kirihara's bedroom is over there. If she's still asleep…"

The girl suddenly trailed off. Her nose twitched slightly.

"…You noticed it, too, huh?" Yuki said.

She then turned to Keito, who had a grim expression. It seemed she, too, had realized the problem.

The moment Yuki had entered the mansion, she had detected a certain *smell*, one synonymous with danger. A smell that rarely crossed Yuki's nose, despite her industry being riddled with peril.

The scent of blood.

(10/22)

The four girls entered the bedroom to find a body collapsed face down on the ground.

Yuki was no stranger to the sight of corpses. She had even seen bodies cut up by buzzsaws or hacked into tiny pieces. Before entering the mansion, Yuki had been confident she would not feel the least bit shaken in the event she came across Kirihara's corpse, assuming the woman had actually been murdered.

Yet now that confidence crumbled like sand.

It was not because the scene was heartbreaking. While the corpse had a great number of cuts and bruises, *that was the extent of it.* Yuki knew of many players who had died in far more gruesome ways. What shattered Yuki's composure was the sight of the color *red* covering the bedroom floor.

It was blood. Liquid blood. Normally colored blood, unaffected by the Preservation Treatment. The fluid from Kirihara's body had pooled all the way to the edges of the carpet, covering the entire bedroom floor and even flowing out into the hallway. It was clear at a glance that the woman was beyond saving.

This was a *real-life corpse.*

Was this how it looked when a person died without the effects of the Preservation Treatment?

"Just to be completely sure…" Yuki turned to the twins. It was obvious from their pale faces, but she still decided to ask. "This is definitely Kirihara, right?"

The pair nodded silently.

Yuki examined the lower body of the corpse, since she had heard Kirihara had prosthetic legs. Upon nervously feeling the woman's legs through her skirt, Yuki felt a hard texture. There was no doubt

about it—this was the craftsman's handiwork.

Yuki stepped away from the body. She also stepped away from the twins, who were undoubtedly rattled, and whispered into Keito's ear.

"Hey, um… Serious question. This isn't meant to be a joke or anything."

"What?" Keito responded, lowering her voice.

"Should we be calling the police in this situation?"

(11/22)

Obviously, the answer was no.

Although the incident was unrelated to the games, the victim, Kirihara, was a former player. Word getting out of her death would potentially cause problems. Keito contacted an agency associated with the game organizers, and as if they had just sprouted from the yard, a group of people in black immediately shuffled in and shooed Yuki's group out of the bedroom. The twins were brought to a separate room for questioning, leaving only Yuki and Keito in the hallway.

"Give me a break, Yuki," Keito said, bringing a hand against her forehead. "Can you cool it with the silly stuff when someone's lying dead in front of us?"

"Sorry…," Yuki genuinely apologized.

Yuki had been dead serious, but she had apparently tickled Keito's funny bone. A few moments ago, Keito had been desperately trying to avoid bursting into laughter in front of the twins. The girl had masterfully repressed the urge to laugh until the two had been taken away, but as a result, she had been unable to talk about what really deserved their attention.

"The twins confirmed her identity, and I'm positive those were prosthetic legs," Yuki said. "That was Kirihara. But why was her blood red? I thought she was a former player…"

"Didn't she quit the industry a while ago? Human cells get replaced every couple of years, so wouldn't the effects of the

Preservation Treatment have long worn off by now?"

"That makes sense…"

Like tattoos, the effects of the Preservation Treatment were not everlasting.

"Considering the timing, this can't be a coincidence," Keito said. "I'm positive this has to be the work of that tattooed player."

"But why? To silence her?"

"Probably. At the very least, Kirihara knew the tattooed player's name and face. It's possible she even knew her phone number and address. Anyway, it's clear there's something that player didn't want getting out."

Based on the state of the corpse and the twins' testimony, the crime must have been carried out the night before. *What bad timing*, Yuki thought.

"That player is a real threat…," Keito muttered. "Yuki, what are you going to do now?"

"Huh? …No clue."

Yuki hadn't given it much thought. The emergence of an actual victim essentially confirmed the tattooed player's existence. However, all clues linking to their identity had vanished.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to ask for your help," Keito said. "It's too dangerous to let that killer roam free. We don't know when another game like Garbage Prison might happen again… There were three hundred victims in Candle Woods, right? It's not out of the question that the tattooed player could cause an even worse disaster."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"That's why, before that can happen, I'm thinking of *killing* her."

Is it my turn to laugh? Yuki thought for a second.

However, Keito had a completely solemn expression. She was serious. At least, far more serious than Yuki's question from earlier.

"I'm going to hunt her down and kill her outside of the games. That'll stop the victims from piling up."

"Huh? Wait… What?" Yuki went tongue-tied for a few seconds. "Isn't that a crime?"

"…Again with the silly stuff." Keito stared at Yuki with half-closed

eyes. “We make our living outside the confines of the law. Are you really going to question that now? Besides, we’re up against someone who doesn’t have any qualms about killing.”

Keito glanced over at the stream of blood flowing out of the bedroom.

“Look, I’m not fearless enough to join a game knowing there’s a homicidal maniac on the loose. I’ve got to clean up this mess, or I can kiss my job stability good-bye.”

I guess that’s a viable strategy, Yuki thought. The idea of killing a dangerous player outside the games proper had never crossed her mind.

If the tattooed player was a psychopath like Kyara, she would likely continue murdering players as long as she lived. Eventually, even Yuki and Keito could become her victims. In that light, going on the offensive would be a rather practical approach.

“How curious…” “Could you explain the details?”

Two new voices joined the conversation from beside them. The twins had returned. It seemed their questioning had ended.

“I wish to assist you.” “I must meet that tattooed player.”

The twins remained serious in expression and tone, but even to a stranger like Yuki, it was obvious a fire burned in them.

“I get how you feel,” Keito said. “Your help is greatly appreciated. Let’s chase after the killer together.”

Keito and the twins nodded at one another and then all turned to Yuki. There was no need to ask what their gazes implied.

Yuki thought about it for a second before answering.

“I’ll pass.”

(12/22)

Yuki headed home. She had reached Kirihara’s mansion by train, so naturally, she took the train home as well.

Yuki rocked from side to side as the train rattled. These days, the quintessential pose for train riders was to hold an overhead strap in one hand and a smartphone in the other. Yuki had wanted to adopt

that pose, too, but instead, she simply held on to a strap with her right hand while keeping her left hand stuffed inside her pocket.

She tried to hide the middle, ring, and pinkie fingers on her left hand—the parts of her body that were artificial—from others as much as possible. Although it would be impossible to tell they were prosthetics at a glance, and she wasn't particularly ashamed of them, she figured that concealing them would spare her from any unwanted trouble. And so, with one of her hands unavailable for use, Yuki had nothing to do but turn things over in her head.

She thought of the invitation Keito had extended to her at Kirihara's residence.

Yuki had declined because she thought the strategy didn't match her style. She knew more than anyone how frightening a psychopath could be but didn't think that planning an attack outside of the games was the right way to go about things. Maybe she would eventually need to rely on schemes of that sort to clear ninety-nine games, but at present, Yuki was unwilling to resort to underhanded tactics. She had learned the truth behind the catastrophic game, along with the fact that the perpetrator had tattoos as a defining physical characteristic, so for now her investigation had reached a stopping point. Yuki decided to pay close attention to other players' arms for the foreseeable future.

She thought of the servants of that mansion.

They went by the names of Haine and Kokone. Due to the urgency of the incident, Yuki hadn't gotten the chance to inquire about their backgrounds. However, she figured their circumstances had to be special if they were working as servants that young—and serving a former player turned tattoo artist at that. It must have been unbearable for them to learn their master had been killed for the sake of concealing a secret. Yuki felt sorry that people from peripheral industries had gotten caught up in the disaster.

She thought of the tattooed player.

What kind of person were they? At the very least, it was clear they were a merciless killer who did not hesitate to murder in order to keep their identity under wraps. Were they really a psychopath like Kyara? If Yuki ran into that player in a future game, would she

be able to escape from their clutches? Last time, Yuki managed to overcome Kyara with the help of her mentor. But now Hakushi had left the world of death games. If a similar encounter took place, Yuki would have to rely entirely on her own skills to survive. Was she really up to the task?

As those thoughts flowed through Yuki's head, the train came to a stop. She got off the train and headed for the ticket gate. Just as she opened her wallet to take out her transit card, however…

"Ah…"

…a mass of coins spilled to the floor.

She hadn't noticed the zipper of her coin pouch was open. While telling herself to remain calm, Yuki picked up the coins and left the station. She followed a familiar road all the way back to her apartment.

When she arrived, she noticed a car parked in front of her building—her agent's. It gave off a black luster underneath the early-afternoon sun.

Yuki wondered why her agent had come in the afternoon. It was too early in the day and too soon since her last game for her to receive another invitation. Did her agent have news about the catastrophe? But if so, a simple phone call would have sufficed, as there would be no reason for her agent to deliver the news in person.

As Yuki approached the vehicle, unable to come up with a satisfying answer, the window of the driver's seat opened.

Her agent was in the car. She greeted Yuki with a "Hello."

"…Hello."

Her agent looked at Yuki's face and narrowed her eyes. "I apologize, Yuki."

Yuki had no idea what the apology was for.

"I'm supposed to be your right-hand woman… And yet I was completely unaware until I received a call from the craftsman."

"……?"

What was she talking about? A call from the craftsman? Had the two of them exchanged contact information?

Although that revelation came as a surprise, the next words out

of her agent's mouth were even more of a shock to Yuki.

"This is about your right eye." The agent touched a spot beneath her own right eye. "We have *scheduled an eye exam for you.* Would you mind coming with me?"

(13/22)

In a certain shopping district, a man clicked his tongue.

"What?" Shion glared at the man.

Since she was scowling quite ferociously and had snarled quite loudly, there was no way the man didn't notice her. Yet he didn't retaliate and simply walked past Shion with a frown.

They were in the middle of an arcade. The various signs and products on display in front of the shops made the already-narrow pathway feel even more cramped. The decent amount of foot traffic meant that people needed to be considerate to avoid bumping into one another. However, some people in this world refused to step aside under any circumstances and instead chose to audibly click their tongue when they were about to collide with someone. Shion had just encountered one such person who intentionally went out of his way to aggravate others.

She let out a rage-filled sigh.

You got a death wish, Gramps? The hell is your problem? That tongue clicking means you're askin' for a fight, yeah? I'll give you what you want, so why aren't you coming at me? Too scared to go up against a little girl? Don't act all hostile if you don't have the balls to follow up, asshole. If we weren't in the middle of town, I'd have slit your throat by now.

Actually, that won't stop—

Shion scratched her head and repressed the urge.

Her agent had advised her to keep a low profile for the time being. Tales of Garbage Prison, along with tales of Shion, the killer behind the disaster, had already become widespread. There had to be scores of players trying to track her down right now. Causing a commotion in the middle of town would essentially expose her

location. And so Shion was forced to exercise restraint, something she had done far less frequently in her lifetime compared to the average person.

Somehow, she managed to keep her cool.

Shion stopped in front of a shop—a croquette shop. It was owned and operated by a single elderly woman and had maintained a price of fifty-eight yen per croquette for many years. The shop's longstanding success was proof of how delicious their product was. Shion had frequented the establishment since she was little. She placed her order with the old woman, who looked exactly the same as when Shion had first visited, and while waiting for her croquette to finish frying, she stared at her reflection in the glass case of the neighboring restaurant.

In her opinion, she had a rather unextraordinary face that was somewhat unsophisticated, even when you took into account her age of fourteen. The kind of face that, if attributed on the news to the perpetrator of a vicious crime, would cause people to go, "A meek-looking girl like her?" Since Shion didn't very much enjoy looking at herself, she tried to immediately avert her gaze, but a second before she could, she caught something in the glass she couldn't ignore.

A girl was passing behind Shion.

In a busy shopping district, it was by no means a rare occurrence for people to pass one by. The neighborhood had residents and visitors of all ages and genders, so the fact that it was a girl was not notable, either. The problem: The girl's face was *unquestionably familiar* to Shion. Her face—and her outfit. There was no mistaking it: Shion had walked past the girl in the shopping district a short while earlier.

Someone whom Shion had passed earlier was now once again crossing behind her. Of course, on its own, that was not indicative of anything. It was entirely possible the girl had visited a shop, completed her errands, and was coming back the way she came. It was far more likely that the girl was just an ordinary person.

However, Shion couldn't help but harbor suspicions.

What if the girl *wasn't* an ordinary person?

What if she had doubled back in pursuit of Shion?

(14/22)

Shion had slipped up in her last game.

Garbage Prison. An escape game set in a prison—was the intended setup, but during the game, another player had seen Shion indulging in her *bad habit.* Shion killed the witness in an attempt to cover it up but was caught in the act by another player. The more she attempted to cover her tracks, the more things escalated, until she was finally forced to kill every other player in the game. She had tried her best to cull them all, but a few managed to slip away, and as a result, stories of Garbage Prison spread like wildfire through the industry. People had even started referring to the game as the second coming of Candle Woods. *They're not entirely wrong,* Shion thought. Although she was not *that woman's* protégé, she still had a connection to her, after all.

It wasn't hard to imagine other players would react sensitively to the return of a psychopath. Some were likely even planning to assassinate Shion before the damage could spread. That was why Shion had taken the initiative. She had erased everyone who knew details of her identity, starting with Kirihara, and had been keeping a low profile ever since.

At least, that was what she had intended.

(15/22)

With paper wrapper in hand, Shion nibbled at her croquette as she walked.

She left the shopping district and entered an area with lower foot traffic. Now that her surroundings were somewhat quieter, Shion scanned for signs of life around her and immediately sensed multiple people closing in on her.

She hadn't imagined it—she was indeed being followed. There

were at least three people tailing her. She couldn't tell if they had ill will, but it would be wise to assume they did. They must have been hiding because it was still early evening. They certainly wouldn't dare cause a commotion in the center of town, where there was no shortage of potential eyewitnesses. But soon, the sun would set, and the number of people on the streets would shrink. When that happened, it would be the time of day for rogues to stir.

Shion balled up the now-empty croquette wrapper and stuffed it into her pocket.

She began to think. How did they find her? She had erased all hints to her identity. In the almost two weeks since Garbage Prison, she had followed her agent's instructions and kept a low profile. She had kept her tattoos hidden. Her face was inconspicuous. There was nothing that would give her away as a crazed killer—

It was then she realized that fleeing should be her immediate priority.

Shion dialed her agent. After an outrageous number of rings, moments before being redirected to voicemail, the call connected.

"Yelloooo?" The sluggish voice on the line was that of Shion's agent.

"It's me," Shion said in a hurried tone.

"Oh, Shion. What do you want from me now?"

"There are at least three people chasing me."

"Really? Sounds like a pickle."

"Come pick me up. I need to get away."

"Too much of a hassle."

"…What was that?"

"Shion, didn't you say you were going to *quit being a player*?"

Shion had indeed said as much. With her identity exposed, she could no longer reside in the world of death games. And so, immediately after Garbage Prison, Shion had expressed her intent to retire to her agent.

Her agent continued, "That means we're back to being strangers. Figure something out by yourself."

"This is a problem related to the games. Can't you do me a solid?"

"Don't want to."

"Stop messin' around."

"I can say the same to you. All this time, I've worked my butt off for you, and you repay me by spitting on me. I can't deal with it anymore."

It was true her agent had given her plenty of support in her day-to-day life. That was why she had been able to survive on her own at fourteen without entering an orphanage or staying at school.

"Did you know that agents get a special bonus when their player reaches thirty games? I was going to treat you to a gourmet barbecue dinner when that happened, but those plans have gone down the drain. Too bad."

"…Fuck off!" Shion raised her voice, despite knowing it wasn't the right call.

"Give me a ring when you're ready to go back to being a player."

With that, her agent hung up, leaving only beeping sounds on the line. Shion resisted the urge to hurl her phone to the ground and instead thrust it into her pocket.

(16/22)

"She's noticed us," Keito said while reading the new message on her phone.

She was inside a car—*not* one of the black cars driven by agents, but her own private vehicle. She had purchased it with her prize money from the games, a cost that was a drop in the bucket for someone who had joined the ranks of death-game veterans with a considerable number of clears to her name.

Keito had her right hand around the steering wheel and her left hand around her phone. The message on the screen was a report from a friend indicating that their target, Shion, had noticed she was being followed. The girl had placed a call in a panic—likely a request to her agent for assistance. However, the negotiations had clearly broken down, as Shion had raised her voice, ended the call, and was now frequently darting her eyes at the road. Keito's friend theorized

the girl was hoping to hail a taxi.

"Would've been perfect if we could have followed her home…," Keito grumbled.

Just as she had resolved ten days ago at Kirihara's residence, Keito had been pursuing the tattooed player, Shion. She had assembled a team of twenty fellow players and an equivalent number of weapons before continuing her search.

The group had managed to locate Shion, quite frankly, out of pure luck. They had acquired footage of Garbage Prison from a certain channel, which revealed the girl's player name and appearance. The group had also found out that a girl with a similar name had previously committed a murder outside of the games, and when they visited the area where the killing had taken place, a miracle occurred: One of Keito's friends spotted Shion. The girl must have had a fondness for the area, as she hadn't moved away. Keito had that friend tail Shion, while she herself was currently rushing over to the scene in her car.

Ideally, they would have followed Shion all the way home, waited outside her residence, and attacked her in the night. It was a plan to resolve things as discreetly as possible, just like how the girl had killed Kirihara. However, now that Shion had noticed them, she certainly would not return home. Since the girl was reportedly searching for a taxi, she had to be planning to skip town.

"We have no choice but to go for it."

The voice came from the passenger seat. Sitting there was Haine, a servant from Kirihara's mansion who was wearing a dull-colored dress.

"I wholeheartedly agree."

This time, the voice came from the back seat. Sitting there was Kokone, the other servant of Kirihara's. For the past ten days, Keito had been running around with the twins.

"Even if it runs the risk of drawing attention, we should go through with the plan," Haine said.

"I'm with you," Keito replied.

If Shion slipped away now, they would likely never have another opportunity to catch her. While it would be unreasonable to carry out

their plan in the middle of a crowd, they had to move forward if even the slightest opening presented itself.

Keito sent those instructions via message to her friends. She then set down her phone, grabbed the steering wheel with both hands, and rushed over to the scene to follow those instructions herself.

Shion—the tattooed player. The girl had killed eighty players in a recent game. But games were manufactured environments. The same thing was not going to happen in the outside world. Unlike in games, where all players began on equal footing, in the real world, there was nothing stopping you from stacking the deck in your favor before heading off to battle.

A *clack* rang out from the passenger seat.

Haine removed the magazine of a handgun.

(17/22)

For the first time in her life, Shion took a cab.

She would have wanted to flag one down on the street, but since it was difficult to imagine a taxi stopping for a fourteen-year-old girl, she instead walked up to one that was parked. The driver scowled upon seeing the young girl, but after Shion demonstrated her ability to pay, he changed his tune and allowed her to board. She wanted to order the driver to hightail it out of there, but since that would clearly draw unwanted suspicion, she uttered the name of a cram school in the neighboring town, hoping to portray herself as a well-to-do girl who did not want to be late for class. Although she wasn't sure if she had managed to deceive the driver, he started the car without saying a word.

While sinking into the back seat, Shion thought about her next steps. Going home was no longer an option. She would have to disappear somewhere, but would that be possible for a fourteen-year-old girl? She had money but absolutely zero social standing. She wouldn't even be able to book a single hotel room. Was her only option to find a sugar daddy who would shelter her without prying into her circumstances?

Shion was anxious about her future, but as it turned out, she had no need to worry—for her attempt at fleeing did not last for long.

As the taxi was stopped at a light, someone tapped on the window.

Multiple people had surrounded the taxi. They were all wearing helmets and masks to conceal their identities, but based on their statures and the visible parts of their eyes, Shion could tell they were girls around her age.

Despite looking puzzled, the cab driver opened the window nearest to him.

"Shut that right now!"

Shion's shout came too late.

One of the mysterious individuals stuck their entire arm through the window, along with the *object* in their hand—a handgun equipped with a silencer.

"……!!"

Shion kicked open the car door.

The force of the impact knocked back one of the assailants. Shion saw a handgun with a silencer fall out of their hand. For a second, she considered picking it up, but since she noticed another gun pointing at her out of the corner of her eye, she devoted her efforts to running away. Shion sprinted across the road, got onto the sidewalk, and dashed into an alleyway without looking back.

Really? In the middle of town? Shion thought. Did they think nobody else would notice if they shot her inside a car? Or did they expect the organizers to erase all evidence of the incident? More importantly, how had they even caught up to her in the first place? Had they followed her by car? Shion regretted not adequately watching her back.

So fixated on these unnecessary details was Shion that it took a while before she realized her next mistake: She had fled into an alleyway with little foot traffic. The better course of action would have been to run into a crowd. She should have entered a busy area and placed herself in a situation where there would be many eyewitnesses, but she had done the exact opposite. She was essentially inviting the assailants to end her life. Shion had given

them exactly what they were craving: a situation where they could finish her off without a single witness.

Click! The sound came from behind Shion.

She instantly identified it as a gunshot. Not only did she know a bullet would make that sound when fired through a silencer, but she also felt a burning pain run through her shoulder. The impact of the bullet propelled her shoulder forward, causing her to twirl as she tumbled onto the ground like a spinning top coming to a halt.

Click! Click! More gunshots filled the air.

Fortunately for Shion, she had been rolling on the ground, which allowed her to evade the two additional bullets. They whizzed through the air right next to her face, such that she could even sense the warm air generated by their velocity. Shion looked up to see two masked assailants. Both were wielding guns. Two or three more reinforcements ran up behind them. That was more than enough visual information to shatter Shion's will to fight.

"I'm quitting the industry!" Shion shouted. "I won't play in any more games! So—"

"Doesn't matter. Shoot her."

The order had come from the person standing at the far back of the line of reinforcements. Although a helmet hid their face, Shion could tell that the voice belonged to a girl, and it sounded like that of a scam artist.

"We can't trust what she says. We've come all this way, so we should take her out once and for all."

Before the assailants could aim the muzzles of their guns at Shion, she took off running.

Click! Click! Click! While dodging the onslaught of bullets, Shion managed to turn the corner. However, the next moment, she stumbled over her feet and fell to the ground. To make matters worse, she landed on her wounded shoulder and let out a scream. She instantly lost the energy to get back onto her feet. Through the ground, she heard the sound of her assailants' footsteps. She had utterly failed to make a clean escape, or any kind of escape at all—she had simply concealed herself in the shadows, buying herself mere seconds at most.

However, there were times when mere seconds tipped the scales between life and death.

Shion's phone vibrated in her chest pocket. She was getting a call. Without stopping to wonder who it was from, she pulled out the phone with enough vigor to extract her own tailbone along with it and brought it to her ear.

"Yellooo."

The tone of the caller was a complete mismatch for the situation. It was her agent.

"What do you want?" Shion asked curtly.

"Don't be rude. Weren't you asking for my help a short while ago?"

"What do you want?" Shion lacked the capacity to raise her voice or even change her wording. She simply repeated the same sentence.

"I figured you might've changed your mind by now, so I called. How about it? Eager to crawl back to being a player?"

At that moment, Shion realized she was hearing two overlapping sets of her agent's voice. One was coming from her cell phone. And the other—

"This is your last chance."

The other came from *farther down the alleyway.*

"You have been invited to Halloween Night. Are your preparations complete?"

(18/22)

A gunshot echoed through the alleyway.

The masked players, Keito and the twins included, all froze in place. That was because the gunshot had not come through a silencer—which meant it had not been fired from one of their weapons.

Time stood at a standstill for a few seconds, until someone stepped out from around the corner. It was *not* Shion. It was a person in a black suit—an agent of the games. The agent was

holding a firearm, likely the source of the gunshot, and pointed it toward the sky like an official of a foot race.

"Long time no see," the agent said in a calm voice.

The players remained frozen at the appearance of the newcomer. The first to regain her freedom of movement was Keito, leader of the vigilante brigade.

"…We've never met before…"

Keito looked down at the pistol in her hands. She couldn't decide whether it was all right to point it at the person in front of her.

"You've got to be…Shion's agent, right?"

"Correctamundo."

"So? What business do you have with us?"

"I came to stop you, obviously."

"Stop what?" Keito raised an eyebrow, which was mostly hidden on account of her helmet. "We're just having *a little spat* here. That's it. No need for the organizers to step in."

Keito had thought up that excuse in advance. Although the issue was between players and had been sparked by the events of a game, Keito's argument was that it would be odd for the organizers to stick their nose in a personal squabble. However…

"That's not going to cut it," the agent said, standing firm. "After all, my player *has joined a game*."

"…What was that?"

"She expressed her intention to participate by word of mouth just a moment ago. We organizers have a duty to ensure her safe arrival to the venue. It's well within the purview of my position to eliminate anyone who tries to harm her."

After explaining the situation in an overly polite tone of voice, the agent pointed the gun at Keito.

"So there you have it… I'm happy to go at it, if that's what you want."

The sound of shoes scraping against the ground filled the air. It was the sound of some players in her group retreating.

Shit, Keito thought.

Joining a game—in other words, becoming a player—would grant Shion the protection of the organizers even in the real world. Going

after her would be equivalent to going after the organizers themselves. That was out of the question.

After seeing Keito's group lose their will to fight, the agent snickered.

"Well then, take care!"

The agent waved their free hand and left.

As soon as the agent disappeared from view, silence returned, making it seem as if time had frozen once more. It finally thawed a short while later, and the players began murmuring. The arrival of an unexpected person. Their failed attempt at hunting down Shion. The reality of success slipping through their fingers left a sour taste in their mouths, as a dampened mood settled over the area.

Shion had begged them to let her go, claiming she was quitting the industry. Keito had instructed her group to shoot to kill because they couldn't fully trust the girl's words, but she had also figured the girl's declaration was probably true. Shion had to understand that a large contingency of players was after her life. Consequently, another disastrous game, like a second or third repeat of Garbage Prison or Candle Woods, would likely no longer happen. Although Shion had slipped away, their group had essentially achieved their objective. That was why Keito—and probably her friends as well—did not feel frustrated.

"……" "……"

However, there were some in the group who gave off a different aura—Haine and Kokone. The two of them held a personal grudge against Shion and appeared deeply upset at the fact that the girl had escaped.

Keito empathized with them, but she couldn't let herself wallow in those emotions. Now that they had fired guns in the middle of town, they were criminals. They had to leave the area as soon as possible.

Just as Keito was about to give the order to retreat, Haine took action. The girl opened her eyes wide as if realizing something, pulled out her cell phone, and placed a call.

"…Yes." "Yes." "Are there any in which I can participate immediately?" "…Yes, please."

And with that, Haine ended the call.

“Who did you call?” Keito’s curiosity beat out her urge to leave.

“My agent,” Haine responded.

“…Haine, you’re a player?”

Keito had been working alongside Haine for the past ten days, but that was news to her. The girl was no ordinary servant.

“Yes. And not just me; Kokone, too. Although, we are essentially half retired.”

“I heard you say the word *participate…*”

“I asked if *there were any game invitations for me…* There was just one, so I requested to join.”

Keito was not so dense as to overlook the implication. “No way… You’re planning to *play in the same game as Shion*?”

Haine nodded.

Based on what the agent had said earlier, Shion must have been taken into protection because she had indicated her intention to play in a game. That meant the organizers were currently recruiting players for a game. Meanwhile, Haine had been invited to a game. There was a decent chance it was the same one Shion had joined.

Haine was still dead set on pursuing Kirihara’s killer—

In response to Haine’s statement, Kokone also pulled out her phone and placed a call. “Yes, it has been quite a while. Yes… I see. Very well.” The exchange ended there, and she removed the phone from her ear.

“How was it?” Haine asked.

Kokone shook her head. It seemed she had not received an invitation.

“Leave this to me.” Haine patted Kokone on the shoulder. “I vow to catch her.”

“……”

Kokone moved her eyes in a way that implied she had something she wanted to say. However, all that came out of her mouth in the end was a simple “Okay.”

(19/22)

“Geez, you are such a hassle…,” Shion’s agent muttered while pulling Shion up by the hand. The girl had been collapsed on the ground, unable to move.

The agent staggered out of the alleyway with Shion draped over a shoulder and tossed the girl into a black car parked nearby. Shion could tell from the sound of the engine and the inertia acting on her body that the car had started moving.

“I knew you’d come back for me,” Shion said while lying across the back seat. It was an entirely insincere remark.

“Don’t try to butter me up,” her agent replied.

“…What made you come back for me?” Shion asked, with far more sincerity.

“I didn’t want this chance to go to waste. Didn’t I tell you? I get a bonus after you clear thirty games. It’s quite a pretty penny, too. Unlike you players, we barely get paid, so I’ve got to take anything I can get.”

Shion couldn’t tell if her agent was being genuine, but regardless, she had been saved. She felt lucky she had exactly twenty-nine clears to her name.

“How ’bout we go to that barbecue place after I survive this game?” Shion said, referencing the exchange they had over the phone earlier. “My wallet’s fatter than yours, so it’ll be my treat.”

“Oh, that?” The agent’s voice turned cold. “Isn’t it obvious I was joking? You think I’d ever share a meal with a brat like you? Hell no.”

Shion curled her lip. *Figures*, she thought.

(20/22)

Yuki went home.

(21/22)

She had come back from school.

There was a spring in her step, as she had managed to catch up

with her classes after falling behind due to Cloudy Beach. Her studying had paid off. Since recent events had given her another thing to worry about, she was ecstatic about having resolved a different one. And so, with joy in her heart, Yuki returned to her run-down apartment.

A car was parked in front of her building—the black car driven by her agent. Since nearly two weeks had passed since Yuki's last game, she figured it was about time for her next invitation.

The window of the driver's seat opened. "Good evening," her agent greeted. "You have been invited to Halloween Night… Would you like to join?"

Her agent had deviated from her usual phrase, probably out of consideration for Yuki.

Several days earlier, Yuki had gone to an eye exam. Back during Candle Woods, the psychopath had injured Yuki's right eye. Although Yuki's vision had ostensibly returned to normal, she had gone to the hospital, complying with her agent's instructions to undergo an examination. There, Yuki received news that was far from joyful. However…

"I'll join," she said, indicating her intention to participate. "I plan to keep playing at the same pace as before."

"…Very well."

Her agent opened the car door. Yuki entered without a word.

She was handed a paper cup filled with water and a capsule-shaped sleeping pill. It was the usual procedure. To ensure the secrecy of a game's location, players would ingest a sleeping pill and be driven to the venue while they were unconscious.

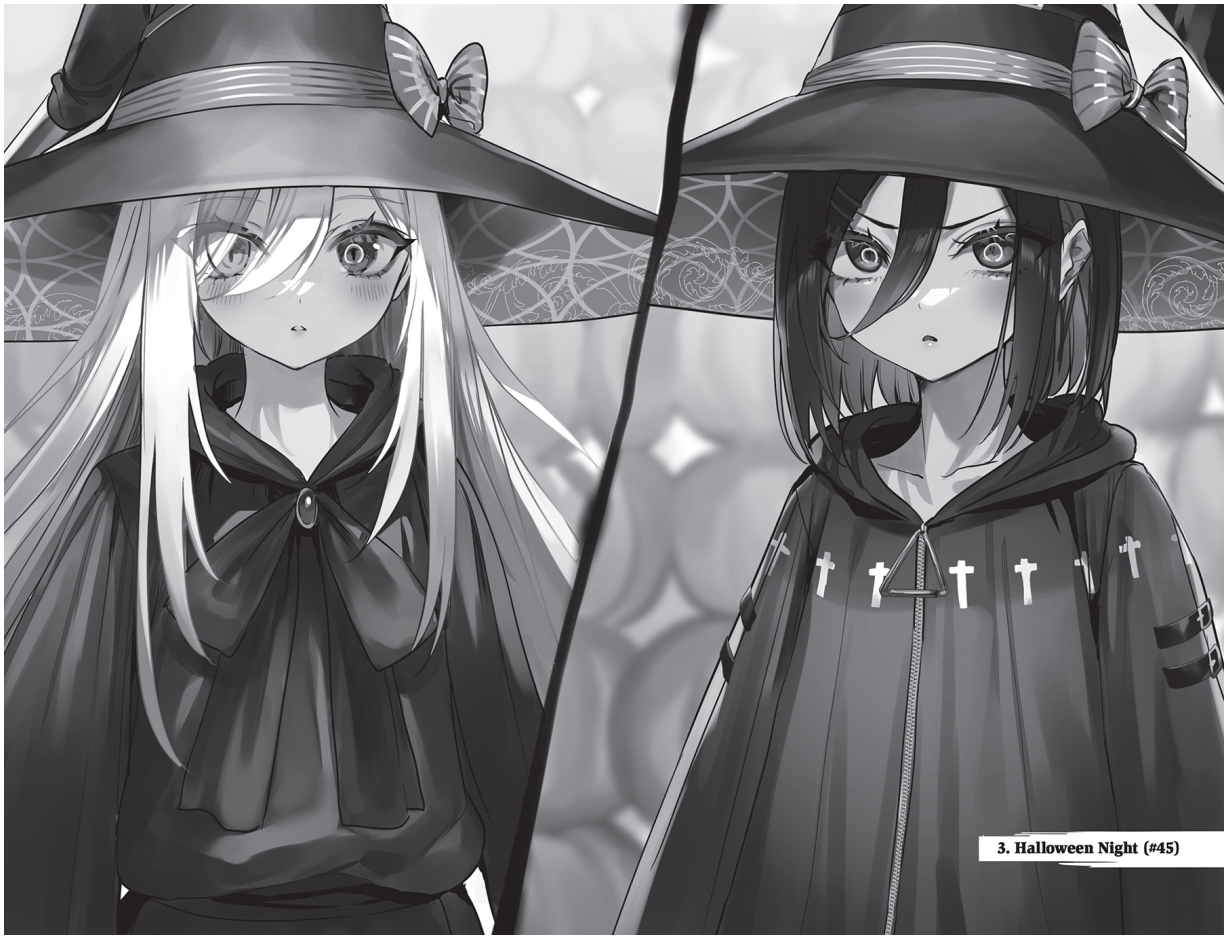
As she went through the motions, Yuki convinced herself things were fine. Playing in two or three games per month was the perfect frequency to avoid straining her body and to ensure her instincts did not dull too much. The *state of her right eye* did not change that fact.

As her consciousness began to fade, she felt frustration for the umpteenth time in the past two weeks. Her right eye had gotten injured solely because she had been sloppy. If she hadn't carelessly approached the psychopath in that synthetic forest, she would not

be in this situation. She had never felt so frustrated before. But agonizing over it now was pointless. She couldn't change the past. It would be worse to let her eye get to her and cause her to mess up even more. It wasn't too late to give things her all. All she had to focus on was the here and now. She simply needed to keep chugging along and do what she could. That was what Yuki told herself.

However, she couldn't help but wish that it would have lasted just a little longer.

(22/22)


3. Halloween Night (#45)

(0/47)

Shion awoke in a pumpkin patch.

(1/47)

She was lying in the dirt. As she had been positioned with her right cheek to the ground, her skin felt chilly and moist, and the smell of the earth assaulted her nostrils. Shion sat up while brushing dirt off her face.

It was a pumpkin patch.

Shion was surrounded, quite literally, by mountains of pumpkins. The gourds were piled high, such that the lowest heaps measured roughly as tall as her, while the tallest ones towered at around two to three times her height.

Shion had no clue how pumpkins were grown, but she didn't believe they would naturally form mountains like these. The organizers must have deliberately placed them like this about the venue. That theory was corroborated by the existence of numerous hollowed-out pumpkins with light sources inside. The dark sky indicated that it was the middle of the night, but the light from the pumpkins ensured sufficient visibility.

As for why there were pumpkins, the reason was immediately obvious.

Shion recalled the name of the game—Halloween Night.

She tugged at the clothes on her body. She had been dressed in a black robe. A black pointed hat rested on the ground nearby. That was the outfit: a witch costume for a Halloween-themed game. Upon picking up the hat, Shion discovered a basket with a handle

underneath that was filled with various individually wrapped treats, including candy, cookies, chocolates, and mini-donuts—yet another essential item for Halloween.

It was common knowledge in the industry that any food found in a game would not be poisoned. Food items only served one purpose: to stave off hunger. Even in escape games that pitted players against lethal traps, food represented a safe haven. As this was Shion's thirtieth game, she was well aware of this principle. That was why she had no hesitation in taking out a person-shaped gingerbread cookie from its wrapping and sticking it in her mouth. But the next moment—

"……?!"

Shion had a violent coughing fit.

Unable to endure the feeling, she spat out the cookie onto the ground. The half-bitten human-shaped cookie, now slightly soggy from her saliva, stared at her with a smile that said, *Gotcha!* Shion buried it in the dirt to deprive the thing of its sight.

The cookie was extremely *spicy.* The pungent taste was not solely that of ginger, but rather a blend of various different spices. Some sweets were intentionally crafted with distinctively overpowering tastes that made them nearly inedible, but this cookie was different: Its taste profile had not been designed for enjoyment.

What, then, was its purpose? Was it not meant to be eaten?

(2/47)

Shion wandered the pumpkin patch. No matter where she walked, however, she could see nothing but gourds in every direction. It was as if the area was a graveyard or disposal site exclusively for pumpkins, or as if every single grain of sand in a desert had transformed into a pumpkin. Their sizes varied widely; some were of an ordinary size that could be found in a grocery store, while others were large enough to fit her entire body inside.

Shion continued walking while paying close attention to her surroundings. The pumpkin walls that towered over her connected

to form paths, albeit not of uniform widths. Some paths were wide enough such that ten people of Shion's build could walk side by side, while others were so narrow they could only be traversed by curling up one's body. Shion also frequently ran into branching paths, intersections, and dead ends. Although the pumpkin patch was not as complicated as a maze, it had still been designed to be fairly intricate. The walls of pumpkins reduced overall visibility, making it impossible to discern the size of the venue and the total player count.

Climbing a wall would offer a better view of the venue, but Shion was reluctant to do so, as there was no guarantee the pumpkins would not give out from under her. As many people in the world were aware, pumpkins were spherical in shape. Since these pumpkins had been piled up into mountains without being fixed in place, they could come tumbling down at any time. Just walking near them was enough to put her on edge.

She touched her shoulder—the spot where she had gotten shot. A sharp pain ran through it. The medical technology of the organizers was capable of restoring torn-off limbs to their original condition, but it could not immediately reverse gunshot wounds. Although Shion could still move her shoulder as long as she endured the pain, she was forced to acknowledge that she was not in the best shape.

Nevertheless, her current situation was far preferable to being killed in an alleyway.

She had escaped by the skin of her teeth. If her agent hadn't felt inclined to save her, she would most certainly be lying dead. Shion had figured some players were coming after her, but she had never expected anyone to go to such lengths. Where had they obtained pistols with silencers? Regardless, now that she was being pursued by violent attackers, it was over for her. She had no prospects of staying in the industry. As soon as this game ended, she would have to immediately go into hiding.

To pull that off, she needed to survive the night. It was just her luck that this game was her thirtieth. The Wall of Thirty—a superstition that had long been whispered throughout the industry.

Around a player's thirtieth game, for some reason, accidents that seemed unfathomable under normal circumstances would occur one after another, making their odds of survival plummet. Shion had dismissed those supernatural stories as fiction, but considering that her identity had been exposed and she had been forced to flee into a game, she had no choice but to acknowledge the existence of the curse.

Shion was standing on the brink of death. That was the unshakable truth.

She heard footsteps coming from up ahead. There were three sets in total, all approaching her. The walls of pumpkins obstructed Shion's view of their source.

Were they enemies or allies? After some thought, Shion decided to come face-to-face with them. She stood in place, waiting for them to turn the corner.

Soon, three individuals came into view.

(3/47)

All three were short in height. They were kids around elementary school age, and each had on a costume appropriate for Halloween. From right to left, there was a ghost with a white cloth draped over their body, a western vampire wearing a pumpkin head with eyeholes, and a Chinese *jiangshi* vampire with a talisman attached to their forehead. Since their faces were covered, it was impossible to tell what they looked like.

All three were carrying weapons: a club for the ghost, a sword for the vampire, and a pair of *tonfa* batons for the *jiangshi.*

Shion stayed on alert. She didn't immediately flee for two reasons. First, none of the kids had ranged weapons, so she determined she had the luxury of waiting to see how they would act. And second, she sensed zero malice from the kids, despite the fact that they were holding brutal weapons inappropriate for their age. They weren't eager to enter into a violent battle—at least, not for the time being.

Shion waited patiently in place, and the children stopped in their tracks a few yards from where she was standing. The vampire in the center shook their head.

"Trick or treat!"

The shrill, falsetto voice resembled the nocturnal hooting of an owl. That, combined with the quiet volume of the voice, meant Shion couldn't pinpoint the vampire's age or gender.

Shion remained silent, but soon the vampire repeated the same phrase.

"Trick or treat!"

Shion then realized that children were staring not at her, but rather at the basket hanging from her left arm. More precisely, they were pointing at the items *inside* the basket. Given what the vampire had just said, it was clear what the three were seeking.

She pointed at the treats in her basket. "You want these?"

The kids nodded.

"Who are you anyway? Players?"

This time, the three shook their heads.

They were not players. In which case, they must have been brought into the game by the organizers. That had to be true, as they had on different outfits from Shion's and were carrying weapons.

"How many do you want? One each?"

The children nodded. Since walking up and handing over the treats directly seemed dangerous, Shion tossed a bag to each kid. They ripped open the wrappers and, as Shion had done earlier, ate the food without the slightest hesitation.

The next moment…

"…Hee! Hee! Hee!"

The children squealed as they broke out into a run.

Unlike Shion, they did not spit anything out onto the ground. They frantically ran about, as if trying to withstand the spicy flavor spreading inside their mouths. Soon, two of them disappeared, and the third one stumbled over a pumpkin before immediately getting back onto their feet and vanishing.

"…Now I get it," Shion muttered to herself once the area fell

quiet. “So that’s one rule.”

There were likely many such children wandering the pumpkin patch. Any player who encountered them would have to give each kid a treat. Refusing to hand any over or having none on hand would result in a “trick”—which most likely involved being killed with those threatening weapons.

She understood the mechanics of the game. Then she began to wonder about the conditions for victory. Was this an escape game where players had to exit the pumpkin patch before running out of treats? Or was this a survival game requiring them to stick it out until the children had murdered a certain number of players?

Shion looked inside her basket, which now had four fewer bags than it had started with. Would it be possible to replenish her stock? Were there extra treats hidden somewhere in the pumpkin patch, or would she have to steal from other players? In the latter case, obtaining a weapon from a kid would prove helpful, but would she be able to get her hands on one?

She could feel herself starting to focus on the game.

She pulled down the sleeves of her robe to hide her arm tattoos and resumed walking.

(4/47)

Yuki woke up.

(5/47)

It was no natural awakening. Yuki sprang up and took stock of her situation in no more than three seconds. She had joined her forty-fifth game—Halloween Night. It was nighttime, and the game was, by all appearances, set in a pumpkin patch. She was wearing a black robe, and a pointed hat lay on the ground beside her. She had been put in a witch costume to match the game’s Halloween theme.

Yuki turned her attention to the source of her awakening—

multiple sets of footsteps coming from nearby.

She scanned her surroundings. Mountains of pumpkins restricted the paths available to her, but at the very least, making a quick escape from the area did not seem impossible.

However, Yuki did not flee, as the beings whose footsteps were inching closer gave off no hint of malice. Ever since her encounter with the psychopath in Candle Woods, Yuki had gained the ability to sense such signs in the air; she could tell if someone was friend or foe without the need to look at them. Dusting off dirt from her robe, Yuki stayed where she was.

Three children appeared. Like Yuki, they were all dressed in costumes appropriate for Halloween. From right to left, there was a ghost, a western vampire, and a *jiangshi*. Their short statures suggested that they were around grade school age, but since their faces were covered, Yuki was unable to verify the truth.

"Trick or treat!" said the vampire in the center.

Their voice was awfully shrill, like that of a hamster being strangled. Yuki remained perfectly still and carefully observed the children.

"Trick or treat!" the vampire repeated.

Each of the children was carrying a weapon. The ghost had a club. The vampire had a sword. The *jiangshi* had a pair of *tonfa* batons. Since Yuki had not been supplied a weapon, and since it appeared the children would only say the same phrase over and over, she concluded they were not players. The organizers must have brought them here as an element of the game.

Next, Yuki considered the vampire's words: *trick or treat*. Obviously, she knew what the phrase meant, but unfortunately, she had no candy on hand, which meant "treat" was unavailable to her as an option. She had to choose "trick." And in this instance, the trick would likely involve…

What should I do? Yuki wondered.

Just then, she noticed the children were looking in an unusual direction.

Yuki traced their gazes to the witch's hat. It was an accessory of her game outfit, one that would complete her witch outfit when

paired with her robe. Curious as to why the children were looking at it, Yuki picked it up and discovered a basket filled with sweets underneath. Her doubts vanished; she had been provided with a certain number of treats in advance. Yuki grabbed a few bags and tossed one to each kid. She feared they might ask for more, but that was needless worry. The children ripped open the wrappers and tossed the treats into their mouths.

"Hee! Hee! Hee!"

The kids ran off screaming, leaving Yuki all alone.

Yuki made a confused face. Was that enough to satisfy them? For some reason, their voices sounded rather sad. That was no normal reaction to eating sweets; rather, it seemed more like how someone would react to eating something bitter, spicy, or just plain disgusting.

Yuki picked up one of the treats in her basket—a marshmallow with a ghost's face on it. While it looked scrumptious, after hearing those pained screams, she was disinclined to try it. Typically, food items found in games were a perk for players. Yuki labeled such items "game food" and always looked forward to seeing what the next game would have in store. This time, however, it seemed the circumstances were different—an anomaly.

Yuki put on the pointed hat and carried the basket on her arm.

She decided to wander around the vicinity for the time being. Yet no matter how far she walked, the pumpkin patch remained unchanging. The venue was, for all intents and purposes, a maze that was partitioned by walls formed from pumpkins stacked in piles taller than her. Most of the gourds were fully intact, but some had been hollowed out to accommodate surveillance cameras or lighting equipment. As such, there was no issue with visibility, even though it was the middle of the night.

Yuki pondered the nature of the game. Halloween Night. True to the game's name, the theme of Halloween was on full display. Yuki had also just experienced one of the mechanics of the game: Players had to hand out treats to trick-or-treating children. Since many kids wandered around the venue, it was easy to infer that the "trick" that would occur when one ran out of candy involved being killed at their hands.

However, that was all she managed to figure out. She had yet to grasp the full picture of the game. What were the conditions for victory? How large was the game? Considering recent events, Yuki felt the player count was of particular significance, as it would directly affect the probability of running into the tattooed player—the Garbage Prison killer. Although the chances of being in the same game as a specific player were fairly low, Yuki couldn't help but worry.

On top of that, there was another concern on Yuki's mind, one that was unrelated to the game at hand.

She closed her left eye and looked around with only her right eye—the eye she had gotten *examined* a few days ago. The sight of the pumpkin patch filled her retina. It didn't feel any different than when she looked with both eyes. It didn't feel like there were any issues with her vision. However, Yuki knew that was nothing more than an illusion. The deterioration of her eyesight was steadily progressing, even at this very moment.

The most she could do was avoid burdening her eye any further—

After thinking that, footsteps once again approached from somewhere in front of her. This time, however, there was only a single set. Was it another kid? Or a player? Yuki felt no danger, so she continued forward without slowing her pace. Before long, she came face-to-face with the source of the footsteps.

Yuki's eyes went wide at the sight.

She knew this person.

(6/47)

It was one of the girls from Kirihara's mansion—either Haine or Kokone. Yuki was unable to tell them apart, but it had to be one or the other. The girl was wearing a black robe instead of a dull-colored housekeeper dress, but her face and ramrod-straight posture were unmistakable. It couldn't have been anyone else.

"Ah… G-good evening," Yuki stammered out, on account of her shock.

The other girl appeared to share Yuki's surprise. Haine—or perhaps, Kokone—blinked several times before responding, "Good evening."

"So um… Which one are you? Haine? Or Kokone?"

"Haine. My younger sister is not here."

It seemed Haine was the elder of the twins. Yuki posed another question. "Haine, are you a player?"

"Yes, although I have not joined a game in quite a while… But what are you doing here, Yuki? I was under the impression you had decided to not pursue the matter any further."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"……?"

"?"

The two girls stared blankly at each other for several seconds, before Haine broke the silence.

"…Don't tell me, did you join this game out of mere coincidence?"

"I guess. Is that bad?"

"No, but… You truly are lucky, Yuki."

Keito had said something similar to her before.

"Please stay calm," Haine continued. "The tattooed player is most likely in this game."

Yuki failed to follow the girl's instructions and was taken aback. Even though she had only just vowed to not burden her right eye any further, both of her eyes reflexively shot wide open.

"I joined this game in pursuit of her."

"Um… How do you know she's here?"

Details about when and what game a player had joined were kept confidential. If such information was made publicly available, multiple players could join forces and enter the same game as a team.

"She and I expressed our intention to join a game at nearly the same time," Haine said. "I have been searching for the tattooed player ever since you and I met…"

The girl explained the entire situation to Yuki. About how Haine and Kokone had teamed up with Keito and dozens of other players to look for the tattooed player. About how they had managed to

track her down with a little luck. About how they had been inches away from a successful assassination, when the tattooed player had contacted her agent and escaped by joining a game. About how Haine had called her own agent moments later and agreed to enter a game, assuming it to be the same one the tattooed player had joined.

"The tattooed player is a girl by the name of Shion," Haine said. "She is around middle school age, and besides her tattoos, she has few distinguishing characteristics. Have you seen her?"

Yuki shook her head before adding, "I haven't, unfortunately."

"I see."

Yuki glanced in the direction of Haine's arm. She was not looking at the girl's arm, nor did she have tattoos on her mind; rather, she was checking the contents of Haine's basket. The girl had fewer bags of sweets than Yuki.

"Um, by the way, have you run into any kids yet?" Yuki asked. "Ones in Halloween costumes with face coverings. They have weird voices and go, 'Trick or treat'…"

"Yes, multiple times," Haine responded.

That made sense, since the girl had presumably been awake and playing longer than Yuki.

"What kind of game is this?" Yuki asked. "I'd appreciate it if you could explain the rules…"

As Yuki had done moments before, Haine shook her head. "I do not understand much of the game myself. Do we simply have to escape from this pumpkin patch? Must we wait until a certain number of players are killed? Will we need to continue handing out treats until the children are full? All those possibilities are still plausible at present.

"However," Haine continued, "if I were to offer you my personal assessment of our situation, I believe clearing this game would be most difficult if it is a *survival game*."

Oddly enough, Yuki shared the same opinion. Children would attack players unless they were handed treats. A survival game would enable the nastiest rules imaginable from that setup. And considering the nature of the games, the most difficult, nastiest rules

imaginable were the most likely to actually be reality.

"I wish to search for Shion, so if you will excuse me." Haine politely bowed. "I pray we may meet again."

The girl passed by Yuki, who watched as Haine grew smaller and smaller, until the girl finally disappeared behind a wall of pumpkins.

(7/47)

Haine strode briskly through the pumpkin patch.

She had been shocked to learn *that girl* had also joined the game. Haine had been half retired as a player and was not up-to-date on industry rumors, but she had learned of the girl's background from Keito.

Yuki—the girl who had slain Kyara, the psychopath who had sent hundreds of players to their graves.

If that was true, then it was entirely possible Yuki would accomplish something similar in this game. Just as she had eliminated the threat of Kyara in Candle Woods, she could very well be the one to take down Shion, the tattooed player who had committed a large-scale massacre in Garbage Prison.

Haine was unsure as to whether that would be a welcome outcome or a vexing one.

After all, she wished to take Shion's life with her own hands.

(8/47)

Haine and Kokone were servants of the Kirihara residence. Like how Kirihara had quit being a player and transitioned into becoming a tattoo artist, the two girls had left the player life some time ago to begin working for the woman. Although they had not fully retired, for all intents and purposes, their careers were over.

Several years had passed since they first began serving Kirihara. Haine felt a deep bond with her master. They were like family—no—*more* than family. Kirihara was far more important to Haine than

those people had been.

Haine and Kokone were runaways, having fled from home before even finishing middle school. They never explained the reason to anyone, nor did they have intention of explaining—not even to Kirihara. They intended to take the secret to their graves. However, if there was anything Haine was willing to say, it would be that the motivational aphorism "expressing gratitude to your parents will lead to happiness" was by no means a principle that applied to all households. Likewise, the saying that went, "home cooking loses its flavor only when you have forgotten your gratitude toward your parents" was a foolish idea championed by those blessed with respectable parents. Young people were moving away from the countryside not because of inconvenient transportation or because rural areas were inherently unappealing, but rather because they had grown tired of the people living there. In any case, Haine and Kokone did not want to spend even a single second more with the creatures who had given birth to them, and so, like cats aware of their own impending death, they had left home without warning.

Unfortunately, Japan was not such a forgiving country that two minors could fend for themselves. To carry on living, the two of them became players. Thanks to the organizers, they were able to secure the basic necessities of clothing, food, and shelter, but at the cost of constant brushes with death. Unless they continued on as players, they would lose the protection of the organizers, and without the support of the organizers, they could not survive on their own.

And then Kirihara extended a helping hand.

She was a former player and understood full well the twins' situation, so she took them in as servants. As a result, Haine and Kokone were able to quit being players. While Kirihara's line of work meant that their lives were not entirely free of danger, they had managed to escape the violent world where death could befall them at any time.

One day, Haine had asked Kirihara why she had saved them.

"—I simply wanted the extra help," Kirihara had answered. "It's not like I have any praiseworthy desire to save people. You two are

the only ones working for me, right? Even though I could hire a hundred people if I so wanted."

Kirihara had dodged the question, leaving her true feelings unknown. It was possible she had been too embarrassed to speak the truth, or maybe she had been truthful about simply hiring them on a whim. Regardless, Kirihara was Haine's one and only savior.

And she had been ripped away from out of nowhere.

Haine had not been unprepared for the possibility. After all, Kirihara was a former player. Anyone who had cleared close to thirty games had the potential to have sparked plenty of grudges along the way. Even after Kirihara became a tattoo artist, her background necessitated she take on clients of dubious character, so she was by no means a saint. If the reason for her murder had to do with her work or background, it would not have been difficult for Haine to accept.

Yet—what was *this* madness? Kirihara had been killed because of a game she had absolutely no involvement with, for the sole purpose of destroying evidence. How could something like that go unpunished? It was completely outrageous. Haine had no intention of taking it lying down.

It's my turn, Haine thought. *I'll kill that girl and avenge my master however I can.*

To chase after Shion, Haine had joined her first game in half a year. However, she could not care less about the game itself. She was fine with sacrificing her own life to bring Shion down. Survival meant nothing to her, as long as she could kill that girl. That was why Haine was making little effort to boost her chances of clearing the game. She made no attempts to evade the children upon sensing their footsteps, nor did she try to steal treats from other players. She was not looking for ways to replenish her basket, either. Her attention was devoted to searching for her target in the pumpkin patch, as she generously handed out sweets to the children who occasionally crossed her path.

Haine ran into Shion when her basket had been depleted by half.

(9/47)

Shion was leaning against a large pumpkin.

Haine could clearly make out her figure thanks to the light coming from inside a nearby pumpkin. Although the girl's robe covered her arms, making it impossible to confirm the presence of tattoos, Haine remembered the girl's face and physique.

Shion was already looking at Haine. It appeared she had noticed her appearance from the sound of Haine's footsteps. However, there was clearly surprise on Shion's face. She must have been expecting to see children rather than a player, as the girl had already adopted a throwing posture, with her basket in one hand and a treat in the other. Haine watched as Shion let go of the candy, which fell back into her half-empty basket with a rustle.

Haine tensed up.

Her wish had been granted. She had located Shion. However, this was the time to remain calm. The critical part was about to begin. Letting her slip away would accomplish absolutely nothing. Haine had to finish her off here, once and for all.

Shion reacted the same way one would respond to encountering any other player. She showed no signs of having intuited Haine's identity. That was not surprising, for the two of them had only encountered each other once before, and back then, Haine's face had been covered. Shion couldn't have known that Haine had been among the vigilante group that had attacked her, and that the maid had joined the game in pursuit of her. And obviously, there was no way for Shion to know about the fierce grudge rooted in Haine's heart.

Calm down.

Don't lose yourself to your emotions and pounce.

Just sidle up to her and bring her down in one fell swoop.

"—Good evening," Haine said, adopting a veneer of calm. She was comfortable with acting as a servant, so her performance was surely convincing.

"…Hello," Shion replied.

The girl's response oozed with caution. Even if Shion regarded Haine as just another player, she still remained wary. Considering the rules of the game, that was the natural reaction. The majority of players Haine had encountered along the way had responded in the same fashion. The only exception was that phantom-like player, Yuki, but even she had probably been on her guard beneath the surface.

In this game, running out of treats meant death. As such, it was normal to want to secure as many as possible. There were two primary ways of achieving that—either by hanging on to the treats already in one's possession or by increasing your supply.

Haine had learned just how difficult the former option would be. According to another player she had encountered, the children were not simply wandering around the venue; they had full knowledge of the players' locations. Even if a player attempted to avoid detection by hiding in a mountain of pumpkins or by burying themselves underground, the kids would be able to find them without fail. That player had speculated the children were either watching the footage from the surveillance cameras or receiving players' location data from transmitters embedded in treats or baskets. Haine was inclined to agree; the very foundation would crumble if it was possible to evade the children by simply hiding.

In comparison, the latter strategy—increasing one's supply of treats—was extremely simple to envision. To say nothing of how easy it would be to pull off, the method was immediately obvious: *steal from other players*. The purest form of robbery, without the frills of a trick or treat. Haine had already seen evidence of several muggings already having taken place. An empty basket on the ground next to a trail of blood that had turned into white fluff via the Preservation Treatment. A brutally dismembered corpse of a player, despite it being far too early in the game for anyone to have run out of candy. Shion must have also witnessed such scenes, which would explain why she was being cautious toward Haine.

Haine didn't expect to be able to get within arm's reach of Shion. That meant she would have to use a *projectile.* Haine silently bowed and resumed walking—not toward Shion but rather toward a destination past where the girl was sitting. Right as she passed in

front of Shion, however, she made her move. With her body blocking one of her arms from Shion's line of sight, Haine slid the handle of her basket from her elbow along her forearm, across her wrist, and into her palm. Then she balled up her hand into a fist and firmly grasped the handle.

The next moment, she hurled the basket at Shion, treats and all.

(10/47)

Embarrassingly enough, Shion had utterly failed to notice the other girl moving. She hadn't seen or heard anything. The next thing she knew, the basket hanging from the girl's arm had moved to her hand and was now flying through the air. Shion could only respond with the amateur maneuver of instinctively guarding herself by lifting up her arms.

By the time the basket hit her arm and fell to the ground, scattering treats everywhere, the other girl was standing right in front of her. She was around high school age, which made her much larger than Shion. Taking advantage of their difference in physique, the girl grabbed Shion by the shoulders, causing Shion to flinch in pain and rendering her unable to resist as she was pushed against the wall of pumpkins behind her. The other girl let go of Shion's shoulders and began throwing punches at her face. One punch. A second punch.

When the third punch came, Shion managed to guard by grabbing the girl's fist.

Then she grabbed the girl's other arm. Their hands occupied, the two girls grappled with each other. In the course of the struggle, Shion's pointed hat fell onto the ground, and the part of her robe covering her right arm flipped back, exposing her prominent tattoo in the moonlight. Her opponent glanced at it for a second before immediately returning her gaze to Shion.

"I have been looking for you," the girl said, unexpectedly striking up a conversation. "Now I finally have you. I won't let you get away."

"Huh…?" Shion's face stung where she had been punched.

Wincing from the pain, she replied, "Who the hell are you?"

The girl had spotted one of her tattoos. If she had heard the stories of Garbage Prison, she must have realized that the person behind the incident was none other than Shion. So why had she not lost the will to fight in the face of such a dangerous player? Why had she been looking for Shion?

The answer was revealed to her seconds later.

"I'm Haine—Kanami Kirihara's servant."

Shion was startled. She had no memory of seeing such a girl when she'd visited Kirihara to get a tattoo long ago.

"She hired a servant?"

There came no reply. The girl—Haine, apparently—casually shook off Shion's hand from hers and threw another punch at Shion's face.

Kirihara's servant. The question of why the girl was here could wait. Shion had to go on the counterattack, and fast. But much to her chagrin, she was unable to mount much of a resistance as the barrage of punches continued. That was no surprise, as their size difference was far too great. At fourteen, Shion was not yet fully grown, while her opponent belonged to an older age group. Body size played a significant role in determining the outcome of a bare-knuckle fight. There was nothing Shion could do. Despite being an expert at killing—or rather, *because* she was an expert at killing—Shion knew full well she was completely helpless. All that mattered for strength was one's height and weight. And everything depended on who could get on top of the other. The only way to upend that principle would be to introduce a weapon into the fray.

Shion attempted to search for anything she could use against her assailant, relying on her sense of touch.

She located a pumpkin that was around the size of a rugby ball.

Even grade schoolers knew that pumpkins were hard objects. Shion had long thought about using one as a blunt weapon. And since she was currently being pressed up against a literal wall of pumpkins, finding one small enough to wield with one hand presented no trouble whatsoever. Showing no mercy, Shion thrust down the gourd straight at Haine's head.

However, she missed her target.

The exact moment she attacked, Haine had created distance between them.

Shion wondered why as she felt her arm swing through the empty air, but the answer came to her one second later in the form of a stinging pain in her stomach.

"……!!"

Agony.

Haine had kicked Shion in the pit of her stomach. Shion slumped forward, unable to properly breathe. After somehow managing to find the energy to lift her head, Shion watched as Haine picked up the pumpkin she had dropped.

Shit, she thought.

Shion felt as though she was being pulled apart; her body refused to budge, while her mind urged her to move.

It was nothing short of luck that the force of Haine's kick sent the wall of pumpkins crashing down.

(11/47)

Shion had anticipated the possibility that something like that would happen. The pumpkins were neither fixed to the ground nor tied together by string. In fact, it had seemed strange to her that such round objects could remain stable when stacked on top of each other.

As a result, Shion was the first to react when the pumpkin wall began to sway. Dashing away at the speed of a fleeing hare was impossible on account of the pain in her stomach—but she managed to retreat by crawling out of range of the pumpkins that rained down onto the ground at the mercy of gravity.

Whomp, whomp, whomp, whomp. The sound of pumpkins slamming against the ground and hitting other pumpkins filled the air, like a large drum being beaten over and over.

While on all fours, Shion looked back. Dust was rising up from the soil. Pumpkins lay scattered all over the ground. However, Shion

cared for neither of those facts. There was only one thing on her mind—whether Haine had escaped in time. The gourds that had made up the wall were of various sizes. Some were adorably small, while others were giant enough to be lethal upon landing on someone's head. Had it worked? Was Haine dead? Had the pumpkins cracked open her skull?

There was no verbal reply from the girl. Instead, Shion learned the answer when a pumpkin came flying through the dust.

In a fluster, Shion scampered to dodge the attack. She resumed moving on all fours in an attempt to leave the area as quickly as possible.

"Get back here!" Haine shouted from behind. "How dare you keep on living freely after killing dozens!"

The girl's accusation made no sense to Shion.

"Isn't that a given?!" Shion replied. "Why the hell would I ever off myself?! Don't try to lay blame on me!"

"That's rich coming from a murderer!"

"Like you're any different!" Shion shouted. She snapped back not only for the reason that she despised being on the receiving end of an argument, but also in the hopes that speaking would get some chemicals going in her brain that would let her move even the slightest bit faster. "You're here for revenge, yeah? So what? You think killing is any different if it's for vengeance? If it's in a game? If it's to settle a duel? If it's for someone else's sake? Like hell it is!"

Shion continued to roar. "Former players have no right to complain about getting killed! It's like us right now! We're just two people messing around, fighting to the death! That's all there is to it, dumbass!"

"Silence! Don't think you have the right to say anything more!"

Shion felt a tug on her body. She turned around to see that Haine had grabbed her ankle. Before Shion could process the fact that Haine had caught up with her, a hard stomp came down on her back. Her torso was pressed against the ground, but she felt her left leg rising up into the air. Haine had lifted it up. Shion didn't stop to wonder why the girl had done such a thing.

Immediately afterward, the pain Shion had expected rocketed

through her left leg.

"…AAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!" Shion screamed.

Her leg was broken. Nothing beyond her left shin felt like it was part of her body anymore. She didn't know exactly what had happened—whether she had been kicked or struck by a pumpkin. The result was the same regardless—she would no longer be able to walk.

Haine grabbed Shion by the hair and pulled, likely trying repeat the same action with Shion's head. Shion lacked the strength to resist, but since her heart refused to give in, a beaming smile spread across her face like that of a jack-o'-lantern. But the next moment—

"Trick or treat!"

(12/47)

That shrill voice, characteristic of a prepubescent child, had come from up ahead. Now that Haine was lifting her head, Shion had a direct view of the source of the voice.

Standing there was a child dressed like a Japanese-style ghost, with a white kimono and a triangular cloth on their head. Their face was hidden by long hair that reached all the way to the ground, and they held a spiked bat with both hands.

A kid.

Shion questioned whether a Japanese-style costume was appropriate for a Halloween-themed game. Then, a second later, she realized it was obvious the kid would come. The collapse of the pumpkin wall had generated quite the loud noise, which would draw any nearby children. In fact, it was rather fortunate there had only been one kid in the vicinity.

"Trick or treat!" the child repeated.

Shion scanned the area. There were no treats to be seen. That was no surprise, for Shion had left behind her entire basket when she fled. The same was true for Haine, whose basket had rolled onto the ground after hitting Shion's arm. Both baskets had almost certainly been crushed under the pumpkins.

Consequently, neither of them had the option to choose "treat." It appeared that Shion was not the only one to realize this, as Haine was also frozen in place, unable to deal the finishing blow to her sworn enemy.

Shit, this is bad—

Just as Shion was sensing the urgency of the situation, she felt a strange texture against her left elbow. It had escaped her notice during the fierce struggle, but *something* was inside her robe. Shion slowly lowered her arm until the object dropped into her left hand.

It was *a treat*—a block of nougat that appeared to be densely packed with calories, to be exact.

"……?!"

Shion frantically hid the treat in her sleeve to prevent Haine from seeing it.

Then she was filled with confusion. Why? How? She had no memory of keeping a secret stash in her robe, and she didn't remember seeing any nougat in her basket. So where had it come from?

Shion could think of only one possible explanation. At the start of their battle, Haine had thrown her basket at Shion. It had hit Shion's arm, causing the treats inside to scatter and fall onto the ground. One of them must have slipped inside Shion's robe. Nothing else made sense.

What are the chances? she thought. Given the collapse of the wall as well, evidently, Lady Luck was shining down on her today.

"Treat! Take this!" Shion shouted, tossing over the nougat.

Her stamina had been nearly depleted, but she had enough for one arm swing. The nougat failed to reach the ghost child and instead landed on the ground slightly in front of them, but they took a few steps forward and picked it up. Apparently, they had acknowledged it as a "treat."

"…You bastard! Where did you get that?!" Haine shouted as she slammed Shion against the ground.

With a pumpkin—presumably the object she had used to break Shion's left leg—Haine struck Shion multiple times, trying to kill her before the ghost child could act.

Despite being on the receiving end of a beatdown, Shion was in high spirits. She had managed to turn the tables on Haine. The jack-o'-lantern smile she had shown out of a refusal to admit defeat now became one of gloating in victory.

The ghost child stuffed the nougat into their pocket. The reason they did not eat it immediately was likely to wait for the other player's response.

"Trick or treat!" the kid said for the third time.

Appearing to determine it would be impossible to finish off Shion in the current situation, Haine left Shion's side and ran over to where the pumpkin wall had collapsed—the location of her treats.

However, she was too late.

"Trick!" the kid said, before chasing after Haine.

(13/47)

"Trick!" a voice called out.

Haine turned around. The child from earlier was running toward her and swinging around the spiked bat, hair flying in all directions. Even a relatively inexperienced player like Haine could sense intense bloodlust emanating from the kid's body. There was no doubt about it—players who failed to hand over treats would be murdered in cold blood.

Haine felt relief upon seeing how fast the kid was running. The child's legs were far shorter than Haine's, and the extra weight of the spiked bat would present a burden. They would not be able to catch up to her on foot. Haine was frustrated at having been unable to finish off Shion, but there was nothing she could do about it at present. She had to shake off the kid and return to finish the job—

The very next moment, Haine realized her thinking had been naive.

The spiked bat flew through the air and silently lodged itself into the side of her torso.

"Gah…?!"

Haine was propelled forward. She rolled over once or twice before

flopping face down on the ground. With her vision turned sideways, Haine saw the ghost child, along with the spiked bat, which had also rolled onto the ground.

No way. A kid isn't strong enough to throw a bat that large—

That was when it occurred to Haine that the kid had been brought in by the organizers. They were no ordinary child. Just as how players underwent the Preservation Treatment, that kid must have also undergone a body modification procedure, one that would certainly be prohibited by the rules for a player.

The child picked up the bat and approached Haine.

Haine glanced every which way. Ironically, because she had been propelled forward, she had reached the area with the collapsed pumpkin wall—the location where the contents of her basket should have been scattered. Haine crawled around like a cockroach, desperately searching the area for a treat…

…and found one. A cream puff. Miraculously, it had maintained its original shape, having avoided being crushed by a pumpkin.

"…Treat!" Haine thrust the cream puff at the kid, who was now right beside her.

However, the child did not cease their rampage. With a large swing, they slammed the spiked bat down onto Haine's head.

Apparently, once "trick" had been declared, there was no going back. Haine was slammed against the ground. She went rigid, both physically and mentally. She was at the mercy of the ghost kid, who continued their attack.

While being beaten and kicked to no end, Haine cursed the injustice of the situation.

Why? Why must I die here? Shion's the one who deserves to die. I'm in the right. She's the evil one here. How could the wall collapse so conveniently for her? How could this kid show up at the perfect time? Why must everything go her way? It was the same back then. If her agent hadn't rushed to her aid, we would've taken her out right then and there. Why is fate on her side?

Even though I'm the one who's done everything right.

Even though I'm the one who's lived an earnest life.

(14/47)

It took less than a minute for the ghost child to brutally murder Haine. Afterward, they tossed the nougat from Shion into their mouth and ran off screaming. Shion was amazed the children didn't get stomachaches from consuming so many spicy treats.

Then Shion let out a sigh of relief. She had escaped by the skin of her teeth. If even one thing had failed to go her way, she would most certainly be dead. She had been in crisis mode for several days now, but somehow, she was always being saved at critical moments. She had never given it much thought, but perhaps she had the devil's own luck.

I can't stay here, Shion thought. There was no way that ghost kid had been the only one to hear the wall collapse. Other children and players might show up at any time, and before they could, Shion had to collect the treats underneath the pumpkins.

Dragging her battered body and left leg, the end of which could no longer move, Shion got back to playing the game.

She had yet to realize what the damage to her body would come to mean.

(15/47)

Yuki heard a scream.

(16/47)

It came from nearby. The instant she heard it, Yuki ceased wandering around and froze in place.

Moments later, a group of players appeared from farther down the path. There were three of them, and they were all basketless. Panic lined their faces, and there was blood all over their robes in

the form of white fluff. None appeared to have been injured, which meant the bloodstains had come from someone else.

Pursuing the three players were two children: a mummy and a zombie. Each was carrying a giant weapon. The mummy had a saber, while the zombie had a ball and chain. Both weapons showed *signs of use*, as they were covered in white fluff. Those facts painted a picture of the situation: The players had belonged to a group of four or more and were fleeing in panic after one or two of their comrades had been killed. It was too early in the game for anyone to run out of sweets, so either the players had been robbed or they had made a careless mistake.

As Yuki analyzed the scene playing out before her, the two kids swung their weapons with great ease, despite how large the objects appeared in their small hands. The saber wielder sliced a player in half, while the one with the ball and chain smashed in another player's skull. The final player tripped over the body of the latter and fell to the ground. The mummy and zombie inched closer and closer.

"…Damn brats!" the final player shouted.

The player picked up a pumpkin from the ground nearby and hurled it at the zombie, but their last-ditch effort failed to reverse the situation. The zombie made no attempt to guard, instead letting the pumpkin strike their head, standing unflinching as though they were a stone statue. The kid then moved of their own volition, swinging the chain with a growing intensity before slamming the iron ball into the player. The impact launched the player into the air and over the wall of pumpkins, and seconds later, the sound of a crunch signaled the end of her life.

Once their job was done, the mummy and zombie turned to Yuki.

"Trick or…" "…Treat!"

Yuki grabbed two pieces of candy from her basket. After witnessing such violence, she had no choice but to go with "treat." Normally, in this kind of game—a game with "executioners" hunting down players—she would have the option to fight back and eradicate all threats to her life, a strategy that had taken center stage in the recent amusement park game. However, the kids' performance just now proved that such a strategy would be

impossible in this game. Their monstrous strength and rock-solid defenses were far from ordinary. Their bodies must have been modified, just like that of Riko from some time ago. Challenging opponents of that nature would be an act of folly.

Yuki tossed over the candies. The children picked them up, put them in their mouths, and ran off screaming. As they disappeared from view, Yuki wondered if they were being forced to act like that.

She looked into her basket. Her supply of treats was running low.

After parting ways with Haine, Yuki had explored the pumpkin patch. Her working theory was that this was a survival game, but she still couldn't discount the possibility of it being an escape game, and it wasn't in her nature to just sit on her hands. While wandering the venue, Yuki had repeatedly run into children, which gradually chipped away at her remaining number of treats. Her supply would last her quite a while, but would it be enough for the remainder of the game?

As those thoughts passed through her mind, Yuki continued exploring.

Soon, she heard another scream.

(17/47)

Shortly thereafter, several sets of footsteps filled the air.

One set came from nearby, while multiple others were slightly farther away. It was impossible to judge based on the sound alone whether they belonged to players or children. Was a treat-less player being pursued by children, or was a chase taking place between players? Whatever the case, a conflict had erupted.

Yuki quickly scanned her surroundings. She was in the middle of a straight, unbranching path bounded by walls of pumpkins. There was nowhere to hide. If whoever was making those footsteps came this way, she would have no way of avoiding them. Steeling herself for the worst-case scenario—combat—Yuki proceeded forward.

Before long, the source of the first set of footsteps appeared. It was a rather plump player. Her robe fluttered in the air as she

frantically dashed down the path. Although her stout build was apparent even underneath the robe, she was running rather fast for someone of her size—implying that her life was in danger. She was tightly gripping a basket with her round hands, but her pointed hat was nowhere to be found. Her hair was tied in double buns, which resembled swollen head bumps seen in comics or cartoons.

Upon spotting Yuki, the girl screamed, "Help! I'm being chased! Please help me!"

Yuki immediately clocked the girl as a novice, not only based on her body size, but also because she was seeking help from a stranger with whom she had no cooperative relationship.

The plump girl got closer and closer. Yuki could very well have taken advantage of the girl's momentum to throw a cross-counter punch, but since the girl appeared to be nonhostile, Yuki decided against it. The girl came to a stop right in front of Yuki and brought her hands to her knees while huffing and puffing.

"Um… I'll…give you…half my treats," she said.

Yuki stared silently as the girl offered up her basket.

The next moment, they were joined by eight players, each with a robe, a pointed hat, and a basket. Unlike the plump girl, not a single one of them was chubby or wide-eyed. Instead, they were all glaring like hunters who had just spotted their prey.

After spotting Yuki, the eight players grew visibly surprised. Since they had noisily rushed over, they must not have noticed Yuki's footsteps. However, their shock lasted only a second before transforming back into sharp glares.

"Hey there, miss," greeted a player with black-and-white hair. "You can guess what we want, right? Trick or treat. Hand over your candy like a good girl, and we'll spare you any trouble."

Yuki had stepped straight into a hunting ground.

Those eight players must have banded together to steal candy from the plump girl. Robbing other players was the simplest strategy to avoid running out of treats, and forming a team would be a practical way to go about it. Although working in a group would necessitate collecting more candy, generally speaking, fighting eight-on-one eight times would be easier than fighting one-on-one once.

Even with the current situation being eight-on-two, that principle did not change.

Yuki heard a rustle. The plump girl was placing treats into Yuki's basket—advance payment.

Fine, Yuki thought. It wouldn't hurt to replenish her dwindling supply.

"Forget it," she declared to the eight players. "You're not getting any from me. If you think you can pull off a trick, I'd like to see you try."

There was no response. The predators quietly approached.

Yuki pegged these girls as intermediate players, from how they carried themselves and how they seemed not to recognize her, a forty-five-game veteran. Furthermore, their strategy of forming a team and collecting candy by targeting lone players was also indicative of their level of expertise. They were semi-experienced, such that they were accustomed to the games yet lacked extensive knowledge of them. Although confronting a group of eight represented a daunting prospect, Yuki was confident she could fight them off no problem.

Upon reaching that conclusion, she dashed forward. In response, the group did the same. The two sides clashed under the light of the moon…

…and the fight ended within ten seconds.

Yuki punched the first player's stomach and landed a low kick into the Achilles' heel of the second, causing the two to writhe in agony. A third player threw a punch from farther behind, but Yuki dodged the attack, grabbed the player's arm, tossed her to the ground, and stomped on their back. She then grabbed the head of a fourth player, who attempted a tackle from the left, slamming it against the skull of a fifth player, who was charging from the right. A sixth player sneaked up from behind, but Yuki grabbed her robe and hurled her entire body at a seventh player. Looking around for the eighth player, she saw them running at her with a pumpkin the size of a human head being used as a blunt weapon. Yuki swept the leg of that player just as they stepped off the ground, toppling them over. She caught the pumpkin that flew out of their hands and dropped it,

causing a *thwack*—to echo loudly in the ear of the eighth player as it hit the ground next to them.

"…Victory is yours," the eighth player said.

"Good game," Yuki replied.

(18/47)

"I'll take a little from each of you," Yuki said while placing the other players' baskets in a line.

The eight players nodded silently. Each of them was hurting somewhere, be it their head, arms, legs, stomach, or back.

Yuki grabbed a handful of treats from each basket. While taking everything was an option, she opted not to do so. It would be difficult to move around with an overflowing basket hanging from her arm, and if she cornered the market on treats, she would face a greater risk of other players forming teams to target her. And so Yuki figured it would be wise to claim only a moderate amount of spoils. Still, when combined with the treats she had received from the plump girl, it was enough to fill her basket to full capacity.

Yuki left the area, continuing down the single path bounded by walls of pumpkins. After getting out of earshot of the players behind her, Yuki let out a sigh of relief. Her body had moved just as she had wanted it. For now at least, it appeared she had no issue fighting in close quarters against multiple opponents.

The battle earlier had allowed Yuki to not only replenish her supply of treats and rescue the plump girl but also to confirm her current condition. She had wanted to test exactly how much she could see and the sharpness of her instincts. Since she hadn't run into any issues in her previous game, Cloudy Beach, she didn't expect to face any sudden impediments, but confirming as much still came as a relief.

Regardless, teams were already starting to form in this game, implying that an understanding of the rules and the sense of urgency born from them had spread among the participants. The game had finally reached a major turning point. If Yuki's

assumptions proved correct, conflicts between players would only continue to escalate. She stretched her shoulders, bracing herself for what the game would have in store.

At that moment, she heard footsteps coming toward her from behind. Yuki turned around to see the plump girl from earlier following her.

Just as Yuki began wondering why, the girl spoke up in a quiet voice, a significant departure from her frantic tone from before.

"Please let me go with you."

"…Huh?"

"Oh, no, um…"

The plump girl abruptly went quiet, as though searching for the right words. Upon finishing her pondering, she said in an energetic voice, "I mean…

"Please take me on as your protégé!"

(19/47)

As in many other industries, the concept of mentor-protégé relationships also existed in the death-game industry. Yet when compared to those other fields, these connections were far more significant in the world of death games. Since a single failure meant losing one's life, and the risk of sustaining fatal damage always lingered, learning on one's own—that is, learning by trial and error through repeated mistakes—was tremendously difficult. Tips and tricks for survival would be passed on from mentors to protégés, and from those protégés to the next generation of players, along with additional teachings added along the way. That cycle had been how players' techniques had evolved collectively over time. Yuki herself was no stranger to that tradition. She had inherited perhaps the most valuable techniques in the entire industry from Hakushi, a legendary ninety-five-game veteran.

Yuki had seen how the players around her tended to start taking on protégés after clearing thirty games. She herself had long anticipated the possibility that the time would come for her to pass

down what she had received from her predecessors.

As such, the proposition was not an outrageous one. Not by any means.

(20/47)

"My name is Tamamo," the girl said, abruptly introducing herself.

Yuki thought the name—which contained the Japanese word for *ball*—was a perfect match for her appearance, but she decided to keep that to herself.

"Um… What did you just say?" Yuki asked.

"Please take me on as your protégé," Tamamo repeated clearly.

Yuki had, in fact, not misheard.

"Where is this coming from…?" Yuki asked.

While hemming and hawing, Tamamo replied, "My agent told me to find a mentor if I want to survive a long time. And well, I want to be like you…"

It was common knowledge in the industry that a player's ability to find a mentor early on greatly influenced their lifespan. Evidently, some agents explicitly urged their players to do so.

Yuki tried picturing the girl's frame of mind. While finding herself on the brink of death being chased by malicious players, she suddenly runs into a phantom-like player. After frantically requesting help, she watches that player wipe the floor with her pursuers in less than ten seconds flat before casually leaving the scene—

Looking back, it had been quite a dramatic turn of events, one that painted Yuki almost like a hero in a Western. Yuki had viewed the situation as simply a transaction involving treats, but it wouldn't be strange if Tamamo now regarded her as a knight shining armor—nor would it be strange for the girl to want to become her protégé.

"No." Yuki shook her head. "I've decided to not take protégés. Sorry."

Although Yuki believed she would have to pass down her techniques to someone one day, she was not yet mentally prepared to take on such a responsibility. She hoped to politely turn the girl

down, but…

"Please, I beg of you," Tamamo persisted.

"Out of curiosity, do you know who I am?"

"……? No. We've never met before… Right?"

Apparently, the girl had made the request without knowing Yuki was a forty-five-game veteran and one of the few survivors of Candle Woods. While Yuki was somewhat impressed with the girl's discerning eye…

"No," she repeated. "Especially not a girl with hair in two bunches. Brings back bad memories."

"Okay, I'll let my hair down…" Tamamo undid the buns on her head.

"Wait, wait, wait, that's not the problem here."

"Then what can I do to make you say yes?"

She's surprisingly stubborn, Yuki thought. Looking back, Yuki realized Tamamo had managed to run away from her pursuers despite her disadvantage in body size, which suggested she was resilient when the going got tough.

"Fine," Yuki relented. "If you want it that badly, I'll take you under my wing."

"…Thank you very much!" Tamamo gave a deep bow.

"Let's go ahead and get started with your training." Yuki pointed in a random direction. "For now, head that way."

Tamamo did as instructed, without showing any hint of mistrust.

The next moment, Yuki kicked the back of the girl's knees—a foot sweep. Since Tamamo was already unsteady due to her body shape, the added force to her knees caused her to completely topple over. She fell onto her bottom and rolled on the ground like a snowball. Yuki took advantage of that opportunity to dash off at full speed.

"Lesson one!" Yuki shouted. "Improve your physique! Sorry, but that body won't keep you alive for long! Keep running around until you slim down; once you're able to catch up to me, you pass! Then we'll move on to lesson two!"

Yuki was spouting utter nonsense. Humans could not slim down that fast just by running around. The task would be impossible to achieve by the end of the game. In other words, Yuki had essentially

said good-bye.

"Ah, wait!" Tamamo cried out. There was despair in her voice, as if she had realized Yuki's trickery.

However, Yuki would not stop to wait for even a second. She took off as fast as she could, away from the girl.

"At least tell me your name! Please!"

Yuki figured there would be no issue with telling her. "It's Yuki!" she replied. "Written with the characters for *ghostly* and *demon*! See you again, maybe!"

"I'm excited to work with you!" Tamamo's voice came flying through the air from far away, barely reaching Yuki.

—In time, Yuki would come to gravely regret that entire conversation.

(21/47)

Shion threw punches at a player's face.

(22/47)

Shion had gotten on top of that player and was mercilessly pummeling her with her fists. Since she had already dealt more than enough damage, her opponent was virtually unable to mount a resistance; all that was left was to wait for that "virtually" to become a "completely." Shion kept throwing punch after punch, half for the purpose of knocking out her opponent, and half for the purpose of releasing her pent-up anger.

Soon enough, the girl stopped moving. Shion didn't care if she had fallen unconscious or died. She lowered her fists and left the area while dragging her left leg, which Haine had injured.

As she made her exit, she stole the basket lying nearby on the ground, which belonged to the player she had just beaten up. The relief of having escaped a crisis washed over Shion as she looked

inside the basket and found it had a decent number of treats.

After fighting off Haine, Shion had searched around the collapsed pumpkin wall, but to little surprise, most of the treats she found had been crushed. She thought they would be okay as long as the wrapping had not come undone, but when she had tried handing them to the kids, they told her no with shrill voices. They would only accept treats in their original, unbroken forms.

Shion had managed to recover a few that were barely intact, but that meager amount brought her little comfort. Her supply was dangerously low. She smashed open a number of pumpkins and checked inside them and also dug around the area where the wall had collapsed, but she came up empty-handed. There seemed to be no treats hidden in the venue, beyond the ones supplied to players at the start of the game. This had led her to conclude there was only one way to restock—stealing from others.

And that was one of Shion's greatest skills.

Compared to fleeing from a vigilante group armed with guns and fighting a player unleashed by revenge, robbing other players was like taking candy from a baby. Using her battered body to her advantage, she had pretended to be a pitiable player whose treats had been stolen, then approached another player while asking if they could share their supply. Although the player did not share any, Shion succeeded in getting close enough to leap at them and beat them unconscious before stealing their treats. That kind of petty crime was child's play for someone who had taken out over a hundred players up to now.

However, she erred just now by taking too long to silence the player. The girl had let out a scream, which meant any children and players who heard it would come rushing over shortly. Shion was fleeing as fast as she could, dragging her left leg behind her, scraping her robe across the ground, but alas, her efforts ended in vain.

She heard multiple sets of footsteps that were not her own.

Shion's injured leg kept her from moving very quickly, so escape would now be impossible. She had no choice but to face down the group of approaching individuals.

It was a group of four players, looking for all the world a gang of thugs.

"Oh? *Someone's* loaded," one of them said with an eye on Shion. That player had so many piercings on her face that she could very well have set a new Guinness World Record.

"Hand over that basket," that player said, sticking out her hand. "Obey, and we'll let you off easy."

"Try to take it from me," Shion spat in response. She beckoned the players forward.

Interpreting Shion's reaction as a show of bravado, the group approached without showing any hesitation. The player with piercings tried to grab her by the chest…

…but the entire fight lasted less than ten seconds.

Shion struck the girl in the chin and pushed her over while she was reeling from the attack. Hoping to avoid the numerous piercings, Shion repeatedly punched the player's stomach instead of her face. A second player approached to assist her teammate, but since she had no piercings, Shion fended her off with an unwavering punch to the face. A third player grabbed Shion's shoulders from behind, and although Shion winced momentarily from the pain of her bullet wound, she forced that player away with a reverse headbutt. The fourth player came charging with a pumpkin, but Shion swiped it away and slammed it into that player's head.

The fourth player fell onto the ground. Shion lifted up the pumpkin to continue her assault. As she raised her arms, her sleeves rolled down, revealing her tattoos. The player, evidently aware of the rumors, suddenly turned pale.

"Wait, don't tell me—"

"If only you'd realized it sooner."

Shion swung down the pumpkin. The player's dying scream cut through the air.

(23/47)

After killing all four players, Shion stole their treats.

It had been a walk in the park. Haine had given Shion trouble because she'd gotten the jump on her, but whenever Shion fought calmly, this was the inevitable result. Shion would never have let that team of four get the better of her.

Although she had managed to refill her supply of treats, there had been another scream. Shion spurred on her aching body to make a hasty retreat.

But yet again, more footsteps filled the air, and yet again, Shion encountered another group of players. This time, there were five of them. Upon spotting Shion, they demonstrated a clear eagerness to fight—a natural reaction, as they were staring down a single, lonesome player. Shion did not look strong by any means, and she had taken so much damage that she couldn't even stand. Targeting weakened prey was good practice in a hunt. It was infuriating, but Shion had no choice but to accept her reality.

I'll make you regret this, Shion thought. She adopted a fighting pose, but then—

Shion thought back to the mechanics of the game.

(24/47)

While walking around the pumpkin patch, Yuki looked up.

The color of the sky had yet to change.

(25/47)

In her previous game, Cloudy Beach, her group had used the motion of the stars to track time, but that was only possible because of Airi. Yuki did not possess such a skill. All she could gather was that the sky was pitch-dark and it would be a while before dawn broke. She had no idea how much longer the game would last.

Halloween Night—a game themed around All Hallows' Eve. From the name of the game and the design of the venue, Yuki had assumed it would be a survival game like Cloudy Beach. Even after

the game had reached a turning point, she still believed in her theory, though she continued to explore the venue just in case. According to her hypothesis, players did not need to escape from the pumpkin patch or wipe out the children; they simply had to stick it out until morning. Clearing the game would be as simple as making it through the night by handing out treats to children until players could see the light of day. Since the game was dubbed Halloween Night, it would end once the night was over—an extremely simple setup.

The average survival rate of death games hovered at around 70 percent. Following that statistic, it would make sense for players to have been supplied with at least 70 percent of the number of treats needed to placate the children. In fact, it would most likely be closer to 80 or 90 percent, or perhaps even over 100 percent of that amount. It was possible there were enough treats in the game for all players to survive.

However, Yuki believed the actual survival rate would be far, far lower. After all, the game had a truly fiendish mechanic—one far more fiendish than it appeared—which was born out of the uncertainty surrounding the rules. Just like in Cloudy Beach, players in this game were provided very little information. The size of the venue, the number of players and children, and the necessary number of treats were all unclear. Yuki's theory about it being a survival game was also unconfirmed, and even assuming it was true, it was impossible to accurately gauge when dawn would break, and there was no guarantee the game would end after a single night.

Amid these circumstances, only one rule was clear: The children would play a *trick* on any player who had no treats. That rule shone brightly like a streetlight in the dead of night. The only survival strategy players could rely on was securing as many treats as possible. And in order to do so…

Players had not been ordered to steal from each other, but the idea would naturally spring to mind. Yuki saw it as a rather cunning method of psychological manipulation. What player wouldn't want to replenish their supply after seeing their basket grow emptier and emptier from the children's repeated requests for treats? At least,

Yuki couldn't dismiss the urgency. Thanks to Tamamo, Yuki had fortunately not needed to attack anyone, but if she had found herself with her back against the wall, she would have considered doing so.

The players' desire to secure an ample supply of treats would translate to many deaths. That was the mechanism behind the game.

"…I wonder if Haine's okay…," Yuki muttered.

Haine had been pursuing the tattooed player—Shion, if memory served. Yuki was worried over whether Haine had succeeded in exacting revenge, yes, but she was also worried about the *aftermath.* It would be difficult to avoid injury in a battle against the player who had been behind the large-scale massacre in Garbage Prison. And if Haine came out of the battle injured, even with just a little bruise on her face, her chances of survival would plummet drastically.

Sustaining even a tiny injury in the early stages of this game would place one at a clear disadvantage.

As all players had likely figured out by this point, the only way to replenish one's supply of treats would be to steal from others. To maximize success, it was crucial to target those who appeared weak. As such, injured players were ripe for the picking—which thereby made them *susceptible to getting hurt even more.*

It constituted a vicious cycle. An injured player would be targeted for their injuries, which would cause them to sustain more injuries, which would turn them into an even greater target. That cycle would repeat itself and continue wearing them down. Consequently, one had to avoid taking damage at all costs. Those who found themselves in a weak position would only have salt rubbed in their wounds. Even the slightest injury would quickly multiply all over a player's body like reproducing mold.

(26/47)

The injuries quickly multiplied across Shion's body.

(27/47)

"...Die!"

From a seated position, Shion kicked a player who had collapsed onto the ground. Although she had cursed at them to die, her victim was already dead, having left this mortal coil after attempting an attack on Shion and being met with a counterattack. There were two similar corpses lying nearby on the ground. They had been a team of three.

Shion placed her hand on her burning forehead. One member of the dead trio—the girl whom Shion had just kicked—had been defiant to the end, cutting Shion's flesh. The girl had scratched all over her with fingernails that had been sharpened into blades. Touching the wound caused feelings of resentment to bubble back up, and Shion kicked the corpse once more. She used her right leg since her left was broken, but the moment she landed the kick, she felt a disturbing sensation. Apparently, she had hurt her other leg in the battle.

Shion rested her body against a wall of pumpkins.

Her breathing was erratic, and her heart pounded rapidly. The battles had continued without a break. Somehow, she had managed to protect her stock of treats, but she had no choice but to acknowledge her extreme fatigue. While she had naturally taken a great deal of physical damage, her stamina and willpower had also been drained. Worse still, she had used the last of her energy to defeat that team of three. If Shion ran into another player, she would likely fail to escape with her life.

"Dammit," Shion said.

Under normal circumstances, this game would have been a walk in the park—because of her tattoos. Tales of Garbage Prison and the tattooed player had spread throughout the entire industry. As such, the majority of players would not dare lay a hand on her if they realized her identity. Shion would essentially achieve the central mission of the game—protecting her supply of treats—just by showing off her tattoos. There was no way she would lose with that

advantage—under normal circumstances.

Haine's interference had erased her advantage. By the time Shion had realized the game could be encapsulated by phrases like "adding insult to injury" or "when it rains, it pours," it was already too late. She had become a prime target after sustaining a severe injury in her fight against Haine.

And so it went that few players wound up retreating after seeing her tattoos. Around half of them appeared cognizant of Shion's identity, but naturally, none of them perceived her as a threat once they saw her sorry state. Thus, she was forced to battle the vast majority of players she encountered. At first, a few had run away after perceiving the difference in their abilities, but later on in the game, when the overall supply of candy was dwindling, not a single player had retreated, determined to settle things with their fists. Once the game had reached that point, Shion could not escape fights unscathed. She suffered further injuries, became targeted again as a result, and then suffered even more injuries. As the cycle continued, the wounds multiplied all over her body.

If only that bitch hadn't been here, Shion thought.

Haine—Kirihara's servant who had joined the game in pursuit of Shion. How had she learned about Halloween Night? There should have been no way for her to find out Shion had joined, too. Shion had assumed fate was smiling upon her when she'd managed to escape the girl, but now she no longer felt that way. She couldn't take it. How could there be a player who was solely motivated to come after her, showing a complete disregard for the game? How could Shion have been put into as dire straits as these?

The word *karma* came to mind.

What, you forgetting who you are? A girl attacking another player for reasons completely unrelated to the games—doesn't that also apply to you? How many people have you killed up till now? Gotta be at least a hundred. So how is it fair for you to be complaining someone fought back?

"Shut it," Shion retorted at the voice in her head. *I had no way out. There wasn't anything else I could do. You know that better than anyone.*

As Shion argued with herself, her displeasure amplified.

When she once again heard footsteps echoing from a distance, her displeasure reached a peak.

Don't come this way, Shion prayed. But in this game, players who offered prayers always, without exception, shared the same fate.

A group of eight girls appeared in front of Shion. They were all bruised, likely the result of an earlier fight. However, they had apparently failed to win, as their baskets were close to empty. Their faces showed a considerable amount of panic.

To them, Shion no doubt looked like a sitting duck.

None of the players stood down even after seeing the three corpses lying next to Shion—evidence of her combat prowess. They silently approached, without demanding she hand over her basket or saying "trick or treat."

"You itchin' for a fight?" Shion sharpened her glare. "Then you best be prepared."

Shion rolled up her sleeves, revealing her arm tattoos. She hoped the players would retreat, but instead…

"What's that supposed to mean?" one of the players asked, completely indifferent. "You eager to show off your tattoos?"

They were unaware of Shion's identity. The ignorant fools.

(28/47)

Everyone has a first time for everything.

The first time Shion committed murder, it was against her parents. She never explained the reason to anyone, and she didn't have to, either. They were people who had driven her to want to kill them—that was all that needed to be said. If she had to explain further, she would describe her parents as people who wouldn't hesitate to abuse the power of words, which, according to one theory, were said to be mightier than the sword. And violence was the only method at her disposal to silence people who could trump her in an argument by commanding a vocabulary far eclipsing her own.

The second Shion killed her parents, she was overcome by a sense of freedom and achievement. *I did it. I succeeded. I beat the people who gave birth to me. Now I can finally be free—*

An instant later, she realized that feeling was but a fleeting illusion.

Since then, the desire to kill others had taken root in Shion's heart. She longed to relive the refreshing feeling of her soul being purified down to its core, the sensation of realness she had felt on that day. She found it impossible to distract herself from that thought. With each passing day, her desire to kill grew stronger and stronger, until it finally began torturing Shion's mind around the clock.

Shion was cursed.

That was why she became a player. A world where she came face-to-face with death. A world where no one could throw around platitudes like "treasure your life." She believed it was the perfect place for someone like her. In that world, Shion could run wild to her heart's content, without fearing what others might think.

However, that belief, too, was nothing but an illusion. That was only natural. Whether you were on the surface or under it, any place where people gathered was a form of society, and the ultimate vice of any society was stripping others of their freedom. Even in this world, people like Shion were unwanted. She would never find a place where she would be welcome. She couldn't live in this world without hiding her true self. A shadow even in a realm of shadows—that was the position she had ended up in. And so, while continuing on as a player, she secretly fulfilled her cravings in the darkness, killing others without being caught.

That was when Kyara reached out a helping hand.

(29/47)

Shion focused on fighting a defensive battle against the team of eight players. Although her opponents were far below her caliber, that was her only strategy, given her condition and the number of

her opponents. The players acted awfully cautious, perhaps due to already having tasted defeat once. Even though Shion was injured, none of them risked approaching her, instead resorting to hurling pumpkins from afar. Shion tried defending herself with her robe and counterattacking by tossing pumpkins back, but she was unable to reverse the tide of battle.

At last, the decisive moment arrived, and a pumpkin hit Shion squarely in the back.

The blow to her spine caused her body to freeze up.

(30/47)

Kyara—the player who would later enter the limelight due to the events of Candle Woods.

When Shion had met her, however, she was no more than an average player. Like Shion, she was a homicidal maniac who acted in secrecy. The two of them had been cut from the same cloth, and Kyara was quite possibly the only person in the world who would accept Shion for who she was.

In addition to Shion, Kyara had taken in two other teenage girls. One was a player by the name of Moegi, who apparently idolized Kyara. The other was a player called Hizumi, who was a complete enigma. Shion lived with Kyara and the two of them for quite some time.

In the house, Shion spoke with Moegi the most. Since the two were close in age and had both escaped from their parents, they got along well. Moegi would always talk about how she had lost everything due to being a good girl and acting exactly how her parents wanted, and how she was going to change herself by learning how to assert her own will under the guidance of Kyara. Shion figured Moegi was the kind of person to fall for shady self-improvement programs. Although she felt bad about it, she couldn’t see Moegi lasting very long.

On the other hand, Shion rarely spoke with Hizumi, for the girl wasn’t someone you could hold a conversation with. Hizumi had

quite a difficult personality; one moment, she would act all spacey, like an android who had been born from culture fluid the previous day, and the next moment, she would flip a switch and blow her lid. Shion was curious as to how much would be enough to make the girl to fly into a rage, so she would test Hizumi's limits through all kinds of pranks, such as filling the bathtub with ice-cold water or setting up a flopping fish toy in the girl's bed. The scene of Shion running away from a knife-wielding Hizumi became a regular sight in the house. Practically half of Shion's combat skills had developed from her bouts with Hizumi. In that sense, perhaps they could be said to have engaged in close communication.

Lastly, Shion also learned many different things from Kyara. Some lessons were useful, such as trusty methods of hiding a body and efficient ways of destroying a human corpse that took advantage of the Preservation Treatment. Other pieces of wisdom were more dubious, such as how to determine a person's time of death from the growth of maggots on their corpse, and the benefits of skinning a victim after killing them. Shion would also sometimes ask Kyara for advice on topics that would concern a teenage girl, such as the meaning of life and how she should live. She had no intention of becoming Kyara's protégé, but in the sense that Shion had learned much from her, Kyara could be called Shion's mentor. The woman's guidance was a major reason Shion had managed to survive through twenty-nine games.

Shion had found things fun back then. For the first time in her life, her days had been filled with happiness.

However, those relationships were doomed to be cut short.

That was of no surprise—you could hardly build a stable community around a homicidal maniac. No matter how much the girls tried to stay hidden, the world would eventually seek to purge them.

Moegi and Kyara were the first to die. Kyara had apparently been unable to suppress her urges and went berserk in Candle Woods, a game with over three hundred players. Shion had figured Moegi would be a goner, but Kyara's demise was difficult to swallow, for the woman was someone who seemed invincible even upon death. To

this day, Shion would sometimes wonder if Kyara was still alive somewhere out there, but even if she was, with Shion unaware of her whereabouts, the woman was as good as dead.

With their leader, Kyara, gone, the remaining girls' shared living situation also came to an end. Shion would occasionally reach out to Hizumi even after that, but she had lost contact with the girl a short time ago. According to Shion's agent, the girl had died in a game that had taken place around the same time as Garbage Prison.

And so Shion was left all alone.

She felt like a wave too massive for her to handle was crushing her. She imagined this was something that had happened repeatedly throughout history. Just as how controversial customs like foot-binding and suttee had been banned, just as how spiritualism and corporal punishment were being eliminated for their barbaric images, just as how smoking and smokers were being driven to a corner of society, Shion felt that she, too, would soon be erased.

This world is improving, day by day. People like me will disappear from the earth. The death of the others, and my own death, are nothing more than a small part of that cycle of renewal.

Somewhere, deep down, Shion had known this was her fate even before Garbage Prison. Although she had continued making efforts to survive, she had half given up on life.

Anything that was not welcome by the majority would disappear from the earth—that was an ironclad law that could not be defied.

Isn't that obvious? You're realizing that way too late, dumbass.

(31/47)

Fortunately, Shion's attackers spared her life. Unlike her, the group of players showed no interest in killing, nor were they driven by revenge like Haine. They simply hurt Shion so badly that she couldn't resist anymore and stole all her treats. Not only did they take the ones in Shion's basket, they also searched her entire body and swiped the ones she had been hiding in her robe as a safety

net.

The eight players walked away, leaving Shion lying helplessly on the ground. She could no longer move. Every inch of her body cried out in pain, and it required all her energy just to continue existing. All Shion could do was open her eyes and stare at the ground nearby.

Upon doing so, Shion had a bizarre reunion.

Next to her on the ground was a broken gingerbread cookie. The way it was broken was familiar—it was the cookie she had spat out immediately after the start of the game. That meant she was back at her starting position. She had circled back without realizing.

Shion recalled having buried the cookie in the dirt, but now it was sticking out aboveground. It must have gotten dug up during her fight against the team of eight.

The grinning face of the human-shaped gingerbread cookie stared straight at Shion.

"What're you looking at?" Shion grumbled.

Shion scowled at the cookie, but it continued to smile, remaining completely still. While applauding it for its toughness, Shion used the last reserves of her strength to pick up the cookie.

She was not thinking of giving it to a kid. After all, she had already confirmed the children would not accept treats that had come free from their wrapping, even if the shape was still intact. She was not planning to give it to anyone—she had picked it up to use on herself.

Shion ate the cookie without wiping away the dirt.

The same pungent flavor she had tasted several hours prior spread throughout her mouth. This time, however, she did not spit out the cookie. She gnawed at it several times before swallowing it. Almost immediately, her entire body was overrun by shock, as she had consumed something that was by no means edible. Her pulse increased, her body temperature rose, and her mind cleared. Her arms and legs regained some vitality. The gingerbread cookie had granted strength to Shion—the pure strength of throwing caution to the wind when staring death in the face.

It was a *pick-me-up.*

Shion sat up. She dragged her barely mobile body and began making her way to the destination she had in mind.

She didn't mind dying—but before she met her end, she was going to give that servant's face a beating.

(32/47)

Yuki noticed the sky was brighter.

(33/47)

Just a little longer, she thought. The end of night would signal the end of the game. However, the precise timing remained unclear—would it be the exact moment of sunrise or would she have to wait for the sun to be fully visible? Either way, Yuki was glad to have noticed a change that confirmed the passage of time.

Yuki looked inside her basket. She had a small number of treats remaining. Considering the pace at which her supply was depleting, she would likely have enough to last the rest of the game. There was no need to replenish her stock. All she had to do was move around and avoid losing any more treats by evading the children and other players as much as possible.

Yuki had continued to explore the pumpkin patch on the off chance the game was actually an escape game, but she found no exit. The mountains of pumpkins must have been set up around the perimeter of the venue to prevent players from escaping. And so, upon sensing no need to explore any farther, Yuki stationed herself in one particular spot, breathing quietly to avoid being detected by the children and other players.

However, the sound of footsteps heading her way forced her to act.

Moving with hushed steps, Yuki covered her left eye and looked in front of her with only her right. She had been occasionally doing that to monitor changes in her vision.

The scene reflected in her eye was no better or worse.

(34/47)

Before the start of Halloween Night, on the day Yuki visited Kirihara's mansion—

After finishing her business at the house and returning to her apartment, Yuki was greeted by her agent. Following her agent's instructions, she was brought to a hospital—one that was presumably tied to the organizers—to undergo a medical exam. Alas, the results she soon received could not be described as joyous.

"—It is a relief your condition does not require immediate attention," her agent had said on the ride back from the hospital.

"…Ideally, it wouldn't ever require any attention," Yuki jested in a tone that ran contrary to her true feelings.

She was *gradually losing her vision* in her right eye, or so the exam results indicated.

In Candle Woods, Kyara had severely damaged Yuki's right eye. Her vision had recovered without issue and had held up for a year, so Yuki thought everything was fine—but in reality, her eye was a ticking time bomb. As her agent had said, her condition required no immediate attention, but her vision loss was progressing steadily. At the hospital, she had been told to prepare for the worst-case scenario of complete blindness in her right eye.

She had yet to notice any visual changes. She had heard somewhere that the human brain would automatically fill in gaps in a person's vision, such that they wouldn't notice any glaring changes even if they became blind or impaired in one eye—yet the fact remained that the vision loss was real. Yuki trusted the medical team of the organizers and her agent. What they said about her condition was likely true.

Furthermore, while Yuki had not noticed any visual changes, the diagnosis had not completely come out of left field. She had shown several instances of carelessness as of late—making a mess in the craftsman's workshop, and scattering around her coins, for example.

If she were to continue as a player, such an occurrence would eventually happen in the middle of a game. If her symptoms progressed, her problems would only worsen.

This would not be her first time losing a body part.

For example, the appendages from her middle finger to her pinkie on her left hand were prosthetics. There were also countless times where she had gotten injured during games, losing her limbs, hair, scalp, and plenty more. Shedding body parts was by no means a novel experience to her.

Despite that, she had been shocked to learn of her current condition. Losing her vision would be severely detrimental. While mending part of an eye might be possible, replacing an entire eyeball was impossible under the limitations of modern medicine. Not even the craftsman would be able to help with his prosthetics. Once Yuki's vision failed, there would be no going back.

The gravity of losing sight in one eye was immediately apparent. If it came to that, Yuki would not be long for this world. She hoped her eyesight would hold out for a little longer. She had only cleared forty-five games, so she was still short of the midpoint of reaching her goal of ninety-nine—

"…Maybe I should've taken her as a protégé," Yuki muttered while walking around the pumpkin patch.

The image of the plump girl, Tamamo, entered her mind. Yuki had refused the girl's request to be her protégé, since she hadn't been mentally prepared. Perhaps, however, she *needed* to take the girl under her wing. It was possible the time Yuki could remain a player was gradually nearing its end. Just as her own mentor had done, it was possible that Yuki, too, would need to pass down her teachings to someone else.

"……"

The sight in front of Yuki turned dark.

(35/47)

"—Have you ever felt like you wanted to kill someone, anyone?"

Yuki had asked her mentor once upon a time.

She couldn't remember exactly when or under what circumstances the conversation had taken place. Perhaps they had run into each other in a game, or perhaps she was being trained outside of the games. Either way, Yuki was clearly in a bad mood; otherwise, she would never have brought up such a topic with Hakushi.

"'I can't stand people who leave me behind to lead live happy lives.' 'I can't forgive society for continuing on like nothing's wrong, while I'm left to suffer.' 'I want to make everything fall into oblivion…' Have you ever felt that way?"

They had talked about this sometime before Candle Woods—before Yuki had begun her career as a player in earnest. During this time, she wasn't living a proper life by any means, yet she wasn't resigning herself to death either, making her existence that of a wandering phantom. Yuki remembered feeling as though her body were filled with a grudge that had nowhere to go.

The mentor in her memory, Hakushi, replied, "I have."

"…Really?"

Yuki found the response somewhat unexpected. She had pictured Hakushi as someone who was beyond those thoughts.

"That's just how young people are," her mentor explained.

"You say that like you're not young anymore. Master, just how old are you?"

"Who knows?" Hakushi deflected the question. "At the very least, I no longer experience the feelings that are in your heart right now."

"Why?"

"Because there's something I have to do."

What her mentor had to do. In other words, score an unprecedented ninety-nine consecutive victories in gruesome death games.

"People stabilize when they find something they can direct their energy toward."

"…Is that how it is?"

"Can't say for sure if that applies to all of humanity, but that's how it was for me."

It would be a while longer before Yuki discovered this principle would also apply to her. The goal of clearing ninety-nine games she had inherited from her mentor kept her grounded in the world of the living. Although it was not an upstanding way of life, the goal made her satisfied with herself.

But what would happen to her if she came to lose her objective as well?

(36/47)

Yuki was taken aback when she realized the path before her led nowhere. She had reached a dead end. A section of a pumpkin wall had collapsed, blocking the path.

Nearby, a player was collapsed on the ground. She was completely motionless, with white fluff jutting out from all over her body. Even from several dozen feet away, Yuki could tell from a glance the girl was dead. The player's injuries suggested she had been killed by the children. She must have gotten caught in the dead end while trying to escape. As Yuki tried picturing the situation, she approached the corpse.

Then her eyes grew even wider.

It was Haine. Although the girl's face was mangled, Yuki could tell her identity from her hairstyle and physique.

She was no longer among the living. Had she been taken out by the tattooed player? Had she managed to exact revenge but lacked enough treats to survive the game? Or had she run out of treats and gotten killed before even getting the chance to locate the target of her vengeance? Hoping it was the second case, Yuki looked away from the corpse.

She turned her attention to the dead end. Since the blockade had been formed from the collapse of a wall, the pumpkins in her way were neither stacked too high nor completely sealing the path. Conceivably, she could squeeze through by contorting her body like when walking through a crowd of people. However, that would be rather annoying to try, and she might risk causing an even greater

collapse if she bumped into the wrong spot. Deciding it wasn't worth the risk, Yuki turned on her heel.

And there…

(37/47)

Covered in wounds, Shion continued making her way to Haine.

(38/47)

She remembered the path. Although she had been too focused on running away to map out the venue once the other players had started coming after her treats, the route from her starting position to where she had encountered Haine was clear in her mind. With this being her thirtieth game, that was a given.

Along the way, she ran into only one person—an overweight player. Shion and the other player immediately went their separate ways, without entering into a fight or exchanging a single word. Shion had thought it would be physically impossible to steal treats from the girl, and the girl seemed to take no interest in someone without treats.

After passing her by, Shion wondered why someone like her was participating. Death games were a spectacle for entertainment, and players all generally had pretty faces. Though, there had been eras in the past when being full-figured was the height of beauty, and it was possible some audience members preferred such players. Besides, Shion herself had a rather plain face, so the takeaway was that individual audience preferences were extremely varied and wide-ranging.

Regardless, Shion was attacked by neither player nor child on her way to the spot where she had killed Haine. Shion had been cursed by her own fate until a little while ago, but it seemed her luck had taken an abrupt turn for the positive. It had been all over the place

lately. One moment, fortune would be kind to her, only to immediately turn the tables on her. What was that all about? What did fate have in store for her?

Thinking that, Shion reached the spot where the wall of pumpkins had collapsed.

—And there…

Two players came face-to-face.

(39/47)

It's her…, Shion thought.

A phantom-like player. Shion knew her name. Although they had never met in person, she had heard the stories. Yuki: the player who had survived Candle Woods and taken down Shion's mentor. Shion had always wanted a chance to talk to her.

But running into her here, after she had been driven deep into a corner?

Shion couldn't tell if that was good or bad luck at work.

Shoot, Yuki thought.

She had sensed the girl's presence but didn't imagine she had gotten so close. The girl was already there when Yuki turned around.

A player with wounds all over her body.

Her left leg was broken. She must have crawled here on all fours. The parts of her skin that were visible—her face and limbs—were covered with countless bruises. In fact, there were fewer parts of her body that were *not* discolored than were. Yuki could imagine the areas beneath the girl's robe were also in miserable shape. This player's flame of life was on the verge of flickering out. That had to be why Yuki had misestimated her presence.

And yet—there was a vitality in the girl's expression that did not match the damage on her body. This was Yuki's first time meeting the bruised player, but the girl reminded her of a sight she had seen

just once before—the face of a player named Moegi in Candle Woods. Moegi's earnest expression had stabbed deep into Yuki's heart back then. People could only make that sort of face if they committed to something entirely, in body and soul.

At this point, Yuki was still unaware of the significance of their encounter.

(40/47)

"…Are you Yuki?"

Yuki heard her name leave the other player's lips. While keeping a close eye on the girl, Yuki replied, "Yeah. You know about me?"

"Know you? Of course I do. You're like the enemy of my parent…"

The girl's lips twisted unnaturally, in a way that would inspire unease in anyone who saw them.

"I don't think we've met. Who are you?" Yuki asked.

The girl did not respond. Instead, she raised her arms like a surgeon entering an operating room. The sleeves of her robe drooped, exposing her skin down to her elbows.

Both arms were covered with tattoos resembling burn marks.

"This answer your question?" the girl replied. That was all she had to do.

"…You're…that tattooed player… Shion?"

"So you've heard of me."

No wonder the girl had such a bizarre aura. *This is bad*, Yuki thought. She had been so close to reaching the end of the game without encountering the tattooed player.

"Mind stepping aside?" Shion asked. "I came here to beat up that jerk."

Yuki traced Shion's gaze to Haine's corpse.

"Is this your doing?" Yuki asked.

"Yeah," Shion casually replied. "She said she came to take revenge on me, so I fought back."

Shion came even closer. Yuki stood perfectly still. As if interpreting that to mean Yuki would not budge, Shion stopped a

short distance away.

Then Shion asked, “Hey, you. What do you think of that?”

“Of what?”

“You know… The idea that revenge doesn’t solve anything. What’s your take?”

Yuki took a few seconds to think before answering. “Well, I guess it’s true. But revenge is something really personal. If someone wants to go through with it at all costs, there’s no stopping them.”

Yuki thought her answer was perfectly ordinary, but Shion seemed surprised by it.

“You’re an odd one,” the other girl said. “Here’s what I think: People who are obsessed with revenge have their heads in the clouds. Every last one of them goes on and on about what will happen after getting revenge. About how they feel empty and how exacting vengeance will make them feel better… They don’t even consider the important part: how to actually take revenge. They just swing around a blade and shout, ‘I’ll kill you!’ Talk about ridiculous. Anyone evil enough to make someone want to exact revenge on them would *fight back* when staring death in the face. And if their resistance pays off, then it’s bad news for the person seeking vengeance. Why don’t those people ever stop to think about that possibility?”

Shion continued, “Just goes to show how incapable they really are. ‘I can’t let this stand.’ ‘I have to make them pay.’ Those two little thoughts make them lose their damn minds. Meanwhile, people like me spend all day coming up with ways of attacking, hurting, and killing. You’ve got to be gullible as hell to think emotions are enough to beat me. People who aren’t grounded in reality deserve to die. They’ve got it coming. It’s the reasonable thing… Hey, do you think what I’m saying makes no sense?”

“…I do,” Yuki replied. “At least, it’s easier for me to understand people who make sloppy attempts at revenge.”

Shion chuckled. “I don’t want to hear that from you. You’re trying to clear ninety-nine games, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would you do that?”

"Well, it's hard to explain…" With her hand on her cheek, Yuki chose her words carefully. "It's the path I decided to walk down a long time ago. And because of that decision, I have to keep moving forward."

Yuki intentionally kept quiet about her current wavering feelings.

"Do you hear yourself?" Shion asked. "That's a roundabout road to suicide."

"Maybe."

"I'd quit if I were you." Shion's words contained a hint of advice. "Don't cling to a ridiculous goal like that. Otherwise, you'll crash and burn before long—just like me."

Shion stretched out her arms, as if to make a display of herself.

"……"

Upon seeing the girl's body, Yuki understood everything.

The tattooed player, Shion. Yuki did not know exactly what had driven the girl to carry out a massacre, how she had been pushed to the brink of death, or why she had offered that advice to Yuki. But the girl's face told most of the story. Shion had *lived life.* Yuki could understand that the girl had nursed a certain feeling in her heart, expressed it loud and clear, and accepted the consequences that came from it.

A vision came to Yuki, as if she was staring at a mirror. The mirror was reflecting the future. If she continued playing in games, she would end up like Shion one day. None of her arrows of conviction would land anywhere, and she would be reduced to crawling on the ground, physically and mentally battered, ruined.

After seeing this vision, a sentiment rose up inside her. And she voiced it aloud.

"I'll take that challenge."

(41/47)

It's only an eye, Yuki thought. *What's the problem? What happened to your fearlessness? What happened to being ready to die whenever? When did you start caring about survival? When did*

you start considering giving up? Idiot. Die. Die. Go off and drop dead. What's wrong with crashing and burning? Your true goal is to die after using up every last ounce of your soul. Isn't that why you've walked down the path of a player?

So see it through until the end.

"I have no intention of quitting, come what may," Yuki said, thinking about her right eye. "I'd be happy if I can die like you."

(42/47)

A vision came to Shion, as if she was staring at a mirror.

Did Yuki understand what clearing ninety-nine games would entail? One risked death playing even a single game, but repeating that ninety-nine times? The prospect of succeeding at that was as unlikely as the probability of a ball passing through a wall via quantum tunneling. Could that even be called a goal? How was continuing down that path anything but a roundabout way of committing suicide?

"I'd quit if I were you," Shion said. The next thing she knew, she was spouting off words of advice. "Don't cling to a ridiculous goal like that. Otherwise, you'll crash and burn before long—just like me."

Who are you to say anything? Shion thought. *Life would have been so easy if you had been able to do that. But you weren't, so look at where you are now: fumbling around like an idiot. "Just like me"? Get real. You really have the gall to compare your stupid ass to a human being? You're no human. Since that accursed day, you've been a demon with no respect for anyone. And because you aren't human, it makes sense a superior being would take you out. Face it already. There's not a single soul in this world who will accept you—*

"I'll take that challenge."

Hearing that statement cut short her train of thought.

"I have no intention of quitting, come what may… I'd be happy if I can die like you."

Shion carefully processed Yuki's words.

She felt her soul grow quiet. The constant turmoil inside her that

raged on whenever she was awake, regardless of where she was or what she was doing, calmed down. The feelings from when she had been taken in by Kyara and lived together with the other protégés long ago came rushing back. With just a handful of words, Yuki had granted even someone like Shion salvation.

So this is the girl who slayed Kyara, Shion thought.

It was now clear to Shion that everything had been building up to this moment. She had been made to survive this long all so that she could encounter the player standing before her.

What did fate have in store for her next?

"Trick or treat," Shion said. She looked over at Yuki's basket, which was running rather empty. "Hand that over. If you do, I'll spare your life."

Yuki instantly replied, "No."

Shion crawled up to Yuki.

(43/47)

Yuki watched as Shion crawled up to her.

Yuki kept her guard up. Her opponent was injured, but players on the brink often proved to be the most formidable, as they would quite literally fight to their last breath. Yuki was far more wary of Shion than she had been of any other player she had encountered over the course of the game.

There was no need to fight. Since this was a survival game, Yuki only needed to secure enough treats and flee. And fortunately for her, Shion's leg was broken, granting Yuki the advantage in agility. As such, running away sounded like an easy task on paper.

Unfortunately for her, however, she was cornered in a dead end. To her left, right, and back were pumpkins, while Shion was directly in front of her. Conceivably, she could squeeze through the blockade in one direction—behind her, where the wall had collapsed and blocked the path—but that ran the risk of causing the surrounding walls to give way. And since Yuki would have to slow down to pass through, there was a high risk of Shion catching up to her.

That meant her only choice was to go forward—escape the dead end by slipping past Shion.

Should Yuki dash to the left or right of her? After a moment's hesitation, Yuki settled on the latter. Going left would force her to track Shion's movements with her right eye—the eye that was now a ticking time bomb. Yuki moved her legs. Taking care to not spill any treats from the basket in her hand, she performed multiple feints before dashing to Shion's right.

However—

Like a mirror reflection, Shion dashed in the same direction and at the exact same time as Yuki.

"……!"

Yuki gritted her teeth. Her opponent had predicted her first move.

Shion ran with her arms and right leg, staying close to the ground. Although she was slower than the bipedal Yuki, she was speedy enough to be able to block Yuki's path. As Shion got closer, she lifted her arms off the ground and grabbed at Yuki's robe.

Yuki also stayed close to the ground and latched onto Shion's arms. The basket hanging from her arm swayed from the motion. Yuki instinctively looked over, but fortunately, not a single treat had fallen out. She turned back to Shion and firmly squeezed the girl's arms. In spite of that, Shion was still attempting to charge forward. Her arm strength was unimaginable for an injured person. The fight-or-flight response was working its magic.

Shion's eyes narrowed for a short second; it looked as though she had failed to blink. However, her next words made clear that was not what had happened.

"Wait a second… Are you worried about your right eye?"

Yuki's body went cold, as if a spirit had breathed on her.

She reflexively thrust out her leg. However, Shion ducked to dodge the attack. Not only that, she used her momentum to pull down on Yuki, forcing Yuki to let go. Shion retreated one, two, three steps backward, moving out of range of Yuki's arms.

Returning from a sitting posture to a standing one, Yuki began to think. *She figured it out. She knows about my right eye. How? From the color of my iris? Or did my movements make it obvious? Is that*

how she predicted I would dash to the right? No, her reaction implies she only realized it just now.

As Yuki panicked, the situation continued to shift.

Shion readied her next strike, picking up a pumpkin from the ground. Using a pumpkin as a weapon was a conventional method of attack that all players had likely attempted at least once during the game. Even Yuki had done so a number of times, and she had seen others do the same as well. And yet, Yuki couldn't hide her shock at Shion.

The pumpkin in the girl's arms was the size of a microwave.

Could adrenaline really enable such feats?

Shion threw the large object, which was quite possibly heavier than herself. Her aim was perfect, and the pumpkin came flying straight at Yuki. Since Yuki had no desire to counter the squash head-on, she moved. As she had been leaning on her right foot at the time, she shifted over to her left foot and dodged the pumpkin by moving left—

But the next moment, *a blow she had failed to see coming* struck her on the head.

Yuki was knocked to the ground.

(44/47)

Shion knocked Yuki to the ground. The girl's basket fell nearby, sending the treats inside scattering everywhere. Shion had spun on her arms to land a roundhouse kick straight out of a breakdance routine and was now observing the aftermath of her attack.

She had hit her target, much to her own surprise.

Her maneuver was simple. All she had done was slip around to the right of Yuki and kick her. She had engineered the situation by throwing a pumpkin to induce Yuki to run to the left, but that was as complicated as it got. Not only had Yuki failed to evade the attack, it seemed she didn't even notice it coming. And so the girl had quite readily toppled onto the ground, her treats going flying.

I can do this, Shion thought. *Yuki can't see out of that eye.*

Doesn't seem like she's fully blind, but she'll miss things if I complicate the situation. It's over for her as a player. With vision problems, she won't be able to fight in close quarters.

Although third-rate players might be deceived, a player of Shion's caliber would easily be able to take advantage of Yuki's weakness. Despite being battered and bruised, Shion would stand a fighting chance. Once again, she thought this was her lucky day—

Soon after she saw that glimmer of hope, a large number of approaching footsteps echoed by. Shion had been so focused on fighting that she hadn't noticed them earlier. This was no time to be mocking Yuki. The next thing Shion knew, *they* were lined up, shoulder to shoulder, as if to block her escape from the dead end.

Children—over ten of them in total.

Shion realized the sky had brightened. The end of the game was nigh. All the children in the venue were probably gathering around the living players, demanding oodles of treats as the ultimate finale.

"Trick!" "Or!" "Treat!"

The children spoke in unison.

Shion and Yuki looked in the same direction—at the basket on the ground. It had fallen right next to Yuki, a short distance away from Shion. The treats inside along with the ones that had fallen out added up to less than twenty in total—not enough for both players to select "treat."

Both players likely made this connection at the exact same time. And at the exact same time, both players began to act. Yuki grabbed the treats that had fallen near her and started tossing them at the children. Shion dashed as fast as she could toward Yuki, making use of her momentum to attack the girl. Yuki grabbed Shion's arms to defend herself, resulting in the same situation as earlier. This time, however, the deadlock did not last for long. If they wasted any time, the children would brutally murder them both. They gave up scuffling with each other and instead turned their attention to the treats scattered on the ground, kneeling down and swiftly maneuvering their hands to grab as many as they could.

"Trick or…" "Treat!"

The children made their second declaration. Shion and Yuki's

struggle intensified. Since there were not enough treats for them both, they needed to hinder their opponent. Slapping away the other's treat-grubbing hands. Stealing treats hidden behind the other's back. Catching candy being tossed at the children in midair. They used not only their arms but also their legs, scraping the dirt like windshield wipers to pull in treats close to them and entangle their opponent's arms. Of course, they did not forget to directly attack one another.

"Trick or treat!"

By the time the third declaration came, Yuki and Shion had each settled on the strategy of attacking one another with both arms while scraping treats towards them with both legs. The two fought with every inch of their bodies, while in seated positions. However…

"—Trick!"

Around half the children raised their weapons and came running at the two.

They had failed to meet the time limit. Neither Shion nor Yuki had supplied enough treats to all the children.

"Temporary ceasefire!" Yuki yelled at Shion.

Yuki then turned toward the dead end where pumpkins blocked the path, yet where squeezing through seemed barely feasible. As if realizing that would be the only possible avenue of escape, Yuki leaped to her feet and darted in that direction. By that point, however, Shion, too, had already started dashing on all fours.

As she moved, Shion casually slipped over to Yuki's *right side.* In order to pull off her plan, being on the side Yuki had difficulty seeing would prove beneficial. Like Yuki, Shion had decided to flee from the children, but she had not simply acquiesced to Yuki's proposition of a temporary ceasefire. Shion had a disadvantage in speed on account of her broken left leg. Since she was staying close to the ground, she had managed to maintain a decent initial velocity, but it wouldn't be long before Yuki left her in the dust. Plus, she would have to slow down to squeeze between the pumpkins blocking the path, which meant the children would naturally catch up. Shion needed to buy time. She needed a *sacrifice* to grant her the time needed for a successful escape.

Shion looked over at Yuki, who was running to her left.

Mentally, she directed a few words toward the girl.

Thanks for saving my heart.

Thanks for acknowledging me.

But—this is where you die for me.

Shion extended her arms and took aim at Yuki's legs, which were moving at great speed. Then she pounced to deal a blow that would be unavoidable and impossible to detect.

However, at that very moment, Yuki jumped, *as if she had seen it coming with her right eye*.

(45/47)

Yuki hadn't seen anything. However, she had expected an attack to come. No way would Shion be able to escape on her own with a broken leg, and the girl was, above all else, a homicidal maniac. Not a player but a murderer. Not a pro at surviving but a pro at killing. Consequently, Yuki had figured Shion would make a move. She familiar with how someone like Shion would think, having fought Kyara in the past.

And so *she could tell without needing to see.*

The right side of Yuki's field of vision was impaired. However, if she knew ahead of time that something was coming, predicting and evading the attack by sensing her opponent's malice was no difficult task, as long as she knew it was something she wouldn't be able to see.

And Yuki had gone even further than that. For she had come to *the exact same conclusion as Shion*—that simply running away would not allow her to escape from the children. That was why she had induced Shion to run to her right, why she had invited an attack, and why she had intentionally spun around as she jumped up. Another characteristic of homicidal maniacs was that they always believed themselves to be *in the position of killing.* The possibility of being *in the position of being killed*—the chance of being

counterattacked the moment their guard was lowered during their attack—would cross their mind too late. Just as how Yuki had an impairment in her right eye, Shion also had, in a certain sense, a flaw in her vision. That was the flaw Yuki took advantage of.

Spinning in midair, Yuki extended her legs. She landed a roundhouse kick to Shion's neck, causing the girl to fly off in the direction of the children.

Yuki did not stop to watch Shion's fate unfold. She turned away from the girl, kicked the ground as she landed, and took off running.

The moment she reached the dead end, she heard the sound of bones snapping behind her. It was immediately obvious what that noise represented. Yuki squeezed through a gap in the pumpkins blocking the path and continued forward. Since the pumpkins were as densely packed as passengers on a rush-hour train, Yuki was forced to reduce her speed to a fraction of what it had been. Upon turning her attention behind her, she sensed a number of children approaching. They were still in hot pursuit.

Squeezing through the narrow space, she felt vibrations through the pumpkins in contact with her body. The vibrations came at a steady rhythm—*thump, thump, thump, thump*. Curious as to their source, Yuki looked up—off intuition alone, rather than a particular suspicion. Her nose for survival was the sole reason she had been able to notice what next she lay eyes on.

A child holding a giant saw was standing on the pumpkin, directly above Yuki's current position.

Yuki reflexively crouched down. The saw passed right above her skull—no—passed *through* a fraction of an inch into the top of her skull. Pain seared in her head, and hair that had been gouged out scattered into the air around her, along with fluffy white blood.

The second Yuki realized the child had jumped on the pumpkins like stepping stones, something struck her back. It was, of course, that very same child, who had landed on her body. The impact forced Yuki to the ground stomach-first, knocking the air out of her lungs. She tried to breathe in to replenish the air she had lost but realized it was impossible.

The child was strangling her with the strength of a hydraulic

press.

Yuki attempted to rip the kid off, but they would not budge. The children had been blessed with the special grace of the organizers. They possessed great strength that would render players completely helpless.

Soon, Yuki's vision gradually began to fade in and out. Her brain slowly stopped functioning. Something white spouted out in the corner of her consciousness and rapidly invaded her head. Just as it had filled nearly every inch of Yuki's mind and threatened to cross the final line…

…Yuki heard the sound of chirping.

(46/47)

Chirp, chirp. Chirp, chirp. The noise continued to repeat over and over.

It was the sound of birds. However, it was no natural sound, for it repeated in exactly the same way and could be heard from all directions. It must have been a recording being pumped from the speakers set up inside the pumpkins.

Yuki understood it signaled the arrival of morning.

Soon, the force around Yuki's neck disappeared, as did the bloodthirst and weight coming from above. She heard footsteps heading farther and farther away. Those pieces of information were enough for her to conclude that the child armed with a saw had let her go.

The game was over. Yuki had achieved her forty-fifth victory.

She sat up on the ground and breathed in and out while rubbing her neck with her hand. It had been a close call. If the game had ended a second or two later, she would be dead by now. She had snatched victory from the jaws of death while in a far more dangerous position than in Candle Woods and Golden Bath.

Yuki looked back. Although she couldn't see past the crowd of pumpkins, she gazed in the direction where Shion's corpse should

have been.

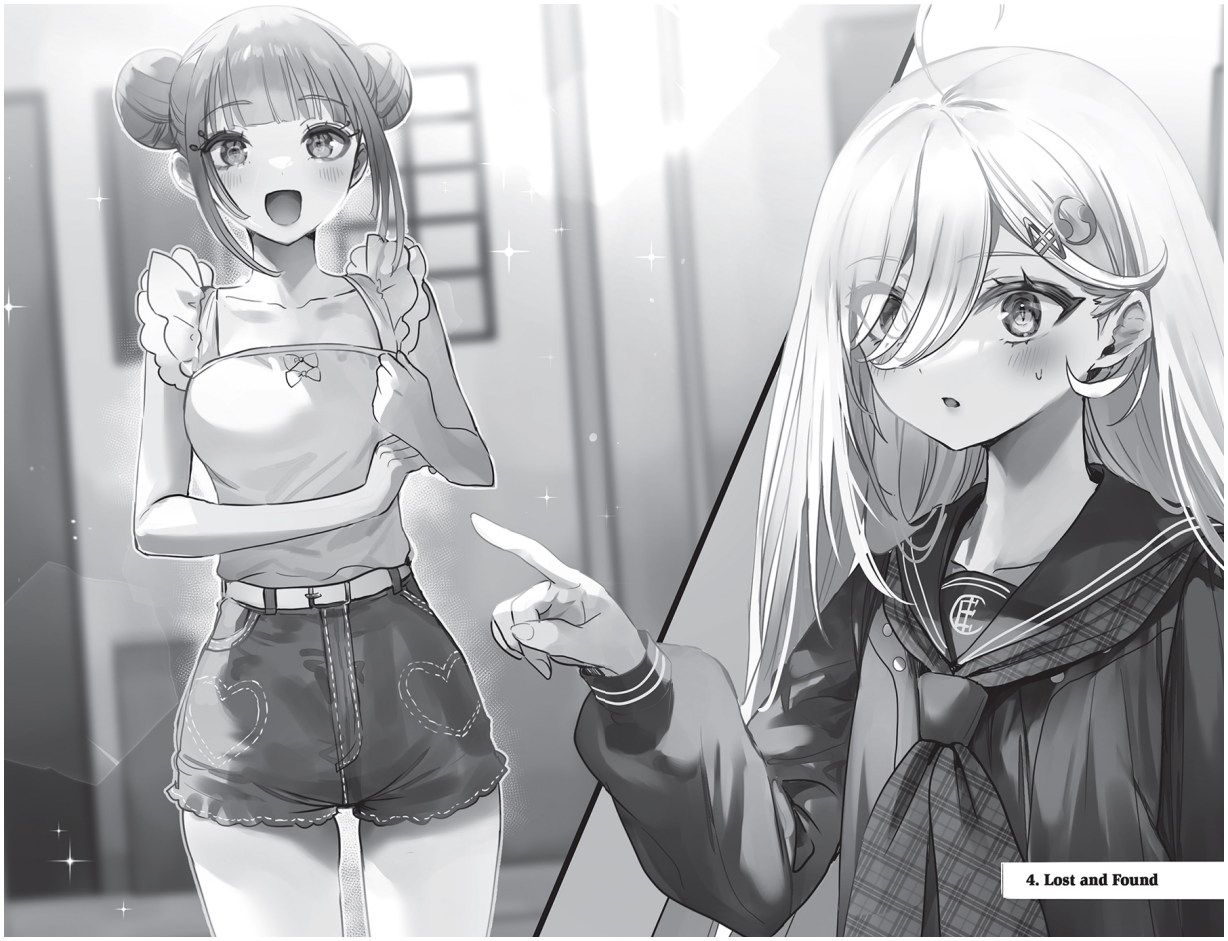
She was a strong foe, Yuki thought. *I can't believe she connected the dots about my right eye so quickly and took advantage of it. This eye of mine will be a fatal weakness against top-class players—that's the lesson she taught me.*

Regardless, Yuki had survived. However…

"…Things aren't looking good at this rate," she muttered, with a small but sure resolve within her.

It was not until her agent came to greet her that Yuki realized she had forgotten to say her usual phrase—"Good game."

(47/47)



4. Lost and Found

(0/3)

Yuki ran into Kokone on the way home from the convenience store.

(1/3)

The game had ended.

Since Yuki had been strangled and had sustained a cut to her scalp, she was taken to the hospital. Fortunately, neither injury was serious, so she was put to sleep with the usual sleeping pill and driven back home. Typically, she would either wake up in her agent's car or remain asleep until she had been carried into her apartment, and this time, it was the latter. Yuki figured she had enjoyed a longer sleep since she had faced more troubles than usual this time.

After waking up, Yuki laid splayed out in bed for quite some time. What finally spurred her to action was the growling of her stomach. Deciding to go out and buy something, she stepped out into the world of midnight. Celebrating her forty-fifth victory—was not what her mood called for, so she only bought a single bun of sweet bread from the convenience store. Cramming it into her mouth, she began plodding back to her apartment.

On the way home, she ran into a girl wearing a gentle-colored dress. It was Kokone, one of the twins from Kirihara's mansion.

Yuki was surprised. She never expected to bump into her. Forgetting to remove the bread from her mouth, she mumbled, "… Goo' eef'ning."

"Good evening," Kokone responded in a completely serious tone.

Since there was no way they had met by coincidence, Yuki asked, "Um… Is there something you want?"

"I wish to offer you thanks, as well as a gift," Kokone replied, giving a deep bow. "You have my heartfelt gratitude for defeating Shion."

"…You know about that?"

Little time had passed since the end of Halloween Night. It was hard to believe that such specific news had traveled so quickly. Did Kokone have a special information network, or had she also joined the game like Haine? As Yuki pondered the reason, Kokone answered with an alternative explanation.

"I was *watching*."

"…Watching…? You mean as a member of the audience?"

Kokone nodded. "I wished to see how my sister and Shion would end up, so I made contact with the organizers."

In which case, the girl had to be aware of Haine's fate.

"Truly, thank you very much," Kokone expressed her gratitude once more. However, her face was far from one of delight.

Yuki recalled Shion's words about how people after revenge were not grounded in reality. She had brushed that comment aside back then, but now she had to admit it made a bit of sense. Haine had likely not imagined a future where Kokone had this expression on her face.

"…I mean, it's not like I defeated her…" Yuki waved off the gratitude. "I'm not the one who dealt the finishing blow, so I don't deserve the thanks."

"Still, the fact she's dead means a lot to me. Again, thank you very much."

Being thanked for killing someone inspired an odd feeling. Since Yuki didn't want to bask in it for much longer, she changed the topic.

"So… What do you mean by 'gift'?"

"It concerns that right eye of yours," Kokone replied. "I have heard…it is not in the best condition. Is that correct?"

The girl must have come across that information as a member of the audience.

"Yeah." Yuki rubbed the spot beneath her right eye socket. "It's not too serious right now, but…I'm not sure what it'll be like in the future."

“Despite that, you still intend to play in the games?”

“I do,” Yuki responded strongly, without going so far as to disrupt the mood of the conversation.

“In which case, I may be able to help.”

“…How so?”

“I am acquainted with *a player who has participated in games despite being completely blind*.”

It took a brief moment for Yuki to process Kokone’s words. However, once her mind caught up, shock welled up in her heart. A person who had made a living as a player despite being completely blind. To Yuki, that seemed far more dubious than rumors of unicorns existing.

“Does…someone like that really exist?”

In sharp contrast to Yuki’s bewilderment, Kokone responded in a calm tone.

“She is an old friend of Kirihara’s. I hear she has retired from being a player… But I believe she must know of a method to clear games without relying on sight. Would you like me to schedule a meeting between the two of you?”

Yuki couldn’t have asked for a better gift. “Yes, please,” she replied.

“Then consider it done. Now, if you would excuse me.” Kokone bowed once again before quietly walking away.

After watching the girl disappear from view, Yuki continued on her way back home. She stuffed the sweet bread back into her mouth and began counting the things she had lost and found recently.

Things she had lost—

Visual acuity in her right eye.

Stability in the foundation supporting her, as a result of her condition.

Things she had found—

A resolution to the catastrophic game.

The experience of defeating a homicidal maniac entirely on her own.

And as indicated by Kokone, the existence of a blind player.

Three steps forward and two steps back, huh? Yuki thought.

It would be another month before Yuki learned she had actually taken *four* steps forward.

(2/3)

Approximately one month after the end of Halloween Night— Yuki had continued to clear games without a hitch. Her right eye had not worsened in that time, and she did not encounter any players capable enough to take advantage of her weakness, so she safely cleared another two games, bringing her number of victories to forty-seven.

By that point, Kokone had already contacted her about the blind player. Evidently, the player in question was living out in the countryside and was available to meet anytime. Yuki wished to leap at the opportunity to meet as soon as possible, but unfortunately, she had an issue she needed to deal with first—someone had been monitoring her at school lately. She had brought up the problem with her agent and they were now working together to figure out a solution.

One day, around that time, Yuki returned home from school as usual to find someone outside her apartment. It was neither her agent, nor Kokone, nor a resident of her building or the neighboring area.

It was an outrageously beautiful young girl.

Due to her occupation as a death-game player, Yuki was acquainted with many pretty-looking girls, but this one took the cake. She was so gorgeous, she had the opposite aura of being a little hard on the eyes. Her beauty was the kind that evoked a sense of danger, like that of a femme fatale who would tempt a king and drive the kingdom's economy into dire straits, or of a shape-shifting creature who would lure in men with irresistible looks before devouring them headfirst.

Who is she? Yuki wondered. It was reasonable to assume the girl

was a player, but Yuki did not recognize her. Although Yuki had completely forgotten about Keito, she didn't think she would forget someone who stuck out *this* much. They most likely had never met before. But even if they were acquainted with each other, why was she standing outside Yuki's apartment?

As Yuki struggled to reach a conclusion, the situation changed. The moment the beautiful girl spotted Yuki, a smile came to her face, and she ran up to Yuki with gentle steps. With a voice as elegant as her appearance, she said with a bow, "Long time no see."

Yuki saw that the girl's hair was styled into two buns on the back of her head.

"…Hello," Yuki responded half-heartedly.

The beautiful girl lifted her head and shook Yuki's hand with a hand so pale, its lack of visible veins was strange.

"I've been looking for you. Finally, I found you! This means we can move on to lesson two, right?"

"Huh?"

The beautiful girl stared straight at Yuki. Her face vaguely reminded Yuki of someone—a player she had come across in Halloween Night around one month prior. Although the girl had become almost unrecognizable, Yuki was able to identify her from her slightly plump face and her hairstyle that brought to mind swollen head bumps from a manga.

It was Tamamo—the plump girl whose name had been a perfect match for her appearance. She was standing before Yuki at this very moment, in a non-plump state.

Memories from a month ago came flooding back. Yuki had relented to Tamamo's persistence and agreed to take the girl on as a protégé. Then, as an excuse to leave her behind, Yuki had told Tamamo they would move on to lesson two if the girl could slim down and catch her. That was indeed what she had said. Still…

"You're kidding, right?"

The girl did not respond. She simply stared at Yuki with a large grin.

Afterword

Hello, this is Yushi Ukai. This is my first time in four months taking charge of this section.

Thank you very much for purchasing Volume 4 of *Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table.*

This volume featured Halloween Night, a night where the living and dead intersect. The story shone a bright spotlight on outcasts in the world of the games. One of them retreated upon sensing her time to quit, another had retired yet failed to escape her fate of death, a third was erased from the world as a result of mob mentality, and a fourth willingly let go of the peace she had once enjoyed. Watching it all unfold is Yuki, who also begins to show signs of unraveling and is left with a decision about how to proceed.

I remember having written a draft of this volume rather early on, and at the time, I was still unsure as to whether it would ever see the light of day. It is a great relief that I was able to safely deliver this to the world. I will continue to devote great efforts to writing this series, and I would be glad if you would accompany me for the journey.

Regarding the manga adaptation of *Playing Death Games* that was advertised in the previous volume, a free web serialization has begun on the ComicWalker and Niconico Manga websites. Not only will you be able to see the players come to life with stunning art

drawn by Banzai Kotobuki Daienkai, there have also been some slight changes made to the story, so please do give it a read.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my editor O and the illustrator, Nekometaru, for once again playing outsize roles in making this volume possible; Banzai Kotobuki Daienkai, for handling the manga adaptation; Yoko Taro, for submitting a comment for this volume's belly band; Yuki Nakashima, for voicing Yuki in the voice dramas… To everyone involved in this series, thank you very much.

Now, then… May we meet again in Volume 5 of *Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table.*


The mysterious, beautiful girl who appeared that day was Tamamo, the plump player I met in Halloween Night. I accepted the transformed girl as my protégé and went to visit the blind former player, Rinrin.
I had hoped to learn Rinrin's secret methods to survive games without relying on sight, but I quickly discovered she was someone with violent tendencies. After completing her training, I joined Royal Palace, a game themed around duels between swordfighters. Depth perception would come to play an important role in the game, but with my right eye in bad shape...
The phantom girl in games of death.
From spending time with an adorable protégé.
From spending time with an adorable protégé.
To getting to know a gentle older woman.
To getting to know a gentle older woman.
Even if my body gets ripped to shreds,
Even if my body gets ripped to shreds, I'll keep playing death games to put food on the table.
PLAYING DEATH GAMES TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE
YEN


Volume 5 coming soon from

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