
SWORD ART ONLINE ALTERNATIVE
CLOVER'S REGRET
3
FINAL
SOITIRO WATASE
ILLUSTRATION BY GINTA
SUPERVISED BY REKI KAWAHARA
SWORD ART ONLINE
ソードアート・オンライン

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SOITIRO WATASE
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SUPERVISED BY REKI KAWAHARA
DESIGN BY BEE-PEE

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“Pretty girls and small animals make for a fetching image.”
“You look cute, too, Detective.”
Klever
He acts extremely sketchy and is generally very aloof and slippery. An *Asuka Empire* player who calls himself a detective. His real name is Kaisei Kurei. He looks handsome, and his real-life appearance is identical to his avatar’s.
Nayuta
Age seventeen. Plays a warrior priestess in *Asuka Empire*. Her real name is Yurina Kushiinada. Goes her own way and doesn’t show emotion often.


"Mmm… Well, that has a lot to do with my and Kaisei's relationship…"
Ririka
Plays a divine archer in *Asuka Empire*. Her real name is Ririka Rougerie. An employee of Klever's company, Clover's Network Security Corporation.


"…Um, was that supposed to be a compliment?"
"N-Nayu! Your uniform jacket is so cute! And Mahiro, you look adorable! And Ririka's in a sailor-type school uniform! Just like a fetish model!"
Mahiro
Plays a tactician in *Asuka Empire*. Her real name is Mahiro Kirihara. Came to know the group when she hired Klever to look for her missing father in the real world.
Koyomi
Age twenty-three. Plays a ninja in *Asuka Empire*. Her real name is Shiori Koyomihara. She's older than the high schooler Nayuta but looks like she's in middle school. The mood maker who keeps everyone engaged.


"That nightwear is just a little too…"
"I've finished in the bath."
"…What's the matter?"

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Chapter 1 The Kuro-Hozuki Archer Princess

When he woke up that morning, Kaisei Kurei, also known as the detective Klever, could tell that his condition was poor.

His limbs felt exhausted and heavy.

The fever, headache, and dizziness he felt caused the ceiling to warp overhead.

He didn't feel nauseous, but his throat was so sore that it was agony just to swallow a mouthful of water.

In short, he was dealing with a major summer flu. The June monsoon chill had gotten to him.

He could guess how it happened, too. Klever had met with a client a few days ago who was dealing with the same symptoms, and that client had forced himself to work through it. The client's office was suffering from the chain reaction of seasonal illness and was practically a ghost town—open for business but not really.

In times past, the old-fashioned mentality was not to stay home because of a mere cold, but that kind of attitude could destroy an organization. You could get away with it when dealing with a weak, poorly transmitted virus, but if it was more than that, it was a mindset that could practically be compared to bioterrorism for all the damage it could wreak on productivity.

Guess it's a reminder that meetings like that should just be done in VR, reflected Kaisei Kurei, the president of Clover's Network Security Corporation. After all, there was no danger of catching a cold or the flu in a VR space.

The problem was that, in this instance, the client had been

consulting him about setting up his own VR office, so the initial meeting *had* to be done in person.

Clearly, this was going to take several days to recover from, but he had other work to do.

I can't manage any work in the real world, but I might be able to do tour guide work in the game. But then again…

One of the strengths of VRMMOs was that even a sick person in bed could play them, but that didn't mean that your fever went away while you were in the game.

What do I have on my schedule for tomorrow? Ah, guiding Mr. Tochimori…

That was a very, very important client.

Clearly, Klever himself needed to handle that one, but if he went through with it and ended up talking feverish nonsense, it might end up being more damaging than if he had simply canceled the appointment.

Even now, he could tell that his thoughts were quite dulled and not at their usual level. After thinking it over for a while, he rolled over and—clumsy fingers and all—managed to type out a message.

His company was not a completely solo affair. There were other employees he could rely on. He didn't want to ask someone else to take over a tour guide job, but he didn't have any other choice right now.

The screen was blurry and swirling, but after ten times longer than it would normally take, he managed to write up a single email. He didn't even have the energy to proofread it; he just had to send it and lie back to suffer the agony of the fever.

Before long, the phone rang.

"…Hello…?"

His voice was hoarse and faint. A nervous response came from the speaker.

"K-Kurei, are you all right?! You're stuck in bed with the flu?!"

"…Sorry, I can barely speak…so just send me a text," he gasped before hanging up. It was hard to listen to the call anyway, and there was no way he could keep up a long conversation.

After a while, the text message arrived, so he sat up to read it.

Don’t worry! I’ll handle the guide job for Mr. Tochimori and inform him in advance. Don’t fret and just get some rest. And don’t try to push yourself to get anything done…

Once he had read and absorbed the message, Klever simply collapsed back onto his bed and fell asleep.

§

There had been an influx of visitors to the Three-Leaf Detective Agency in recent days.

To Nayuta, who was there quite often, the increase didn’t seem particularly real.

Despite the idea of a video game tour guide sounding like a joke, it was a company that had no competitors. And somehow, being a very niche company serving a specific demand, they got plenty of requests from other businesses.

The purpose of those requests was not actual sightseeing but observation. They spoke about monetizing VR spaces, past successes and failures, consumption trends of players, and the effective use of VRMMOs for marketing and public image strategies. In short, it was all business tactics.

Many of those clients came to the agency through a recommendation from the *Asuka Empire* development team itself. If they advertised the potential business opportunities of their VRMMO themselves but did not meet the client’s expectations, it could sour valuable business partnerships. But because Klever was a third party who could speak truthfully to the good and bad parts of the medium, it was a beneficial deal to everyone involved in the long run—or at least, that was how the detective described it.

Naturally, these business referrals were only possible because of the trust between Klever and the developers. When Nayuta had helped Yanagi on a playtest of the Ghostly Orchestra event, Klever claimed that he had a very lucrative connection to the developers.

Since spring, Nayuta had assumed this connection was the

head of the error-testing team, Mr. Torao. But now she was faced with Torao's supervisor, the *real* force backing Klever, and couldn't help but be surprised by his rather charming appearance.

"Ah, hello, hello. It's a pleasure to meet you, young ladies. I've heard all about you from Torao. You were a great help to us in the whole Ghostly Orchestra business. I'm much obliged."

"Uh-huh…"

Nayuta and Koyomi—hanging out in the Three-Leaf Detective Agency office without its owner present like they so often did—weren't sure how to deal with this odd arrival.

Standing regally before them was a cat.

It was a Persian with a flat face and white, fluffy fur wearing a silk hat, a tailcoat, pince-nez glasses, a pocketwatch, and a black walking stick and leather shoes—the very image of a classic English gentleman. And yet, it was most definitely a cat.

The player's name, *Tochimori*, appeared in the menu window.

"…It's very nice to meet you," Nayuta said, recovered but unsure of what to do, and hunched down to offer the cat a handshake at its eye level. Behind the cat stood Torao, who was dressed as a Shinto priest and scratching his head.

"Erm…yeah. So this is my boss, the CTO—Chief Technical Officer—of the company, Mr. Tochimori. He's one of the company execs and the supervisor of the technical division. Basically, he's very important, but on the inside, he's a fifty-something man with a wife and kids, so please don't scratch him under the chin or try to distract him with cat toys, you. Yes, I'm talking to *you*," he said, referring to Koyomi, who was scratching the cat under the chin and dangling a cat toy in front of him.

Tochimori, however, had his eyes narrowed in pleasure and was purring happily.

"Ah. That's nice. Now, CTO sounds like a very prestigious title, but I'm basically just a longtime company engineer who's made his way up to a nice office. You're not our employees, so you can simply treat me like you'd treat any old cat."

Torao's cheek twitched. "Mr. Tochimori…are you really so desperate to cast aside your dignity and have young women fawn over you…?"

The Persian cat in the tailcoat sniffed. "You always have some

snide comment up your sleeve, don't you? Take a page out of Kurei's book. He gave me two beautiful ladies as replacement guides. That was very thoughtful of him."

"…Guides?" Nayuta asked. Klever the detective hadn't given her an advance warning about this.

Torao hastily leaned down to the cat and whispered, "No, Mr. Tochimori. They just happened to be wasting time here. Our guide is going to be Kurei's head of publicity."

"…Hmm? Not these girls? Oh. That wasn't thoughtful of Kurei at all," Tochimori said, immediately changing his tune. The sulking disappointment was cute coming from a cat, but not when you envisioned the middle-aged man actually acting it out.

Koyomi grabbed Tochimori's cheeks and pulled them apart. She murmured, "The cat…is talking…?"

"Um…Miss? We've moved on from that already."

It wasn't clear if Koyomi was actually hearing what anyone else was saying. She continued to caress Tochimori's luscious fur.

To be fair, even in *Asuka Empire*, talking cats were quite a rare sight. In the Monster Cat Teahouse and other establishments, it was a conscious choice to make most of the *yokai* silent, in part to hide their rudimentary AI. At Maneki-ya Hot Spring Resort Hotel, the black cats that ran the place could communicate with hand signals and some simple written language, but they did not speak.

NPCs who delivered quest hints and story developments were a different story, but while they could offer some rudimentary conversations, the results were not exactly natural by human standards.

Sometimes players took on *yokai* forms as a type of cosplay, but none of those forms were cats. This was a defense against people taking advantage of the system to pretend to be AI or NPCs and engage in spying or peeping behavior, so as a general rule, players in *Asuka Empire* could not transform into something smaller than themselves.

There were cases when you might be turned into something else as part of a quest or an event, but when leaving the quest, you would be put back to normal, of course.

So Tochimori's case, while seeming likely in the game's setting, was actually quite extraordinary.

I guess it's like…a special avatar that the developers can use?

She still had many questions, but there was one thing to clear up first.

“Um, you mentioned replacement guides… Did something happen to the detective?” Nayuta asked.

Torao gave her a shrug: *I dunno*.

“Apparently, he’s down with the flu. There were typos in the text he sent me, which immediately told me he was off his game. He said his assistant is supposed to be coming by to act as our guide…”

“Assistant?”

Nayuta had never met this assistant. He had mentioned having an assistant to handle the battles during Yanagi’s quest, but this assistant had proved so elusive that she was starting to doubt they even existed.

But apparently, they did.

Tochimori sat down rather regally on the couch. “We’ve come slightly ahead of schedule. I’ll make myself at home while I wait,” he said.

Torao, however, turned right on his heel. “Then I’ll take my leave and return to my work. I’m a bit swamped at the moment…”

“Ah. Good luck with that,” Tochimori said, waving a paw and exposing his beans.

Torao headed for the door, but Nayuta called him back. “Wait a moment, Mr. Torao! I have some questions… What did he mean by ‘assistant’?”

He turned back and smiled with a quizzical look. “What? You mean Kurei didn’t tell you? Hmm…”

The fact that he was trying to walk out on his own boss spoke to just how busy he really was. Sensing that Torao’s explanation would take too much valuable time, Tochimori ignored Koyomi’s chin scratches as he said, “It’s fine, Torao. I’ll fill the young ladies in while I wait. Return to your office. Thank you for escorting me here.”

“Uh…thank you, sir. Good luck the rest of the way.”

And with that, Torao slinked out of the detective’s office. Without much other choice, Nayuta sat down across from Tochimori.

I had no idea he was feeling under the weather… You’d think he

would tell me.

Most likely, he worried that if she came over to take care of him, she would catch it, too. And her end-of-term finals were coming up.

Behind his tiny cat glasses, Tochimori's eyes narrowed, and he yawned sleepily.

"Good grief… Torao is such a busy fellow. Apparently, they found an error in the quest that's supposed to go live next week. I feel bad for making him escort me around for a personal matter while he's swamped like this. I visited this office a number of times when it was in Kiyomihara, but since they transferred over here while doing all the preparations for 108 Apparitions, I haven't seen him at all. I didn't know where to go."

"I see…"

Tochimori had claimed that he was making Torao escort him around for a "personal matter." It seemed quite strange and extraordinary that the CTO of *Asuka Empire*'s publisher would be hiring a contractor like Klever for a personal guide job.

He clearly picked up on her consternation and gave her a feline grin.

"You seem to have some questions. Where should we start? Perhaps with who Kurei's assistant is?"

"Yes…but before that, is the detective well enough to work? I know how diligent he is, so if he's passing up a VR tour guide job, he must be in really bad shape," she said, failing to control the slight tremor in her voice.

Whether sick or injured, the stress placed on the body was greatly diminished in a VR environment. If his symptoms were light enough, he would've been able to put his AmuSphere on and perform his job like any other day. But if he wasn't even logging in, that suggested he might be so feverish that he could barely think straight.

Tochimori closed his eyes. "Well, I don't know what he's ailing from, so you'd have to ask him for details…but I suppose he'll be all right. I once scolded him for attempting to work while he was sick. He must've known that if he showed up to greet me while under the weather, I would tear him a new one."

It wasn't the most relieving thing to hear, but Nayuta had to agree that it made sense.

Koyomi reached across the couch to rub Tochimori's furry chin and agreed, "Yes, you're supposed to get rest when you're sick so that you don't spread it around. My company's full of old grandpas, so they're especially strict about it there. But I'm fine because I haven't caught a cold in about a decade."

After a brief, fraught pause, Koyomi tipped her head and gave Nayuta a firm look. "Oh, and don't crack any jokes about how stupid people never catch colds, all right?"

"I didn't say anything of the sort, nor did I think it. In your case, Koyomi, I think that you're resistant to stress and always maintain a healthy smile, which gives you antibodies. I'm very glad to hear you're always healthy… Getting sick when you live alone is really tough."

So the detective, who could never fully escape the shape-shifting fox allegations, was human after all.

Tochimori nodded gravely. "And since Kurei isn't strong enough to work, we have someone else lined up to be the guide today. I thought it was you two at first, but apparently, I was wrong… I let Torao handle all the communication, so I'm not in possession of the details. But if it's his assistant, then I suspect it's…*her*."

"…Her?"

Was he simply referring to some woman, or was it hinting at a more intimate relationship? Before Nayuta could ask further, the door to the back room of the detective agency opened.

"Hellooo. Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Tochimori. Ririka Rougerie from Kuroneko, at your service!"

A strangely cheery archer, whose voice was syrupy sweet and held its vowels just a bit too long, appeared. She wore a crop-top modified kimono with an archer's chest guard and baggy *hakama* pants with *kyahan* leggings at the bottom.

The pale, exposed shoulders and tight, bared stomach seemed designed to draw the eye, but what surprised Nayuta even more than the sexiness of her outfit was the ostentatious bow she carried.

The curved limbs were black and crude, while the ends extended backward with decorations that looked like the menacing horns of an oni. Any veteran player couldn't help but recognize such a distinct appearance.

Is that…a Kuro-Hozuki*?*

Kuro-Hozuki, meaning "black ghost lantern," was a rare bow capable of shooting three arrows at once, and it was the envy of all players who fought with bows and arrows.

Nayuta the warrior priestess and Koyomi the ninja couldn't make use of it, but if they ever found one, it was a weapon valuable enough to consider changing to take advantage of it seriously.

That fact alone spoke to the great power and experience of this Ririka Rougerie.

The Persian cat nodded with great satisfaction. "Ah, it is so good to see you again, Ririka. Torao made such a big deal about calling you the head of publicity, but I seem to recall that you were just an ordinary employee last year… Am I wrong?"

The archer gave him a friendly smile. "No, sir. I've gotten a promotion! And a very generous two-percent raise."

"…Well, I can't comment on that without knowing the number itself, but such a small percentage bump for such an increase in responsibilities makes it sound like Kurei is taking advantage of you…"

She lifted her slender fingers to her lips and gave him a very knowing smile.

"Mmm… Well, that has a lot to do with my relationship with Kaisei… Ah, you must be Nayuta and Koyomi, yes?" she asked, taking her eyes off Tochimori to dazzle the girls with a brilliant smile. "Nice to meet you! I'm Kaisei's subordinate at Kuroneko, Ririka Rougerie. I know that sounds like an avatar name, but it's my real identity. Kaisei has told me about you two…"

The honeyed tone of voice she used made Koyomi's cheek twitch.

"Um…wait, wait. Just a second. I'm having trouble catching up. Let's put aside the talking cat, huh? Kuroneko? Employee? You call him Kaisei—by his first name?" she exclaimed, unsure of where to even start with the questions. Nayuta was reeling, too.

Ririka looked perplexed by the questions. "Yes, Kuroneko. Clover's Network Security Corporation. *Kuro-ba's Ne-twork Security Ko-rporation*. Get it now? You can shorten it to Kuroneko, or Black Cat. Kaisei might be the president, but I named the company. Isn't it a cute name?"

She was very personable and affectionate, but she also seemed to be older than Koyomi, and there was a deliberate air around her mannerisms to produce extra cuteness. Ririka was the type of girl who got lots of attention from boys at the cost of the ire of other girls. As evidence of that, Tochimori was beaming and purring happily at the sight of her.

At a Japanese company, referring to your company president by his first name was simply unthinkable. Either she had been friends with Klever for many, many years, or she was something like a romantic partner. In any case, it was clear that they were very close.

If her real name is Ririka Rougerie, then…is she foreign? What if his English skills are because she's—?

Nayuta's train of thought was interrupted by Koyomi, who asked, "So, Ririka…you're an employee of the detective's company, and you're going to be the tour guide instead of him…?"

"Yeah! It seems like Kaisei's totally out with a cold, so I'm here instead. Mr. Tochimori's one of our stockholders, so Kaisei was putting together lots of stuff for today's job. I guess he has a bit of bad luck, getting sick at such an important time," she lamented, putting a hand on her knee and going into a deep bow to the cat. "I'm very sorry about this, Mr. Tochimori… Kaisei was very much looking forward to this trip today. But don't worry, because you're in good hands with me."

Despite the very obvious way she leaned forward to accentuate her chest, the match between her appearance and attitude made this whole display feel very natural and not forced or unpleasant. It was almost like the kind of professional service offered by a hostess to clients at a club.

"Of course. I'm very much looking forward to it," said the Persian cat happily. He turned to Nayuta and Koyomi. "If you're not already busy, would you two care to join us? There won't be any fighting, but you might enjoy the show."

Nayuta couldn't help but turn to Koyomi. The older girl was busy shamelessly rubbing the cat's fluffy chin. "What do you mean? A show?" she asked. "This isn't just a regular old sightseeing trip within the game?"

Ririka answered with a wink. "Well, this isn't actually a tour of *Asuka Empire*. Mr. Tochimori wants to observe our office. The

main Kuroneko office is a virtual space, but we also treat it as a showroom for small to midsize businesses that are considering making the switch, and—”

She paused her explanation, perhaps unsure of if she was breaching any confidential information.

Tochimori took over. “The thing is, a number of companies considering sponsoring and collaborating in the 108 Apparitions event also happen to have an interest in setting up VR offices. We’re not in the business of offering such services, so we passed it on to Kurei instead. But then it occurred to me that I don’t really know how he operates his company, either. That didn’t seem ideal in terms of showing it off to other people, so I asked him to set up a guide instead.”

Koyomi’s mouth fell open. “Huh? You mean *this* isn’t the detective’s office? But he’s always doing work in here. He even has his little retro laptop and is always tap, tap, tapping away…”

Ririka lifted her hand to her cheek and looked away awkwardly. “Yes, this does seem to be a workspace for Kaisei… but the company is actually located on a different server that doesn’t rely upon the *Asuka Empire* system to function. He’s got a proper office there, but because he does so much guide work, it seems like he finds it more convenient to hang out here.”

“Would you care to join us, then?” asked Tochimori, regally stroking his whiskers. “There won’t be any enemies to fight or treasures to earn, but it might be something interesting to pass the time.”



To be perfectly honest, Nayuta *was* curious. A regular office visit might not be very interesting, but it seemed like a good example of a practical use of VR that was worth observing.

And beyond that, she was just a bit curious about Ririka, too.

“I’d like to come along… What about you, Koyomi?”

Koyomi had Tochimori’s paws in her hands and was making him do a little dance. She looked up at Nayuta and murmured, “Hmm. Yeah, I guess I’m down. Shall we? Knowing the detective, it’s probably some super modern office in an incredibly tall building, or maybe it’s some old nineteenth-century style brick mansion or something.”

Ririka chuckled to herself. “I think this detective’s office shows off Kaisei’s taste the most. Our office is more a demonstration of the employees’ interests… Well, shall we go? The passageway in the back is the teleport gate to the office.”

She turned and proceeded toward the sliding door to the back room of the agency. Beyond it was a narrow hallway, flanked by a break room with a simple kitchen and a nap room with a *kotatsu* table and a home theater.

The heated *kotatsu* wasn’t seeing much use in these early summer months, but when it turned to winter, Nayuta could see herself hanging out under it with Koyomi.

Koyomi picked up the Persian cat without an ounce of hesitation and followed Ririka. Nayuta noted this and asked, “Um, Koyomi… I know Mr. Torao already mentioned this, but you realize that’s a grown man in there, right…?”

“Huh? But……it’s a cat.”

“Do as you wish,” chuckled Tochimori, who seemed to be enjoying the ride. Nayuta wanted to think, given his position, that he wasn’t just getting his rocks off being caressed by a young woman, but it was hard to imagine the need for him to be in a cat avatar to begin with.

“…Please pardon the personal question, but why is your avatar a cat? Players don’t have that option,” she asked.

He rubbed at his cheek the way a cat would. “Ah. This is a special character without its own status that was established for our corporate partners to use on their visits. It has no attack power, but it’s also completely ignored by any hostile enemies. While it sounds like a contradiction, you can think of this avatar

as an NPC with a human inside. They use them for debugging purposes sometimes, too. Have you heard any stories about Cat Inspectors?"

"Oh, I have. They're a rare sight that disappears if you chase after them, right?" Koyomi asked. Nayuta had never heard of them.

Tochimori nodded with satisfaction. "Those are either representatives from our sponsors and their guides or a debug team. We stamp out obvious errors before bringing out events live, of course, but when we want to observe how actual players are reacting to quests, team members sometimes take this form into the game world for practical observation."

This was a bit of a surprise to Nayuta, who asked, "Um…is that not something you can do by joining as a regular player?"

"For ordinary quests, that's perfectly fine, but for solo quests, like dares, there can't be more than one player in a quest instance. And as I said earlier, this avatar is ignored by enemies, so if it looked like a human indistinguishable from other players, that would lead to a lot of confusion. We don't want people thinking that there are players cheating the system, and if it looks like a cat, folks tend to interpret that as a type of *yokai*."

This all made logical sense, but Nayuta still wasn't satisfied for some reason.

"Also, when everyone in the tour group is a cat, the atmosphere tends to soften up. It makes business discussions flow much more smoothly."

That sounded like the most likely answer.

They walked through the narrow hallway, past the *kotatsu* room, and came to a wall at the end. Ririka stuck a keycard into a slot between the mud wall and a pillar. A wooden sliding door gradually phased into being on the wall.

Then she turned and gave them a very showy and courteous bow.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Clover's Network Security Corporation. Your current appearance will be carried over, but we will be leaving the *Asuka Empire* system. Your items and stats will not be reflected, so do not be surprised if the menu window works differently."

With a soft grinding, the door slid open sideways.

On the other side was an aged grand piano—sitting all by its lonesome in the midst of an enormous domed foyer.

§

The entrance to the VR office of Clover's Network Security Corporation was a circular room lined by a number of doors.

The ceiling was a glass dome that offered a view of a pristine blue sky and white, fluffy clouds. Below it was the grand piano, which Tochimori grinned down at from Koyomi's arms.

"Ah, that does seem like Kurei's style. I forgot that he could play the piano."

Ordinarily, you wouldn't want to place a piano in the path of direct sunlight, but there was no concern about UV light and degradation in a place like this.

"Wow…I had no idea that the detective could play," Nayuta remarked but didn't show her surprise on her face.

Ririka whispered, "But he only plays game music. He can't perform any classical piano compositions, so don't give him any requests."

That made much more sense. Nayuta moved on and glanced around the room; there were over twenty doors lining the edge of the dome, and each one of them was different. There was a wooden door like that of an old Western mansion, a steel door you might find offering entrance to a warehouse, a door resembling a classic Japanese entryway, a sliding door of clouded glass…

There were also heavy double doors that looked like they belonged to a movie theater or concert hall and even security doors with state-of-the-art retinal scanners.

It was clear from the total lack of consistency that each of these doors led to a space that matched its design. On the upper half of each one was a plate that displayed the name of its destination.

PRESIDENT'S OFFICE, SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT, MEETING ROOM, RECEPTION ROOM, CO-WORKING SPACE, HACHIDORI, ROUGERIE, OOGAKI, SENJUYA. *Oh, these last few are the names of employees, I guess.*

There were other plates with people's names on them, too. It seemed that each employee had their own workspace.

The wooden sliding door that they had entered through into the dome read THREE-LEAF DETECTIVE AGENCY.

Ririka took the group in a circle around the edge of the dome. "As you can see," she explained, "this entrance, which we call the terminal, offers access to all the individual rooms. When the owner of each workspace is absent, its door will be automatically locked. For today, the president's office and Hachidori's door are locked. Hachidori is the vice president, by the way. He has the most invested in the company, so some say he's the true leader who outranks Kaisei."

This extra context was meant for Nayuta and Koyomi. "Hachidori," Koyomi said. "It sounds like the name of a bird that drinks nectar. Is that his real name?"

"Of course. We all go by our real names. He's a much rarer sight around the office than Kaisei, but he's a genius programmer, and it kind of feels like Hachidori's the reason our company works at all. He's rich enough that he doesn't need to work, so he joined the company out of personal interest and a need to stay busy. We won't see him today…but have you met him before, Mr. Tochimori?"

The cat in Koyomi's arms shook its head. "No, I haven't. I've heard stories about him from Kurei, though. He's older, right?"

"Yes, the oldest at the company, though he's not even forty yet… He's a really talented guy, but he's such a genius that sometimes he kinda just goes off half-cocked on some crazy ideas. He's really close with Kaisei. Sometimes I get a little jealous," Ririka joked. The mention of the word "jealous" raised Nayuta's hackles.

Even if this Ririka girl happened to be Klever's girlfriend, Nayuta wouldn't be jealous of her. She wasn't that close to him, and to her, the detective was nothing more than her late brother's friend.

Or, at least, that was what she told herself. But it unsettled her anyway.

Ririka continued her tour, unaware of the change in Nayuta. "One of the benefits of a VR office like this one is that expanding, outfitting, and dismantling each room and changing its look is

incredibly simple. Each employee can easily have their own private space, or you can arrange for a large area for everyone to work in together. These things can be arranged without needing to worry about rent. What makes for the most efficient office will depend on the company and type of business, but it's a major perk that you can try out different arrangements quite easily at a very minimal cost."

It was an almost suspiciously professional speech, and Nayuta was not surprised when she noticed a panel next to Ririka with all of the tour guide's spiel written on it.

"…Of course, all of this is old hat to Mr. Tochimori. As I understand it, game companies and research institutions were the tip of the spear when it came to VR office spaces."

"Oh, I don't know about *that*," Tochimori grimaced. "We've always just tried things out as the need arose, so at the core of our systems, it's quite unrefined. We're like a house that's been expanded and expanded over the years. What you folks are offering is more like the VR office version of custom-built homes. Designing VR offices—not for your own company but to offer them to other clients—is a very keen business decision in my eyes. It's particularly great for smaller companies who might be interested but are unlikely to have the VR-savvy personnel to make it happen."

"Kaisei would be very delighted to hear you say that!"

As the other adults talked, Nayuta examined some more of the door plates.

Cat and Tiger Café: Tigey Tiger, Deep Sea Maid Café: Rule Yeah, Beach Café: Shark Hell, Planetarium Café: Dark Nebula, Teahouse: Foxfire, Aerial Fortress: Tortoiseshell, Monster Cat Temple: Katsuobushi Hall.

"…Why so many cafés?" Koyomi asked quite reasonably. There were some stranger things on the list she could have pointed out, though.

"There are a bunch, yes. But there's a reason for that," Ririka said, placing her fingers on the door of the deep sea maid café. The door was rusted steel, and the doorknob was in the shape of a barnacle. "See, these are all model rooms. When offices are designed for efficiency, they tend to wind up looking the same, so the idea is to have a café attached to express a bit of individual

flavor for the company. I'm sure you can imagine what the cat and tiger café is like, so let me show you the deep sea maid café instead."

Nayuta had a sudden ominous thought and quickly stepped in front of Koyomi. She just had a feeling that Koyomi should not be the first in line.

"Huh? What's up, Nayu?"

"Nothing… Just please be careful not to drop Mr. Tochimori."

This wasn't a game, so there wouldn't be any enemies. There was no reason for anyone to be on guard, but the look of this door was just too fishy.

Nayuta's premonition turned out to be accurate.

With an almost indescribable sound, an octopus-headed creature with tentacles coming from its mouth appeared in the doorway.

"Eeeek!" Koyomi shrieked, freezing. If she had been first in line, she would have drawn her sword and attacked, but Nayuta was blocking her way now.

The monster before them offered a very rusty bow and moved aside to allow access to the interior. Upon closer inspection, it was wearing a cute-looking maid outfit, but the utterly alien look of the creature was keeping the costume from having its intended effect.

It was trying to usher them inside, but its muffled voice was very difficult to make out. The only words Nayuta could hear were, "*Iä, iä.*"

Is…it trying to say, "Welcome"?

The room was dark. The air was very damp and clammy, but there was no real smell to it. Strange, labored breathing was audible but clearly not human, which made for a very unpleasant combination with the sticky, wet noises elsewhere.

A horrible shiver ran down Nayuta's back.

Something's there.

Something vast, sitting in the back of the café, lording over all…

"W-we don't need to go in there! W-we're fine!" stammered Koyomi, backing away quickly with Tochimori in her hands.

Ririka turned to them with a blank smile. Her pupils were dark and did not seem to reflect the light.

“Really? But it’s so fun in there… It has a very good reputation. Where else can you enjoy a sulfur-flavored cocktail through a tubeworm straw or a barreleye gratin cooked in a giant isopod shell or any of the other fantastic options here…?”

Koyomi shook her head violently. The motion caused Tochimori to rock left and right in her arms, too. “No! I don’t wanna go there! Every one of my survival instincts is telling me this place is a no-go! This isn’t a maid café, it’s a made-in-Hell café!”

Ririka placed a finger against her cheek. “Aww. But fans of the deep sea can’t get enough of this concept… I mean, isn’t she cute? She’s got these big, adorable eyes, and her tentacles are so smooth and moisturized—”

“Those are the eyes of a predator! Also, you don’t say ‘moisturized’ when the words you’re looking for are slimy, oozing, and viscous! And don’t start blushing, you! Don’t use those hooked claws to make a heart shape! Dammit… I hate that you’re so creepy. That’s actually kind of cute!” Koyomi ranted at the monster maid, unleashing a torrent of criticism. However, she didn’t actually move from where she stood.

Tochimori lifted a paw for attention. “Erm, Ririka, I think I agree that we don’t need to look around any of the wilder doorways today. She’s clearly terrified, and I can definitely sense some cosmic horror and madness in here. In fact, this clearly isn’t to Kurei’s taste. Is this the work of that Hachidori fellow?”

Ririka closed the door while the maid freak bowed politely to them.

“The problem is…we don’t really know who in the company created this one. I’m sure that whoever did it is just hiding that information for fun, but everyone insists they had nothing to do with it. Kaisei was supposed to delete it for good this week, but he came down with that nasty summer illness.”

“It’s a curse! The detective’s been cursed! This is definitely one of those things you shouldn’t take lightly!” Koyomi ranted, freaking out. Nayuta’s mind, however, was crystal clear.

Assuming Ririka’s just telling bad jokes, I still have to admit that the detective’s company is much busier and wider-ranging than I thought…

The tourism business within a game still didn’t seem like any

way to make money, but Klever had used this unprofitable concept as a stepping stone to form a relationship of trust with the *Asuka Empire* developers and earned himself a more lucrative business off the back of that.

It wasn't clear what sort of budget it took to do VR office design for other businesses, but given the times, it certainly seemed like a growth industry.

As a demonstration of what was possible in VR, the creepy deep sea maid café was actually quite effective. They didn't set foot inside of it, but there was undoubtedly an impressive atmosphere around the place.

"That's too bad… It's a real masterpiece, guaranteed to traumatize you," Ririka lamented, moving on to the next door.

This one was a wooden door that seemed to be cobbled together out of scrap materials and had an adorable design of a cartoonish shark in the center.

"Beach Café: Shark Hell… I have to say, this one seems really horrific, too, so can we hear the concept before we open the door?" Koyomi said, being cautious to the extreme, as she adjusted Tochimori's weight in her arms.

Ririka gave her the grin of a carnivore catching sight of a juicy bit of prey.

"In here, we have a number of different kinds of sharks taken right out of classic B movies engaging in a round-the-clock fight for survival. Two-headed sharks, *three*-headed sharks, super-intelligent sharks, giant sharks, tentacled sharks, mechanical sharks, flying sharks, sand sharks, zombified sharks, ghost sharks, sharknados, ancient sharks, sharks with hands and feet. This establishment allows you to enjoy a relaxing tea time as you gaze upon the savage and bloody ballet of a fight to the death!"

Koyomi quickly hid behind Nayuta's back. "Evil! Her smile is pure evil! This is obviously leading up to the sharks working together and ganging up on the customers! They're going to swallow this poor cat whole!"

"……Well, I wouldn't say they're……*not* going to do that, buuuut……"

Ririka averted her eyes and quickly moved on to the next door. Nayuta pressed her fingers to her eyes in exhaustion.

"Um, this is supposed to be a tour of VR work offices, right? I

would assume that Mr. Tochimori wants to see practical workspaces, not creepy, horror-tinged attractions…"

"Awww, you sound just like Kaisei," Ririka pouted. "Listen, don't you think every good sales pitch needs a hook?"

"Maybe it does, but there's always such a thing as taking it too far. I can only assume that all the other cafés in here are similarly ghoulish."

There was the planetarium café Dark Nebula and the teahouse Foxfire—they sounded suspicious from their names alone. The next doors after them weren't even for cafés but belonged to a fortress and a temple.

"Hmmm… Oh well," Ririka sighed. "Technically speaking, we do have a number of showrooms, and this lineup was chosen specifically for Mr. Tochimori's visit, but…"

"Yes…well, it all seems like jolly good fun, but maybe some other time. As Nayuta suggested, let's take a look at the offices if you please," Tochimori said gently, though his dignity was slightly ruined by the pained note in his voice from being clenched by Koyomi.

"You're certain? In that case, I'll guide you to our shared workspace. It's the room we use when doing work as a team and was designed specifically for convenience. We're very proud of it."

She led them to a white, steel-framed door with a clouded glass pane—the sort that you might see at a professional office, but the three-leaf clover pattern etched into the glass was quite tasteful.

"Ahhh, this looks more like a regular old…not an office," said Koyomi, quickly adjusting her statement as Ririka opened the door.

While the door itself looked typical for an office, the inside was not quite in line with her expectations. There were six desks, and 3D displays, all surrounded by large, spherical cockpit-like enclosures. They gleamed white and were arranged in a circle around the center of the room.

"It, uh…looks like a ride at the amusement park," Nayuta remarked.

"Yeah. For sure," Koyomi agreed.

The spheres weren't bolted to the ground but hung in the air a few inches above it.

In the soothing, practiced tones of a tour guide, Ririka said, “These are our work modules for high-focus teamwork arrangements. Please have a seat in one. The module will reshape itself according to the size of the user, so that includes you, Mr. Tochimori.”

“Ah, wonderful. If you’ll excuse me,” Tochimori said, leaping from Koyomi’s arms and sneaking into one of the modules. The sphere shifted as smoothly as a shrinking balloon until it was cat-sized. Nayuta and Koyomi sat in their own modules.

Instantly, Nayuta noticed that the weight of her head and arms felt lighter, making her feel strangely buoyant.

…Huh…? Why am I so…light?

The soft backrest offered support up to her head, but she didn’t sink into it. She almost felt like she was in zero gravity.

“Oh? Huh? Whoa, what is this? It’s so floaty!” Koyomi cried nearby. Nayuta’s 3D display showed her Ririka, who was sitting in a different module. There were also windows that gave her a view of the excited Koyomi and relaxed Tochimori.

Ririka put on a businesslike smile and explained, “These work modules are painstakingly designed to minimize the so-called ‘death march’ that often happens in system development jobs. Of course, it’s more important to avoid such scenarios entirely, but it’s the nature of network security jobs, for example, to have sudden, urgent situations arise, requiring significant crunch time.”

Various bits of text explaining the module’s capabilities appeared on the display, which Nayuta idly read as Ririka’s pitch continued.

“Of course, in the real world, you’ll be resting on your bed, but in this module, the sensation of gravity is cut by ninety percent to relieve the user of the weight of their head and arms. This does, however, come with a downside. If it is used too often, your body will feel sluggish back in the real world…but it’s only a sensory issue. Your body is still under the Earth’s gravity, so there are no long-lasting effects of the sort that astronauts deal with.”

Many VRMMOs had some level of weight-lightening system. Nayuta wouldn’t be able to fight in the game without it, and some games even made it a selling point, like *ALfheim Online*’s pitch of flying with fairy wings. That was for action-based games,

however. Nayuta had never heard of a VR office space advertising that it reduced the effects of gravity.

"The tables and sofas inside the modules can be altered and reshaped like putty. They'll only move when you actively think about altering them and will stay fixed in place at all other times. The armrests are ultra-flexible and can move with your arms to provide constant support…but since there's no weight to your arms, they're more like railings you can grip when moving your body than armrests."

In the corner of the display, Nayuta could see Koyomi fiddling with everything like an excitable puppy. "Oooh, what's this? That's so neat! Wow, it really only moves when you *want* to move it! And the texture and softness stay exactly the way I would expect them to! How does this work?!"

Nayuta, too, was surprised by the novel concept and adjusted the workspace until it fit her posture. The sensation around her body was a bit like a beaded cushion, but because her own weight was extremely light, the resilience of the sensation changed according to her own desire. The shape could be adjusted and fixed at will, so it offered a kind of comfort that would otherwise be impossible.

"Each work panel can be customized to suit your needs and offer classic keyboard and mouse support as well. There are also foot pedals…but they work by mental feedback at the moment. If you think, 'I want to press the SHIFT key,' as you press the foot pedal, it will act as the SHIFT key at that moment. This feature works with all kinds of computer commands, such as copying and pasting, sending emails, and calling up search engines."

Just like that, a message from Koyomi appeared in Nayuta's workspace.

NAYU, IS THIS SENDING?

YES, I SEE IT. THIS IS VERY HANDY.

The foot pedals automatically adjusting to whatever you were thinking about was hardly flashy but very useful. You could bring up a calculator, check the weather, and perform a variety of other functions instantly, all without having to launch the programs yourself.

In the corner of the screen, Tochimori rubbed at his chin with a paw. "So you could lie down and have your work monitor fixed

to the ceiling… I see! Very nice. It does feel rather strange, but that's probably only to people of *our* generation. For the people who will be raised with VR spaces, functions like this will feel perfectly normal, and they'll adapt just fine. One can imagine a future not too far off when all functions can be controlled by thought rather than by hand and foot movements. I bet it will look like psychic powers."

Ririka chuckled softly. "And *that* was the main point of your visit today, wasn't it? Then let's not waste any time and test it out right now."

A message reading <* MENTAL OUTPUT TEST MODE *> appeared on Nayuta's 3D display.

"Mental…output?"

In the corner of the monitor, Ririka nodded. "Ordinarily, when operating a computer, the user types on the keyboard or writes on a screen with a stylus pen—physical actions that input data to the system. Our revolutionary Mental Output System cuts that out and creates the data as the user simply thinks it. You can think of it as an input process controlled by thought, so it might be more accurate to call it 'Mental Input' instead. But our developer, Mr. Hachidori, designed it with the idea of the human brain being a computer that outputs its own thoughts as completed data. That's where the name 'Mental Output' comes from. I think you'll find it easier to understand just by trying it, however."

She started to do something with her hands off-screen.

"When it comes to graphics, text, 3D modeling, and program creation, Mental Output mode is quite accurate. You'll need some experience and know-how to do the 3D and programming stuff, so we'll demonstrate with a simple flat image instead. I'll turn the system on for the next twenty minutes, and in that time, just think of your favorite art or photographs. If you manage to conjure a detailed image in your mind's eye, it will be reflected as data. The more you attempt to create and the faster you do it, the more you'll really understand the true value of this feature," Ririka explained.

Just then, something inside Nayuta's brain changed. It felt *off*—like some circuit that had been closed was suddenly opened—and then the work monitor before her eyes turned into a canvas.

Within moments, an image appeared on it—the very image

that had been inside her head.

…What…is this? What is this…?

It was a picture of the cats at the Monster Cat Teahouse, hard at work.

Nayuta felt quite disoriented. Simply by thinking, *Draw this picture*, that very picture appeared before her without her having to lift a brush.

Her mental image was fuzzy initially, so the picture was blurry and vague, too, but as she focused on the details and refined the image, crispness came to the picture on the screen, and with every few seconds, it got clearer and more vivid.

If she felt something was wrong, she could instantly adjust it. If she wanted to try something, that process unfolded before her eyes. If she wanted to fix it in place, it would stop changing.

There was no warping or smudging of lines. Once a line was down, it could be adjusted instantly and perfectly, and she could change the color contrast and saturation to whatever she wanted.

Everything changed and shifted exactly as she wished without her lifting a finger until the picture she had in her mind's eye was right there on the screen. It might as well have been printed straight from her brain.

…And when you go to draw the next image, the canvas automatically clears itself after saving the previous piece… That means you don't have to memorize how to operate the software…

Layers, color adjustment, masking, line correction, overwriting, saving with a custom filename, undoing, and redoing—all of these functions and commands could be performed simply by *wishing* for them to happen rather than finding the right icon or button to press. The undo and redo functions didn't even need to be named; if you thought to yourself, *I messed up*, the correction would already be happening.

It could even produce videos. On the screen, the cats at the Monster Cat Teahouse began to dance and prance around. The speed of the process was clearly beyond anything that existing technology could produce.

"Twenty minutes are up. I'll turn off Mental Output mode now," Ririka announced when the period had run its course. The next moment, Nayuta rested her head against the seat, still in one-tenth gravity, and simply stared ahead blankly, her mind

empty.

Her body felt light, but her heartbeat was quite fierce. Even she could tell that her chest was heaving much harder than usual when breathing. And it was not out of the excitement of coming into contact with an entirely new technology but simply exhaustion.

Nayuta had created images and videos one after the other and had reached a total of ten pieces in her twenty minutes of work. At that rate, she could probably create an entire movie in half a day.

This is just…remarkable…

The shock of the experience left her speechless for a time.

Through the monitor, Tochimori remarked, “Hrmm. This…is a rather striking feature for a VR office. Even our development team isn’t doing stuff like this. But…”

Ririka put on a pained smile. “Yes, it’s rather tiring, even in short bursts, isn’t it? It’s very efficient in terms of time usage, but if you’re not used to it, the fatigue and buildup on the brain is intense. And how quickly you get used to it depends highly on the individual. Folks who work in design and other creative fields on a daily basis tend to pick it up rather quickly, while those who don’t find it very difficult. Mr. Hachidori created this system to make his own job more efficient, so we haven’t done any testing on potential health effects yet.”

Nayuta was completely immobile. If she really wanted to move, she could easily do so. But the mental fatigue was so great that she just didn’t *want* to do anything.

For now, she said, “So you’re saying…it’s kind of like learning to ride a bike? You’re going to fall over and lose your balance at first, but once you get the hang of it, you can go faster than walking?”

Ririka clapped her hands. “Ah, yes, yes, exactly like that. It makes things so much easier once you’re used to it. Mr. Hachidori’s gotten to the point where, with some AI assistance, he’s able to do the work of twenty people… It’s actually kind of scary if you think about it.”

Stumbling out of the workstation, Nayuta made her way to the adjacent module and looked inside. Sure enough, Koyomi looked quite dizzy.

“…Koyomi, are you all right?”

“…Yah…jushhh fiiine…,” she slurred, sending the opposite of the intended message, and toppled into Nayuta’s arms. Her screen showed some brilliant avant-garde art in progress, but sadly, Nayuta did not have the artistic sophistication to appreciate it.

Tochimori trotted over toward them. “I’d heard a bit about this feature from Torao,” he said, “but this is quite incredible. The fatigue might be a bit much for most people right now, but in a few years, I can see this becoming a very important technology.”

“Y-yeah…I don’t see myself mastering this…,” Koyomi muttered, cheek twitching. For her part, Nayuta thought she might get used to it after a while.

“And yet, I hear that the developer himself is somewhat skeptical of this feature?” Tochimori asked, much to Nayuta’s surprise. If this tech was finished, it seemed like the sort of thing any company would be happy to bring to market.

Ririka exited her module and murmured, “Well…he did say he ‘had the wrong approach’ and that ‘it’s better to increase the subjective time sense to make it more efficient compared to the passage of time in the real world.’ …Honestly, when Kaisei and Mr. Hachidori get talking, I can’t follow along… Apparently, there are rumors that some other company is researching a way to have a few minutes of real time feel like several days in VR. This seems like it could work alongside a system like that, so I’m sure this can still work out… Are you aware of anything like that, Mr. Tochimori?”

The Persian cat’s eyes narrowed. “Increasing subjective time…? I’ve read a number of research papers on the topic, but I don’t know how practical it is. Even if they did manage to pull it off, it’d be top secret at this point in time. They’re definitely working on the research, but it’s well beyond the scope of Kurei’s company, and I don’t think much of the idea, personally speaking. It seems like the sort of thing that’s truly too much work for the mind to follow. If I’m being honest, I think the success you’ve found with Mental Output mode transcends the bounds of your company.”

“That’s very flattering, sir.”

“Though, I’ll admit it’s hard to know if it’s right to attempt

bringing this to market. I can see why Kurei was concerned about it," Tochimori said. Nayuta was surprised by his reaction. She would have thought that he'd be effusive in his praise, but he hesitated to go that far. And Ririka seemed to have anticipated that reaction.

"Um, pardon me, but…this is really something quite remarkable, isn't it? So much so that if people get used to it, the classic way of working in the real world will become too ineffi…"

She had been about to say, *The classic way of working in the real world will become too inefficient to keep up with VR*. In other words, people who couldn't master this style of working would find their value in the labor market suffering a precipitous drop. It also meant that the areas where this system was most useful would turn the work of dozens of people into the work of just a few.

Nayuta couldn't begin to imagine how many people would be out of jobs in such a scenario. This sort of thing might completely unbalance the job market in a number of industries all at once.

Business managers trying to lower personnel costs would be delighted, and start-ups relying on a tiny staff would find it a godsend, but if that shift happened too quickly, it would spell widespread disaster for the current workforce.

And most troubling of all, even if Klever's company kept this research under wraps, it was a certainty that other companies would bring the same product to market sooner or later. There was no stopping this sea change.

Tochimori recognized the shift in her mood and smiled benignly. "This is quite spectacular technology, Miss Nayuta," he said. "It fully embodies the hope of an engineer. However, hope can sometimes bring people to a wild, blind fervor. It's difficult to control it. At the same time, we cannot step into the future without hope. Humanity has always grappled with such matters as the ages come and go. I wonder what the next age will look like."

He sounded as serene and placid as a cat.

"I will say that it was quite a fruitful experience, however. It's still rough around the edges, but there is great potential in this tech. I'm sure that Kikuoka with the Ministry of Internal Affairs would love it."

“Mr. Kikuoka’s already been here, as a matter of fact,” Ririka admitted, though her smile was less than delighted. “He actually had quite good things to say about the deep sea maid café. But…I don’t think he and Kaisei get along very well. He said, ‘I can’t trust anyone who’s more suspicious than me.’ A rather rude thing to say, if you ask me.”

Tochimori’s cat shoulders shook with laughter. “Ah, yes, they do share that in common, don’t they? But after the *SAO* Incident, it was anti-regulation representatives and government officials like him who gave VRMMOs a lifeline to exist. Of course, I’m sure there’s more to the story than that…but he’s clearly a very capable man. I’m sure you don’t need me to tell Kurei not to make an enemy out of him.”

Though the adults were aware of this person, Nayuta and Koyomi were completely out of the loop, of course. Koyomi leaned against Nayuta, looking gaunt from her mental exhaustion, and grumbled, “Urgh…I feel like crap… I wanna have something sweet to eat…something classy and refined, like sweet potato *yokan*, sweet potato *kintsuba*, or…”

Ririka clapped her hands together. “In that case, why don’t we try the teahouse, Foxfire? It’s just a traditional Japanese teahouse. There aren’t any horror elements. It’s got an outdoor terrace modeled after the places along the Kamo River in Kyoto, and while there aren’t any NPC waiters, you can eat and drink all you want as long as you serve yourself. ♪ It’s an employee-only lounge that’s off-limits to outsiders, so everything’s free.”

Koyomi’s eyes lit up like an excited child’s. “Really?! No traps or anything? If you betray my hopes and dreams on this one, I’m going to leave an anonymous comment with the Labor Standards Bureau saying that you might be engaging in illegal overtime practices!”

“…That’s a very subtly nasty idea to come up with. Well, don’t worry. This place has a pleasant and comfortable environment that Kaisei designed for meetings with other companies. Why don’t we stop in there and enjoy a little break? Cats are welcome, too. I have some questions for you, too…such as how Kaisei’s been doing lately.”

Ririka’s gaze was bright and friendly, but Nayuta took it quite seriously. She had some questions of her own to ask: about Ririka

and Klever. Based on the way she talked about him, it was clear that this was no ordinary employer-employee relationship.

“…Certainly. Shall we go, then?”

“Yaaay! ♪ ” Ririka’s grin turned into a full smile. “It’s been ages since I got to talk with younger girls like you two. ♪ It’s important to talk business, of course, but I’ve been itching to get into this with you to tell the truth… I’m sorry to talk about personal business like this, Mr. Tochimori, but you must be curious, too, right? Setting aside who might be his favorite, we’re talking about that borderline womanphobic Kaisei taking these two cute girls to a hot spring, even if it was only in VR. Curious, right? My husband and I have been wondering if this is really what it looks like…”

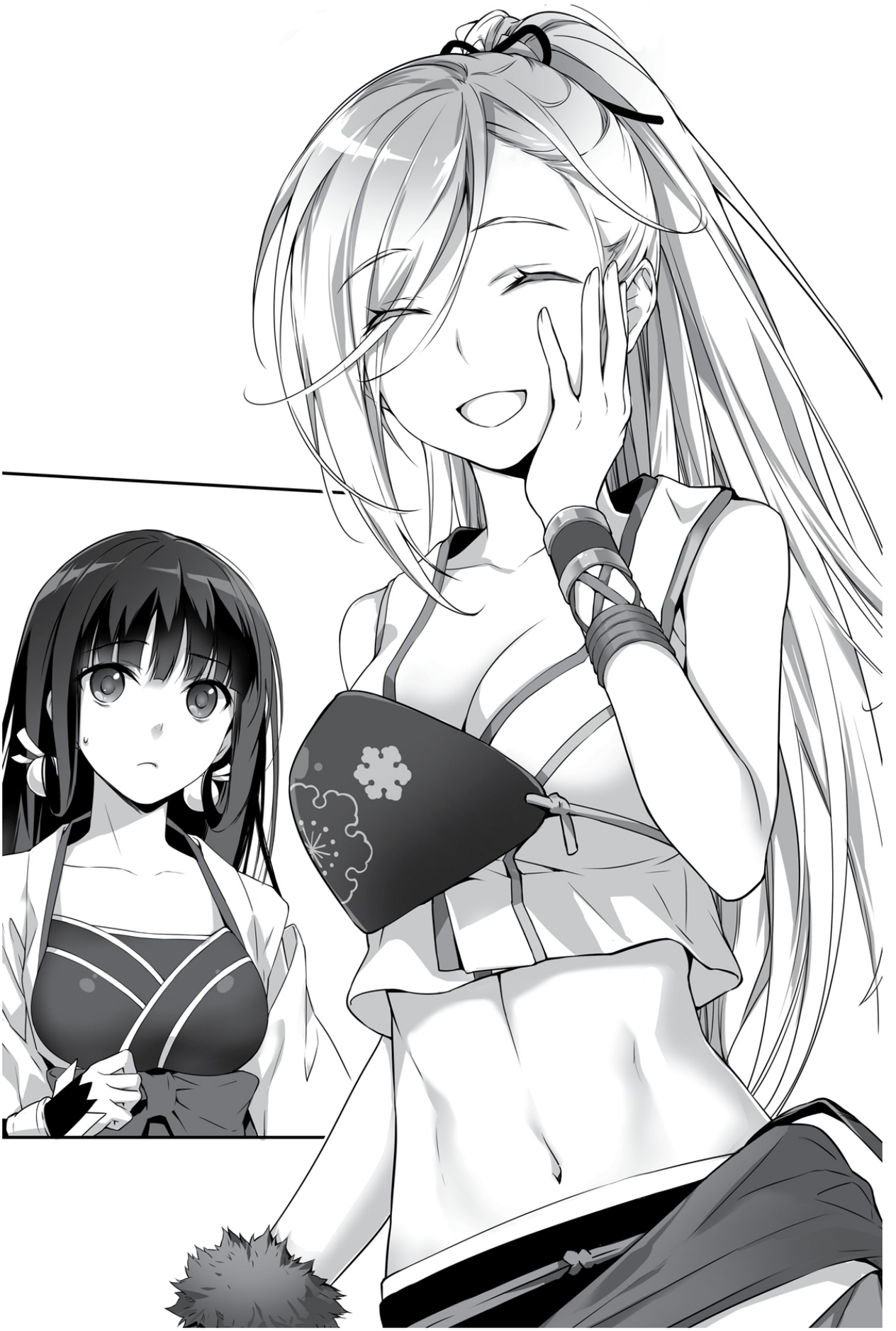
“……Husband?”

Nayuta reacted instantaneously to that one particular word that had been dropped into the midst of Ririka’s chatter.

The other woman put a hand to her cheek and said, “Yes, my husband says, ‘Kaisei is all about safety and security, so he would never mess with teenage girls.’ But I happen to think that every man has a thing for younger women, and I hope that my spooky fox of a younger brother has a human streak underneath that exteri—huh? Why the blank look? Hello? Nayuta?”

When Nayuta didn’t respond, Koyomi narrowed her eyes and spoke up for her.

“……Sorry……‘Brother’?”



“Yes, she is Kurei’s older sister,” Tochimori said genially. “Her last name is different now because she’s married and lives in America. Her husband, Ethan Rougerie, is an excellent lawyer and adviser to Kurei’s company. Ethan also happens to be the son of a good friend of mine. I’ve known him since he was a baby, and it was through him and Ririka that I came to know Kurei.”

But nothing Tochimori was saying reached Nayuta’s ears.

His older sister… The detective’s…older sister…?

They didn’t look alike.

Ririka was friendly, bubbly, and pretty and had a slightly aloof side to her. But nothing about her was sinister, foxlike, or untrustworthy in any way.

Koyomi’s cheek was twitching again. “No way… I would have thought that any of the detective’s relatives would be more… Oh, you know, obsessed with fried tofu like all folktale foxes are or skilled at detecting the pitter-patter of rodent feet under the snow or having a tail that forks into nine parts, with the ability to turn to stone and breathe poison gas… Is any of this ringing a bell…?”

But Ririka just tilted her head and frowned. “Hmmm. No, Kaisei’s the only foxlike member of the family… Although I’ve heard that our late grandfather had a more beady-eyed, foxlike expression. Maybe it disappeared for a generation and came back?”

She turned and headed toward their destination. Nayuta followed in a daze. After the rigors of the Mental Output experiment, she felt doubly exhausted.

Nearby, Tochimori murmured, “Did you think…she was Kurei’s girlfriend?”

“…No. No, I did not,” Nayuta lied. The cat patted her knee with a squishy paw pad.

“I have high hopes for Kurei, you know. But he does seem to have an issue with putting his trust in anyone else, so I can’t help but worry about him falling apart. I know this is asking a lot, but would you please look after him if you have the chance? He might be older than you, but from my perspective, he’s still a child.”

The gentlemanly cat never seemed more like a wise, elderly man than he did right now.

Nayuta nodded without a word. It didn’t seem true that Klever

needed a mere girl like her to get by, but they both lived alone, without any relatives in the vicinity.

A cold was one thing, but if he was suffering from something worse than that, the possibilities made her shudder. It was that concern that had left her feeling off all day.

Deciding that she would visit him after logging off, Nayuta got her head in gear for now, telling herself not to slip up and give the game away during their little tea party with Ririka.

§

Klever the detective was bedridden, trapped between awake and asleep, murmuring nothings under his breath. Even he couldn't tell what he was saying. He didn't even know what was happening to him at the moment.

A cold, refreshing cloth pressed against his forehead. The pleasant sensation got his eyes to open. A girl with long, luscious black hair was staring at him with undeniable concern.

"…Is that…Nayuta? Why are you here…? How did you get in…?"

She frowned at him. "You opened the door for me yourself. Then you collapsed. It was an ordeal just getting you back into bed… Has the fever subsided at all?"

Now that she mentioned it, the image existed in his mind as hazy as a dream he might've had. He had opened the door to see her there, then fallen over…

In the dream, he felt like he'd been surrounded by something soft and warm. In an ordinary state, he would have paled at the realization, but with the fever, Klever was barely able to think.

"…Did I…did I do anything untoward…?" he asked hoarsely. Nayuta sighed.



“You’re sick. You shouldn’t be worrying about things like that. But it does seem like your fever has gone down a bit. I bought some instant rice porridge. Do you think you can eat?”

“…No…not yet…”

“That’s all right. I’ll leave a vitamin-replenishing gel by your pillow. There are a few more in the refrigerator, so you can take those when you feel up to eating something. I assume you can hold down water?”

She gracefully held out a cup of water with a straw in it. Klever craned his neck, unable to rise to a sitting position, and took the end of the straw in his mouth. The fact that the lukewarm water tasted so pure and sweet was a good sign of just how weak he was feeling.

“…Thank you. I’m good now…”

For once, Nayuta actually spoke with anger. “You are *not* fine. Why didn’t you contact me when you started feeling this way? Fine. I know that you hesitated because you didn’t want me to catch it, so I’ll save the rest of my scolding for when you’re better. Just get your rest now. Your laundry seems fully dry, so I’ll fold it and tidy up a little.”

Apparently she had taken care of his backlog of laundry, too. It also felt more comfortable than before in the room. She had ventilated it and gotten the temperature and humidity under control while he was asleep.

“…Thanks for…everything you’ve done. I feel bad…”

She was on her way out of the bedroom but turned back to smirk at him. “You know, in a samurai period piece, this is where I’d say something like, ‘Now don’t say something like that and make things awkward, Pops.’ …But I’m not that nice, so I’m going to expect you to make it up to me later. If you don’t recover from your cold, that interest is going to pile up, so make it quick.”

Klever just closed his eyes. He didn’t know anything—what time it was or why she was there—and didn’t even have the strength to ask. He fell back asleep.

After some period of time, there was a knock at the door.

Without opening it, Nayuta softly said, “Detective…? Are you asleep? I’m about to leave for today. I’ll come back tomorrow. I hope you feel better by then.”

It sounded like she was about to leave, but there were no

footsteps leading away.

Maybe I'm dreaming again, he thought, helpless to do anything about it. Then the whispering started again.

"…To tell you the truth, I met your sister in VR today. At first, I mistakenly thought that she was some kind of long-distance girlfriend of yours…not that that matters in the slightest, but…"

She paused, searching for the words she wanted to say. It seemed like she was simply sorting out her thoughts on her own, under the assumption that he was asleep, and not actually talking to him.

"…Once I realized that I was mistaken, I was kind of shocked by how relieved I was… I feel like that makes me a bad person. But I realized that if you had a girlfriend, I would have to stop coming over, and I just… I'm sorry. It's nothing. I'll be back tomorrow. Oh, and I'll take the key with me this time since I need to lock up after I close the door."

In the end, she didn't really reach a conclusion before walking away from the door. A few moments later, he could hear the front door opening and closing.

Through the feverish haze, Klever thought, *Yes, I know this is definitely a dream now*.

In reality, he was basically unconscious and having fever-induced visions.

By his pillow, the notification alert on his phone went off. It was a text message from his sister Ririka over in America.

Feeling an ill omen come over him, he managed to reach over and weakly lift his phone.

KAISEI, HOW ARE YOU FEELING? THE GUIDE JOB WITH MR. TOCHIMORI WENT WELL. HE HAD A GREAT TIME, AND SO DID I. OH! I ALSO MET NAYUTA AND KOYOMI! SHE'S CUTE! CUTE! SOOOO CUTE! WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH HER?! HOW'D SHE GET TO BE A NATURAL MONUMENT TO BEAUTY LIKE THAT? WAS IT A CHEAT CODE?! THAT MAHIRO GIRL WAS CUTE, TOO, OF COURSE, BUT NAYUTA'S LOOKS ARE POSITIVELY CRIMINAL IF YOU ASK ME. KOYOMI WAS FUN TO HANG OUT WITH, TOO. I HAD A GREAT TIME TODAY. WE ALSO SENT EACH OTHER FRIEND REQUESTS. ♪ I'M ESPECIALLY EXCITED ABOUT NAYUTA! GIRLS LIKE HER ARE RARE TREASURES, SO TREAT HER WELL, GOT IT? I'M IN YOUR CORNER, LITTLE BRO. DON'T WORRY. I KNOW YOU'VE GOT A SHOT WITH HER! JUST DON'T GET ARRESTED!

WELL, SO LOOOONG! ♪

“……It’s over…”

Klever was suddenly assaulted by a fresh wave of headache pain that had nothing to do with his sickness. He couldn’t stomach reading the unbearably energetic text again, so he set down the phone and hung his head, praying that it was just a nightmare.

Despite the urgency of the situation, he could only lament the fact that he had asked his sister for help. He could have simply told Mr. Tochimori, *I’ve fallen ill*, and the older man would’ve chuckled and delayed the tour to a later date.

Instead, he was dealing with the cruel reality that an impaired decision-making ability could lead to catastrophic mistakes. He reached for the vitamin gel near his pillow.

The first thing his fingers touched was a sheet of paper.

Please make sure you rest. I put something that’ll be gentle on your stomach in the fridge, so when you’re ready to eat, go ahead and have it. I’m borrowing your key because I’ll be back tomorrow.

He didn’t know when she’d placed it there, but the neat, careful handwriting could only belong to Nayuta. Such kindness really hit hard when he was feeling so under the weather.

…Well, it’s true…that she’s a real treasure, but still…

The age thing was definitely a problem.

Somehow, he got the room temperature gel down his throat, and from that point on, Klever settled into a sleep that would help him recover but was anything but restful.

Mental Output System

Clover's Network Security Corporation is currently engaged in designing and implementing VR offices for client companies as an extra line of business.

Because it's not for a game, it does not use the Seed engine (and in fact, the Kuroneko VR office was built by Vice President Hachidori using pre-Seed VR tech), which means that it is widely compatible with any VR system but does not contain any stats or special skills. In other words, it is a classic, traditional, network-based VR office that was adapted into a full-dive system.

In that sense, it's tempting to think that Hachidori's subsequent development of the Mental Output System was meant to use VR to make typical work tasks more efficient. But in fact, the biggest reason he conceived of the system was so that he could pet his cat and work at the same time–a noble but difficult goal to achieve.

After all, petting a cat requires two hands, ideally, or one at a bare minimum.

But if your work involves typing on a keyboard, using one hand is extremely inefficient. At first, Hachidori tried to solve the problem by adding his two arms to the equation, but this proved more difficult than he thought, and attempting to type while petting the cat with his arms more often than not caused him to squish the cat instead. He came to a conclusion: "Both hands should be reserved for petting the cat, and the work should be completed without using them at all."

Currently, Hachidori's daily work sessions see him petting cat bots with both hands while he does his programming using the Mental Output system. The invention was intended solely for this purpose, and work efficiency was only a happy byproduct of the process.

Cat and Tiger Café: Tigey Tiger

Over the course of establishing their business offering VR offices to other companies, Kuroneko created a number of different café spaces to serve as showrooms for their design capabilities.

One of them, known as Tigey Tiger, is a café that features cats and tigers.

Tigey is a regional term from the Hiroshima area, a corruption of the word "*taigi*," which in this case means something like *annoying* or *troublesome*. Originally, however, *taigi* referred to important rituals and ceremonies in the imperial court.

Such events were, of course, formal, stuffy, and burdensome, which is most likely how *tigey* came to refer to things that are annoying and fussy.

Given the name, one might think that this café would feature some very annoyed and lazy cats and tigers, but in fact, the true meaning of Tigey Tiger is *taigi taigan* ("a grand ritual for the sake of fulfilling a grand wish").

By sharing a space with grand cats and grand tigers, one's wishes are fulfilled, restoring your vitality and zest for life. *That* is the true intention of this café–not to have a bunch of tigers and cats sleeping around and being lazy.

It's true because I say it's true.



Chapter 2 The Recovering Fox and the Drying Girl

“……I just don’t get it.”

It was late at night at the Three-Leaf Detective Agency.

Koyomi the ninja’s remark, delivered without context, caught the attention of Nayuta the warrior priestess and Klever the detective.

“And where is this coming from?” asked Nayuta, who was sitting on the sofa, looking down at Koyomi pouting across her lap. She closed her paperback-sized e-book reader.

Klever, meanwhile, focused on the computer screen at the desk by the window, refusing to entertain whatever nonsense this was going to be.

For some reason, Koyomi was in a very foul mood despite enjoying her fill of Nayuta’s lap. “Listen, I’m not saying I have a problem with this sort of lazy mood…but I can’t help but feel like something’s subtly different here from before…and I think the cause is the detective and you, Nayu. You’re acting *too* comfortable. I can’t help but suspect that some kind of affection-raising event happened outside of my knowledge…”

Once again, Nayuta was stunned at the older girl’s psychic tendencies. But before she could react, the detective sighed heavily at his desk.

“It has already been four months since you two began squatting here. I think that’s long enough for people to become familiar with one another. I’m sure you felt right at home in no time…but for me, it wasn’t until quite recently that I no longer felt awkward about the situation. Couldn’t that explain the

change you're feeling?"

Koyomi whined like a little puppy. "Hmmm… Maybe you're right… You've got a point, but I don't know if I buy it… My jealousy sensor is saying I shouldn't just let this go…"

"I think your sensor is busted," Nayuta remarked, but that didn't wipe the pout off of Koyomi's face.

"…Ah, yes, Nayu… You *would* say that…but maybe I'll ask the detective. Detective, Detective. What do you think of Nayu?"

"I think she's a smart young lady with a firm head on her shoulders. You don't see that very often these days. Anything more than that, I suspect, will be misinterpreted, so I have no further comment. I don't have an ounce of improper sentiment toward her," Klever said smoothly. The words came out instantly, like he'd been rehearsing this very answer. Maybe it was just because his sister Ririka had been grilling him about it recently.

A few days earlier, while giving a VR office tour to Tochimori, Ririka had asked Nayuta an endless supply of those same questions about Klever. Because Koyomi was present, she didn't say anything about their IRL correspondence, but she had a feeling that Ririka had figured that out, too.

Koyomi clicked her tongue with annoyance. "You always have the safest and most boring answers… Don't you ever feel like letting your twisted libido fly for once and giving me a straightforward answer like, 'I want to put Nayu into a Playboy Bunny outfit,' 'I want her to dress up as a maid and wait on me hand and foot,' or 'I want her to sit at my bedside and nurse me back to health when I'm sick'? This is Nayu we're talking about! She's totally hot, right? If I were a guy, I would totally be going after her!"

This was the sort of nonsense that Koyomi always said, but one of those comments in particular hit a little close to home.

"Wait a minute, Koyomi. Setting aside the bunny and maid cosplay, I don't think that nursing someone back to health belongs in the same category…"

At once, Koyomi bounded up from Nayuta's lap. "What are you talking about?!" she exclaimed. "All of those things are deadly weapons when it comes to tickling a man's fancy! For one thing, nursing a man back to health is the purest expression of wife-material power there is, which makes it way more dangerous

than any over-the-top slutty costume! The dedication to nursing him back to health despite the risk of catching what he has, an act of gratuitous kindness, the fulfilling taste of homemade porridge on an empty stomach, and the relief of having someone trustworthy to watch over you… A member of the opposite sex being around in an emergency and providing all of this helpful care is the exact kind of critical hit that makes any man or woman think about marriage! My grandma even said it to me! 'You should marry the kind of person who will take care of you when you're sick.' It's when you're down and out that people show their true nature!"

The onslaught of commentary was so fierce and thick that Nayuta couldn't squeeze a word in edgewise. She pulled back to distance herself.

"R-really…? I still don't know if they belong together, though… Bunny and maid outfits are embarrassing and demeaning, but there's nothing shameful about caring for someone when they're sick…"

But Koyomi just shrugged her shoulders and sighed theatrically. "Oh, Nayu, Nayu, Nayu… You just don't get it. Listen, it doesn't matter whether you're embarrassed or not. I'm asking the detective if, in his capacity as a man, he dreams of situations like that or not. Because if I'm being honest, no man is going to be immune to your charms if you're taking care of him. You could even get girls falling in love with you. Like me, for example! And you don't seem to be aware of that, so you need to be more careful because you're going to have that kind of effect on people whether you realize it or not!"

Nayuta was so blown away by the force of this speech that all she could do was nod and squeak, "Well, I'll be careful…in the… future?" In the corner of her eye, she spotted Klever holding his head in his hands.

Just the other day, he had been bedridden with a nasty cold. He still wasn't back to perfect condition, but at the very least, his fever had subsided, and he was able to work in VR again. For the few days it took to recover, Nayuta had spent all afternoon and evening with him after school. Fortunately for her, she hadn't caught the bug.

Koyomi turned back to Klever and said, "What's up? Why are

you holding your head like that, Detective?”

“Oh… I’ve got some minor discrepancies in these figures that aren’t adding up. The thought of having to go back through the numbers to find my mistake is just exhausting to think about. That’s all. But I’ll be fine.”

“Ah, I see. You do all the accounting for your company? That seems like a lot of work. I bet Nayuta’s lap pillow would do you a lot of good. But I still call dibs!”

She dived back onto Nayuta’s legs, wagging her tail. It wasn’t rare to imagine that Koyomi had grown a tail, but in this case, it was no hallucination.

“…Koyomi, I just noticed the tail. What’s up with that?”

“Oh, this? It’s an equipable accessory that gives you a tiny speed boost. It moves on its own to reflect the wearer’s emotional state. When you want to tuck it away, it goes like this…”

The fluffy, doglike tail swirled into a compact circle and hung from the side of her waist, at which point it looked just like a fake-fur cell phone strap.

“Another strange item they’ve put into the game… Do they sell those in stores?”

“Yep. They also had cat-ear and dog-ear headbands, but my ninja headband ribbon already does the job there, so I don’t think I need one,” she said. The way the tail wagged freely seemed to suit her perfectly.

Well, at least I managed to divert the topic of conversation, Nayuta thought and moved on to a different question before they could go back. “By the way, I haven’t heard about anything new in Ayakashi Alley lately. Is there anything good out these days?”

Koyomi’s head tilted back and forth on her neck. “Hmmm, just the tail and headbands, really. They’re gonna add a bunch of new stuff for summer vacation, but we’re not quite there yet, so the pickings are slim right now. Oh! But they’ve started preorders for a seaside swimsuit event! You can choose the style and the pattern and stuff now, and then your suit will show up on the first day of the event. You wanna go for a new swimsuit, Nayu? That white bikini you wore at the hot spring resort was killer, but you can’t wear that in public, right?”

“Sorry, I’ll pass on that event,” Nayuta said. She had to be very firm on that one. Even in VR, she didn’t want to be wearing a

swimsuit in front of strangers. Unsurprisingly, this caused Koyomi to pout again.

“Awww, you can use it at the hot spring again. You should definitely have one. Why don’t you just pick one out so that I can buy it for you as a present? There are some that are way less revealing and look like modified kimonos… You know, like the one Ririka was wearing. Which wasn’t a swimsuit, I guess.”

The mention of that name brought a bitter twitch to the detective’s eyes. Nayuta pretended she hadn’t noticed and replied, “That’s a good point. I guess I might be willing to keep one if it looks more like that…”

“Exactly!” Koyomi beamed. “What would be best? You’re the cool and calm type, so blues or whites seem best for you, but I bet a fiery red or orange would work, too. Oh yeah, and the priestess-style white kimono bra with the red pareu from the catalog was cute, too. So that one’s a must, and as an extra option, we can go with—”

“I don’t need two,” Nayuta said quickly. She wasn’t going to be treated like a dress-up doll. “I’d just like a normal, respectable swimsuit…and a jacket to wear on top, plus tracksuit pants for bottoms.”

Koyomi’s eyes narrowed. “All right, then. You really do hate swimsuits, don’t you? How is that possible when you have such a killer body…? Sure, I guess it’s not fun to stand out too much. But VR is way less dangerous than real life, and if obnoxious guys hit on you, there’s always the option to log off. I just think you should be able to enjoy a typical teenage girl’s life and have fun. That’s all,” she lamented.

“I’m sorry, but to be honest, I find it more enjoyable to lounge around like this with you than to cavort around at the beach,” Nayuta admitted.

Koyomi’s face broke into a sappy grin. “Awww! ♪ That’s so sweeeeet! ♪ When you’re being such a darling, li’l Koyomi’s got no complaints! *Woof, woof, woof!*”

Tail wagging, she clung to Nayuta’s thighs and rubbed her face against them, just like a pet dog would. While this was hardly appropriate behavior for an older woman, Nayuta did find it to be something of a relief. While she herself would never do the same thing, Koyomi was never guilty of thinking about things too

seriously and was always relaxed and focused on what would be the most fun thing to do. Given Nayuta's tendency to always be serious and earnest, this was a model she could learn from.

I suppose being lovable is an important quality for anyone to have, male or female, she thought. There was even something about Klever, who seemed so in control but was actually not on top of things at all, that was endearing to her.

She looked across Koyomi, who wriggled and cooed on her lap, to the detective at his desk, who looked back.

"Excuse me…Miss Pet Owner? I'd like to close up the office now. Do you mind if I log out?"

"Ah, not at all. Shall we get going now, Koyomi?"

"*Woof, woof!* Oh yeah… Ah! Is it really this late?! My bath's gonna be boiling by now! See ya tomorrow, Nayu!"

"Yes, see you tomorrow."

Nayuta watched Koyomi pop upright and log out, then opened her own menu screen. But before she went, she had one last message for Klever.

"Um…Detective, all that stuff Koyomi was saying about nursing someone back to health… I just want you to know that none of it was intended to win points with you or anything of the sort. Please trust me about that."

"I know," Klever said gravely. "And I hope you don't take her ramblings too seriously, either. The bunny and maid stuff is nonsense, of course, and as for nursing me back to health… Well, I'll be honest. It was a big help to me, and I'm grateful to you, but I know that you weren't intending to send the sort of message Koyomi was talking about."

That was the reaction she expected from him, but there was still one more thing to ask.

"Just for posterity's sake, I wanted to ask…if it's true that men typically find it enticing when a girl cares for them while they're sick… I would think that, with the fever, you'd be too preoccupied to think about anything like that."

His face looked almost comically serious. "How should I answer that? Let's talk about the general consensus. While the man's being cared for, he doesn't have any ulterior motives—he's just grateful. That has nothing to do with the opposite sex, just the value of knowing that someone is there to help you while you're

weakened, especially when living alone. Once the fever passes, and he's able to think rationally again, he'll look back on the experience. I think it's only natural to think, 'I want someone this kind and caring to be around,' but on the flip side, if the other person is cold and uncaring, he's going to wonder if he really meant so little to them. Maybe there are times when the person providing the care is thinking, 'This is really pathetic that you're so helpless over a mere cold.' So, speaking personally now, unfortunately, I must admit that Miss Koyomi's observations were largely correct."

He leaned back in his chair and gazed up at the ceiling thoughtfully.

"Caring for another's sickness is a situation that forces both parties to consider what the other person means to them. To the caretaker, it's whether the other person is someone you truly wish to get better or if they're an annoying burden that must be eased as quickly as possible. And to the patient, the value that they represent to the caretaker is visible to the naked eye. If you're aware of the implications, it's quite easy to use the situation as a way to emphasize your own qualities. And there is also the ever-present danger that a simple act of personal kindness is misinterpreted as something more."

Nayuta's head bobbed up and down. She was taking all of this to heart. According to Koyomi, her grandmother had said that it was when you were weakened that you saw the other person's true nature. Depending on your viewpoint, it could be an instance of each party confirming their valuation of the other.

How important is the other person to me?

And what do I mean to them?

Both caretaker and patient were forced to be aware of the other's answer through the phenomenon of sickness.

The detective sighed bitterly. "But…as you say, it does not deserve to be listed among indecent cosplay exhibitions. That is quite a stretch."

"Yes, I agree that she was making a major leap," Nayuta said, satisfied that they were in agreement on that point. She moved to press the LOG OUT button, but just before she did, she glanced in Klever's direction again. "And now that we share that opinion, I'll just add one more thing… I did not intend to appeal to you in that

instance, but I also would not do as much as I did out of sheer kindness. Please don't make that mistaken assumption."

"…Hmm? Wait, what do you—?"

"Now, if you'll excuse me. Good night."

She quickly left the VR space while the detective looked at her in bafflement.

Her mind traveled back to reality. Klever had looked like he was totally confused by her parting statement. She had known it would have this effect on him, but for all of his comments about how she let her guard down too much around people, Klever himself seemed to do that the most.

Back in her apartment, Nayuta was starting to draw a bath when she received a text message.

Oh, it's from Ririka.

She had recently friended Klever's older sister, Ririka Rougerie. She lived in America, which meant the time difference made it very unlikely that they would meet in VR, but she seemed to have taken a major liking to Nayuta and often sent her little messages.

HIYA, NAYUTA, COMMENT ALLEZ-VOUS? WERE YOU ABOUT TO GO TO BED OVER THERE? SORRY, IT'S SO LATE. ANYWAY, I JUST GOT AN ANGRY TEXT FROM KAISEI SAYING, "DON'T FILL NAYUTA'S HEAD WITH NONSENSE." DID YOU DO SOMETHING? JUST BETWEEN US, WHAT DID YOU DO? I WON'T TELL ANYONE.

Apparently, Klever had interpreted that parting comment as a bit of a prank stemming from his sister's bad advice. For a detective, it was a shockingly dense assumption, but maybe she should interpret it as a demonstration of his *hope* that it was the case.

Nayuta typed out an intentionally dense reply.

I'M ABOUT TO TAKE A BATH. I'M SORRY, BUT I DON'T KNOW WHAT HE'S TALKING ABOUT. HE'S PROBABLY CONFUSED ABOUT SOMETHING.

OH, OKAY. I THOUGHT MAYBE THERE WAS SOME PROGRESS THERE…BUT I DID HEAR A LITTLE WHILE BACK THAT YOU WENT OVER TO NURSE KAISEI BACK TO HEALTH WHEN HE WAS SICK IN BED? SO SORRY ABOUT THE TROUBLE MY DUMB

LITTLE BROTHER'S PUT YOU THROUGH.

They had managed to hide it from Koyomi, but he'd told his sister, then. For such a buttoned-up guy, Klever had surprisingly loose lips.

NO, IT WAS MY DECISION. HE'S DONE A LOT FOR ME, AND I'D WANT SOMEONE TO HELP ME WHEN I'M IN NEED, TOO.

Nayuta put down the phone so that she could get into the bath. It was a well-deserved soak that melted away all of the fatigue of the day. When she was done, she checked her phone again and saw that Ririka had responded over half an hour ago.

ACTUALLY, I DIDN'T HEAR ANYTHING ABOUT YOU NURSING KAISEI BACK TO HEALTH. ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH THE TERM "LEADING QUESTION"?

Nayuta pretended she hadn't seen that smug response and rolled onto her bed. Yes, she had been naïve. What now? Clearly, Ririka was an even trickier conversational partner than Klever.

She couldn't think of any good plans. Instead, she placed her phone on the charging stand, grabbed the end of her blanket, and pulled it all the way up over her head.

§

Cats are nothing but wild animals in the end.

They certainly aren't gods.

Belief systems are subjective and up to the individual, which means one is also free *not* to believe in anything.

So if there is a true god, what is it?

The capybara.

"...And so it seems that a religious organization worshipping capybaras has sprung into being, unintended by the developers.

Now they're spreading and showing signs of odd behavior…"

"Really…?" Klever replied with a raised, skeptical eyebrow.

Torao, hunched over with a faint little smile, sipped his cup of tea. "Do you remember Beast Hunt: Genroku Capybara Scroll? It had quite an impact, didn't it? Gameplay aside, it *did* make quite an impression…and now, we've got people who treat that field as a holy land and worship the capybara. They created a group called the Capybara Guild, but it's split apart into the Capybara Ascetics and Capybara Fundamentalists, the Feeders, the Nappers, and more…"

"Are they engaging in inter-guild warfare?"

"No, it's totally peaceful. They just keep splintering into smaller and smaller groups."

So when the developer is crazy, it tends to rub off on the players, then.

Torao's brow furrowed with concern. "But as a priest of the cat-god religion, I'm afraid this is a development I cannot ignore."

"I would think that you'd *actively* ignore it to avoid a religious clash. Is this inconveniencing you somehow?"

"Mmmm," Torao grumbled. "I think it's just a blow to my pride to have cats disrespected by rodents… You know how it goes, right?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't," Klever said. It wasn't smart to contradict one's important business partners too much, but this was one area where he wasn't just going to play along.

Torao cackled. "Anyway, to get to something serious for once, we should have a special pilgrimage to the Cat-Buddha statue as an event once summer vacation starts. Naturally, we want to remind people of the appeal of the cat god, more than the capybara god, leading up to that."

"Ahhh, so that's what you mean. But you don't need to antagonize the Capybara Guild to do that. Just promote the Cat-Buddha statue…"

"So for now, we've decided to build a massive, over-seven-hundred-foot-tall Cat-Buddha statue at the Capybara Guild's holy land."

"If your company were not a very important client of mine, I would be admitting a very unflattering opinion of you right now," Klever said. This one was valid to roll his eyes at.

Torao grinned impishly. He had a streak of mischief that was unbecoming of a man his age.

Klever used his laptop to call up a list of tall buildings. “It looks like Tokyo Tower is just over one thousand feet tall. The main deck is almost five hundred feet off the ground, and the top deck is over three hundred feet above that… That makes the Cat-Buddha statue you’re proposing almost as tall as the top deck. Doesn’t that seem a little too big to you?”

“We’re making the inside a dungeon, so it has to be at least a certain size to work. If you can reach the Cat’s-Forehead level at the top, you’ll get some Cat-Koban coins that can be sold for money. Inside the dungeon, you can also find Cat-Scratchers, which are cat-themed back scratchers; Cat’s-Eyes, precious stones that bring good luck; Cat-Naps, which are hooded onesies that offer protection against cold; and Cat’s-Paws, which are shoes that quiet your footsteps. We’ve been busy coming up with lots of new stuff.”

“…Are you guys feeling a little self-conscious about this?” Klever asked bluntly. Torao smiled awkwardly.

“I won’t deny the staff is a bit desperate. Most of these folks don’t even take the Obon holiday vacation off. How does your company handle Obon?”

“Same as ever. If anyone wants an extended vacation, we give them the time off, but I have to pick up the slack for them, so I might end up busier than usual around that time.”

Torao’s brows furrowed, and he muttered, “That’s not great, either… You’re a young fellow. You should be enjoying your summers. You know…by going to the beach with a teenage girl, for example.”

Klever was getting used to being teased like this. “Please don’t prop up false charges against me. She’s the sister of my late friend,” he insisted.

“And don’t you misconstrue my words,” Torao said, shaking his head. “I’m not talking about your boring morality. I’m telling you to give that poor girl some good memories. She’s still in high school, isn’t she? That’s an age when she wants to have a good time, but living alone, she doesn’t have the time or the money to do that. If she’s the sister of your close friend, it’s all the more reason for you to take her under your wing and show her a good

time as an adult in her life who's in a position to help her."

That sounded like wise advice from an older man, but Klever was not taking it at face value. He replied, "Yes, thank you for your insincere commentary. Now tell me how you really feel."

"Given how calm and collected you appear at all times, I find the sight of you being twirled around the finger of this teenage girl to be extremely funny," Torao answered, which was more or less exactly what Klever expected.

He glanced out the window into the darkness. "It might be entertaining to you, but with one wrong step, I'll have the police at my door…and honestly, they might show up even if I *don't* take a wrong step."

He had a status as a former police officer. If there was one thing he never wanted to suffer, it was getting arrested by his former coworkers.

Torao sighed quite spectacularly. "It's not good for you to be so unnecessarily frightened. My own opinions aside, I think you could stand to show a little backbone and take her out for a good time. And you should know better than anyone that she's not trying to trap you and get you arrested."

That one stung. Nayuta herself had been telling him to stop treating her like some kind of tumor and trust in her a little. However, there was one fatal misunderstanding in Torao's suggestion.

"I'll look into it, but there's one big problem: She's the indoor type. As I understand it, she refuses to even go to the beach or pool with her friends because she doesn't like people staring. If I tried to invite her to go anywhere crowded or popular, she'd probably balk at it."

Torao looked up at the ceiling. "Ahhh… Now that you mention it, that sounds right. She's the quiet type who doesn't carry on making noise. But so are you, for that matter. Won't you get along, then? Nobody's going to punish you for taking her to a movie or something."

Klever wasn't sure how to respond to that. Though he couldn't tell Torao, he had once invited her to a movie out of a similar sense of responsibility.

Nayuta had casually turned him down. Instead, for some reason, they ended up watching a movie at Klever's house with a

streaming service. While discussing it with his coworkers the next day, someone pointed out that this was basically an “at-home date,” which shocked Klever.

Honestly, it makes no sense that I didn’t realize it before this point.

He thought back many times on how it had come to that, but Klever couldn’t figure out where he’d gone wrong. If he had to analyze it, the only conclusion was that Nayuta’s negotiation skills—and her ability to steer a debate to her favor—were far craftier than he had anticipated.

It’s true that it seems like we’re sitting together at the table more often than before…

But, of course, they weren’t a couple.

Torao got tired of watching Klever ponder in silence and said pointedly, “Isn’t it the case that you *can* have a relationship with a minor as long as it’s a serious one with the intent to marry? Given her parent or guardian’s approval, of course…”

This, of course, was nothing but criminal instigation to Klever. “Regardless of what the law says, it is still hugely problematic in the eyes of society,” he shot back.

“Listen, Kurei,” said Torao, flashing him a sarcastic grin, “take this pointless advice from an older man for what it’s worth…but the eyes of society are almost completely useless in life unless you happen to work in one of those few special industries that use popularity as currency. The eyes that matter are *yours*. What does this girl look like through your eyes? You can take your time with it, but you ought to give it a serious look. At the very least, you shouldn’t just throw out your ability to form your own opinion, using the extremely pointless yardstick of the ‘eyes of society’ as an excuse. And it’s not like you to hide behind something like that.”

While his tone of voice was as aloof as ever, Torao had a very good point about that, and Klever couldn’t deny it. Such a logical suggestion deserved a good answer.

“…I suppose you’re right. I’ve been placing an unnecessary filter over my view of her, simply because she’s not an adult. She’s scolded me for the very same thing.”

“Of course, what you’re doing is a mature response on its own. The kind of adults who go after high school girls are almost

entirely scum, and while this might sound contradictory to what I've just been saying, if you were the type of dangerous man who'd go right up and hit on minors, I wouldn't hesitate to report you to the cops," Torao said, cackling. His sleepy eyes trailed down to the floor. "Well…after this conversation, I'm glad I turned that request down."

"Request? Turned down what?"

"It was from an important business client. He was helping look for a potential marriage partner for an acquaintance's daughter and was asking if you would be interested in the offer. I flaked out by saying I didn't know you that well. And you wouldn't take the bait anyway, would you?"

Klever smiled uncomfortably. "Oh…thank you for turning it down. I'm sorry you were put into that situation. And who was this important business contact?"

"It was Mr. Hishikawa from Shankara Japan, one of the big tech companies we partnered with on Seven Mysteries."

Klever's foxy face smirked with recognition. "Ah, yes. So that's his angle this time."

"…So you *do* know him already."

Despite the fact that no one else would be listening in, the detective lowered his voice. "That's the company that tried to hire Mr. Hachidori out from under us. He didn't give them the time of day, but…"

Torao lowered his voice even further. "Ah…do you think they heard about the Mental Output thing somehow? And if Hachidori wasn't playing ball, they thought they might ensnare you, the company president, and get the details from you…"

"Maybe I'm just overthinking it, but if they asked to be introduced to me by name, then I don't think it's a coincidence. There are other places seeking to partner with us at the moment, too. They're all after the Mental Output System. I've made it clear that it's still in development, but they're all very knowledgeable about it already. The thing is, I know exactly how they found out. During the beta phase, Mr. Hachidori went out and bragged to a friend all about it." Klever sighed. He could have stopped it from happening, but Hachidori was as excited as a child and very hard to discourage. Ultimately, he had to give up, and the story spread from there.

“The idea that they would try to offer a marriage partner, though… I’m not going to say it’s completely anachronistic, but it’s certainly not a tactic I’ve heard of happening to anyone *I* know.”

Torao’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t hear about them much, but they do happen. These days, they don’t call them formal marriage interviews anymore. They say vague things like ‘introduction from a mutual acquaintance.’ Basically, they want to count you as an ally. Forming marriage connections with valuable people to get them on your side is a legitimate tactic that’s been historically used since well before the Warring States period. Given how effective it is, it never really goes away, even if the changing times make it unpopular.”

So there was a logic to it, but it sent Klever back into rumination. “It would make sense if they tried to sweet-talk Mr. Hachidori, but I’m just some amateurish youngster. I guess they figured that they’d dangle the bait of a big leap up in life and make off with my secrets like a bandit.”

Torao’s look turned piercing. “Listen… You might not be aware of this, but to most people, you’ve got some serious qualifications on your side. Of course, these folks are assuming that if they talk you into their family, they’ll automatically get Hachidori in the deal, but you have plenty of value on your own. You’re a former police officer and the young owner and manager of an up-and-coming tech business, and you’ve got a keen and practical eye. On top of all that, you’re handsome and a good talker. You’re guaranteed to have a solid income and a promising future. If my daughter were the right age, I’d be recommending her to you myself.”

It was such an onslaught of compliments that it immediately soured Klever’s mood.

“…I’m sorry, Mr. Torao, but hearing so much praise from you just makes me assume that you’ve got something up your sleeve…”

“Hey, that kind of accusation is uncalled for. This is what I get for saying nice things,” Torao said, cackling briskly before he dropped to a hush. “But jokes aside, that Mental Output System you’ve got is worth the trouble of trying old-school tactics like that. Hell, I wish *we* had it, too. Seems like a lot of trouble to master, but if you do, a single person could practically make an

entire feature film in a single day. If a rival company had a monopoly on it, I can't imagine how I'd be able to compete."

"That's just an exaggeration," Klever said, downplaying it. "Yes, it does drastically shorten working time, so it leads to major savings in personnel costs, but the quality of the product isn't really any different from what's already out there. It all just depends on who's making it."

Torao snorted. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to shorten production time…? Online game developers like us are always responding to bug reports. And people frown on overtime and all-nighters these days, so a system that allows you to produce the same results in a shorter amount of time is a godsend."

Overtime and all-nighters were a regular occurrence with the *Asuka Empire* dev team since they were busy producing their yearlong event. Mahiro's father, Munemitsu Yamashiro, was suffering from a loss of sharpness and good decision-making prior to his disappearance, all due to crunch scheduling.

The dev team had its own VR office, and members were able to log in virtually from home just about any day of the week, but during especially crucial moments in the process, they had to report in offline as a safety measure to prevent inadvertent data leaks.

That meant commuting to the office, and when work days got longer and longer as busy stretches arrived, it wasn't uncommon at all for programmers to sleep at the office. If they were able to make use of the Mental Output System, a lot of that working time could be greatly compressed.

"Is every company really that pressed for time? Based on the person I know working on the *ALfheim* team, they seem to be a lot more chill over there…"

A furrow appeared on Torao's brow. "You can't compare the two… The developers of *ALfheim* have the full version of *SAO*'s Cardinal System at their disposal. The majority of games, like ours, can only use the reduced-function version. We don't have AI-created story generation, for example, which is why we had to come up with a user-submitted quest contest out of sheer desperation. Plus, we brought a ton of collaborative sponsors on board, so we have to manage each and every one of their orders and requests. Who in the world approved this crazy project?"

That would be Tochimori, the CTO of the company.

"…So what do you think, Kurei? Feel like allowing us to use your special system, even if just in a limited-time trial run?"

As an important client, Klever wanted to take on as many of Torao's requests as possible. But in this case, he shook his head no.

"I'm very sorry, but that still belongs to Mr. Hachidori alone. It's true that it allows even normal people to create text, graphics, 3D models, videos, and programs through the powers of their mind alone—once they get used to it—and that alone makes it a valuable business product, but…"

He trailed off when he lost his train of thought and paused to take a breath.

"Hmm? Is there some secret about it that you can't afford getting out?" Torao asked with concern.

"I'll be honest. The security aspects of the feature might as well not even exist right now. It was fine while Mr. Hachidori was developing it on his own within the company, but if anyone pokes and prods at it enough to find a security hole, our company is going to explode into smithereens. I'm talking about in court."

Torao whistled. "I didn't know about *that*. You sure you were supposed to let me know about it?"

"This is just me talking to myself, but it's obviously dangerous," Klever admitted with a sheepish little smile. "First, you sit the player you want inside the Mental Output System's module. Then, as long as the player's monitors are off, they don't realize that their thoughts are being output, so you can forbid the system to overwrite that data and secretly save all of their thoughts, and…"

The other man shivered. "You can simply ask them whatever question you want, and even if they don't answer out loud, the thoughts that came to their mind will still be recorded…?"

"Precisely."

An excellent tool for questioning suspects, of course, but completely outside of the bounds of human rights and ethicality.

"Whether it's business, national secrets, or twisted sexual fetishes and evidence of adultery, all that sensitive information is going to come right out. As long as it's in your memory, you can have images, voices, maps, and even bank account PINs. One of our guys, Senjuya, decided it would be funny to test it out…and it

was devastating. We learned all of his traumas—memories of his first crush, his daily downers, various dirty secrets and desires. They were all laid bare. If this tech gets out into the world at large, we're going to be treated like war criminals," Klever said, exhaling heavily.

Torao's cheek twitched uncomfortably. "Yikes. I didn't realize it was that bad…"

"Once you know how it works, I suppose you could produce false confessions on purpose, but you can even use it like a lie detector, looking for fluctuations in the subject's thoughts. As company president, I called off further development at that point, and I've had Mr. Hachidori working on limiting its powers and enacting security measures since then…but it sounds like it's been rough going."

"Geez… I guess genius is always a hair's-width from disaster. Can't believe he made something so dangerous," Torao said, shoulders slumping.

"He had no idea of the implications of what he was making. Besides, the system was only built to help himself with his own personal work."

"It's crazy how complex its features are, though… What's this Hachidori guy like anyway?"

Whenever this question came up, Klever just vaguely laughed it off. "He looks like a normal person. He doesn't have any dangerous ideas like Akihiko Kayaba. But it is true that he's a bit removed from the common sense of the typical person, and he's aware of that. I think Mr. Hachidori teams up with normal people like me because he relies on my typical senses."

"Hmmm," Torao grunted. "So you're like the brake that keeps him from running wild. I'd like to meet him someday, but it sounds like you keep him well-guarded."

"He's a rare sight even around the company," Klever admitted. "Maybe you two would get along. He's a cat person."

"I think I like this guy already," Torao joked and stood up from the couch. "Well, I should get going now. Thanks for the interesting stories. I'm not going to tell anyone what you've told me, but is Tochimori an exception?"

"Mr. Tochimori already knows all of this. He sent me a concerned message after his recent office tour."

Torao cackled on his way to the door. “He’s so sharp… The man’s a born engineer. He still complains that he wishes he was back getting his hands dirty again. He knows that he’s too old to handle long work shifts anymore, which is probably why he’s curious about that Mental Output System. He could produce dramatic results in a short time. Just the sort of toy a retired man would love.”

“By the time Mr. Tochimori has retired, there will be even better solutions out there.”

VR and AR were making daily progress with dramatic leaps. The biggest breakthrough came from Akihiko Kayaba, a man who was no longer alive, but there were many, many more researchers after him with exciting business opportunities waiting to be found. There were lots of investments happening, not just in game companies.

The VR space was like a new continent, just waiting for development. There weren’t actual resources like metals and crops to be gained, but digital currency and cash were both drawn to the fields of lucrative data to be harvested. In an arena where marketing and image were so effective as sales tools, consultants like Klever were valuable enough to make a decent living offering their services.

As he left, Torao turned back to say, “By the way, speaking of Tochimori, he had high praise for those young ladies. He was impressed with Koyomi’s unflinching friendliness and Nayuta’s wisdom and consideration. He especially complimented Nayuta for being mature well beyond her years. It’s rare to see a young lady with such a solid head on her shoulders. Wish my daughter would take a page from her book.”

Klever wasn’t sure how to respond to this. He agreed with all of this, but if he said as much, it was bound to dig up the uncomfortable topic from earlier. Torao could see right through him and grinned.

“Don’t get your hackles up. You probably don’t realize it, but since those girls have been coming around and hanging out, the look on your face has loosened up a lot.”

This took Klever by surprise. “Huh…? I’m not aware that anything has been altered in my personal appearance settings…”

“I’m talking about in real life. Before, you used to have a

menacing air around you, like you were trying to put a curse on everyone. When you smiled, your eyes stayed cold. Stuff like that. But when you showed up at the office during the whole Yamashiro incident, I was shocked by how that look had totally vanished. It's a good change for you."

He turned and raised a hand to wave goodbye, then returned to the Cat-God Worship Research Society next door.

Klever sat with this last comment for a while.

The look on my face has changed, huh…?

He wasn't aware that anything was different. But it was true that the number of nightmares he had was going down.

A little while after Torao left the detective agency, the door opened again.

"Hello, Detective. My finals are over at last," said the warrior priestess with a prim and proper smile and bow, not looking tired in the least. There was an aura around her that seemed to cleanse the area of any ill will or curses, and it was definitely brighter than before.

Klever felt a bit unnerved that the very reason for the change in his looks had shown up right after he'd been told about it, but he managed a quick smile that gave away nothing about his thoughts.

"Congratulations. How do you think you did?"

"I felt better about my tests than usual, thanks to you."

Having done a pale imitation of a tutoring job in math and English, Klever had played a small part in that. If her results were worse than before, it would indicate that he was a poor teacher.

"Glad to hear it. So that's one less thing to worry about during your summer vacation."

Nayuta sat on the couch and opened an e-book. "Speaking of vacation, are you planning to do any traveling, Detective?"

"Nope. No plans like that."

"Same here. My relative in the country said I should visit, but I was thinking that would be better saved for once I've gotten into college."

Klever paused what he was doing and stared at her. "Isn't that all the more reason to go now? What kind of relative is this?"

"My aunt. The one who sent me soba noodles and greens earlier. She's my mother's younger sister, but now she lives with

her husband's family, so the hurdles are a little bit higher for me to just show up out of the blue… I've never been there, and there are lots of people who aren't blood relatives there, so it seems like it'd be a tiring trip, to be honest."

It sounded like it would be more stressful than relaxing, so Klever didn't feel it was right to recommend that she go.

"I see. Speaking of which, what happened to the idea of going to visit Koyomi? She said you should stay over at her place, didn't she?"

"I see her basically every day in VR, so I don't know if it's worth riding the bullet train to see her. And I'm trying to save as much money as I can for living expenses."

Klever pressed lightly on his eyelids. Nayuta was very principled and frugal, and while there was something laudable about that, seeing her be so cheap at this age was almost pitiful.

"…Listen…I'm not telling you to waste your money, but…I think it's okay for you to have selfish desires and hopes every now and then. Isn't there anything you wish for? I'm realizing now that I haven't paid you back for the Thirteen-Floor Underground Labyrinth. If there's anything I can help you with, I'd like to hear about it."

Nayuta blinked. "I'm…surprised."

"By what?"

"That you, of all people, would say something as careless as 'if there's anything I can help you with.' Are you sure you want to do that? My request could get you into a lot of trouble," she said. The implications were horrifying.

"After the way you scolded me, I have decided to put my full trust in you. I believe that you will not make any requests that betray this trust."

Her head bobbed up and down. "I see. This is now rather tricky. If I make a strange request of you, all of the trust that I've built up with you could come crumbling down."

"…That's true, but you might be thinking about this too logically. Just free your mind and think. There must be some fashionable clothing, bags, shoes, or other accessories that you've been thinking about."

Nayuta gave him a curious look. "Do I look like the kind of girl who asks for presents like that?"

“…No, you don’t. Which is why I’m having so much trouble trying to figure out what I can do for you,” he said. At the very least, it was difficult to treat her the same as any regular teenage girl.

“It’s the thought that counts. If anything, I’m just amazed that I somehow elicited that offer from you, Detective,” she said. At the very least, she wasn’t flatly declining his offer. “Between the dinners and tutoring, that’s enough for me. Please don’t feel too obligated to do anything.”

“That’s easy for you to say… And with the dinners, you’re obviously the one doing a favor for me.”

Plus, the other day, she had helped nurse him back to health. In that light, it was hard to say which of the two was really the older and more capable one.

“…It’s occurring to me to ask,” Nayuta said, breaking the silence, “if staying over at your house is an acceptable request.”

“Absolutely not,” he declared. “I don’t think very highly of that kind of tasteless joke. What were you going to do if I accepted?”

Nayuta exhaled quietly. “I would’ve taken you up on your offer…but that’s the reaction I expected. But I didn’t say it as a joke or to be crass. This morning, my water heater malfunctioned out of nowhere, and I can’t take hot baths or showers for several days until it gets fixed, which is a problem. There aren’t any public baths near my place, and I can’t go to stay at a Net café overnight as a minor, and I’d only be using the shower there… If worst comes to worst, I could go to a hotel, but it would be a huge waste of money. But at your house, I could have dinner, use your bath, and then spend the night, which would make things much easier for me.”

While unexpected, her reasoning was difficult to refuse, which only made this harder for Klever. In logical terms, there were no holes in Nayuta’s story. But as a request, there was no sense to it.

“…And you can’t stay with a friend?”

“I would feel bad about it… Honestly, the hotel would be better than that.”

Caught between a rock and a hard place, Klever could only think of one solution.

“All right. If I let you use my bath once or twice…then I’ll drive you back home afterward.”

“I don’t like cooling off after the bath. I prefer to get right into bed from there. Please let me spend the night.”

At his wit’s end, he tried desperately to enlighten the teenage girl about the sense of danger she might be lacking.

“Listen, I would love to be of help to you, but I think you should feel a bit more cautious around me… Grown men in their twenties are not the kind of people you should blindly trust like this.”

Nayuta returned to her book with a look of feigned ignorance. It seemed that she had given up on her idea.

“Oh well, then. I can’t force your hand. Also, I was cautious of you at first, but you were such a gentleman that my trust is winning out over that caution. Also, if anything untoward were to happen, knowing your personality, I think you would hold yourself responsible for it.”

“…When Daichi was still alive, he told me about you. We were talking about our sisters, and he said that his little sister was too bold about the oddest things. Nothing he said sounded as wild as what my sister does, but now I can see what he meant by it.”

“I’m not bold. I just don’t let my feelings show normally. For example, I’m just lonely and tired of living alone and taking advantage of your kindness, Detective.”

She said it matter-of-factly, even casually. But to Klever, it sounded like a cry for help that shouldn’t go unheeded. Nayuta quickly realized what she had done, too, and hastily added, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. Please forget what I said.”

“No.”

She might look older, but she was still a minor.

There were plenty of others her age who lived alone, whether at a dorm or for work reasons. But her situation was different. Torao had just told him to be the adult and be proactive in helping her.

In a legal sense, it would be smarter for him to push her away and avoid trouble, but to do so would be to betray his attachment to the memory of his late friend.

And most of all, Klever *liked* Nayuta. He wanted her to be happy, and if she needed support in her life, he wasn’t going to turn his back on her when that need arose.

“…As for staying over, it’s all right until your water heater is

fixed. Sometimes I have coworkers or Narafushi over, so I have an inflatable air bed. I'm sure you have bags for changes of clothes, so I'll drive over to pick you up."

Nayuta looked up without closing her book. Her eyes were even wider than before. She wasn't bothering to hide her shock.

"…Are you serious?"

"This was your idea. I've had broken water heaters before. And when you live alone, there's nothing else you can do. We all need a little help sometimes," Klever said simply. Nayuta remained frozen in disbelief.

A whisper escaped her lips like a sigh. "Um…Detective…are you really that easy…?"

He flashed her a foxlike grin. "And are you really that sure of yourself? Because if you claim you can get by in the middle of summer without a hot bath to clean off, that's no skin off my back."

"I'm sorry. Koyomi always says that to me, so I was hoping to try it out on someone else for once. I will gladly and gratefully accept your offer until the repairs are done," she said, bowing deeply. Then she opened her menu window. "Well, I should pack my belongings, then. You're going to come pick me up in your car?"

"Yeah. I'll go in an hour so that I have a little time to clean up the guest room. Just wait at your place for me to get there."

"I will. Thank you," Nayuta said. The softened look of deep happiness on her face caused Klever's heart to skip a beat. After she had logged out, he dropped his head into his hands.

I wish that I could take myself from about a minute ago and sit him down for a long, harsh lecture.

"…What am I doing…? Just because I owe her one, who allows a request like *that* one…?"

"Listen, don't blame yourself… She's playing with different weapons. You're trying to defend against ballistic missiles with a cardboard shield," said a comforting voice from the entrance to the office.

Klever jumped. Visible through the crack of the open door was Torao, wearing his Shinto priest robe.

"Sorry… Wasn't trying to eavesdrop. I'd forgotten to relay another work message… The final playtest for the Seven

Mysteries (School) quest has been moved up to tonight at the client's request. If you have the time, we'd appreciate your presence… Should I send you the details in an email later…?"

"…Please do," Klever managed to reply, slumping over his desk. A heavy silence followed, which eventually wore out his resistance. He croaked, "Mr. Torao…please don't tell anyone what you just heard…"

"…How could I? I know there's a line that can't be crossed, and I'm not in any rush to betray your confidence. But I have to say, my goodness…," Torao closed the door entirely and continued muttering as he left. "I made the right call turning down that marriage meeting for you. Certainly can't recommend you to anyone now…"

Klever had no response. He stayed slumped onto the desk, utterly immobilized for a few minutes.

§

108 Apparitions was planned to be a series of 108 different scenarios, comprised of the user-submitted One Hundred Tales, the sponsor-collaboration Seven Mysteries, and the Grand Finale at the very end.

Half the year had passed since it all started in January, and when the One Hundred Tales were half-finished, they had started implementing the Seven Mysteries, starting last month.

The first round was a dungeon-exploring quest, Lullaby in the Ruined Hospital, which took place in a vast hospital that had been transformed into an alternate dimension.

The collaboration partner for the quest was a venerable, old sweets company. As the player explored the twisted hospital, which was the size of an entire town, the item shops mainly stocked the company's products, serving as both a healing and save spot for players.

Because the hospital was so enormous, even the shortest route to the end took several days to reach, and even a full month since the quest had gone up, only a few people had beaten it.

The second quest, The Castle of the Dead, which had just gone

live in July, was a collaboration with a health food company that often sponsored old samurai dramas. This one, by contrast, was a speed-running competition to see who could reach the castle tower first.

Unlike the first Mystery, the second could be completed in just twenty minutes. It was a puzzle adventure full of action with hidden passages and tricks meant to be retried over and over for better times. At present, many players were trying their hand at filling the charts, and for the moment, Nayuta and Koyomi were fairly highly ranked.

Later in August, the third of the Seven Mysteries would be unveiled, a collaboration with a private school that focused on education with the latest technology. “School (Temporary Title)” was the official name of the quest, not a placeholder.

The collaboration wasn’t suggested by the *Asuka Empire* staff but was brought to them by the school. A programmer who had worked on *Asuka*’s team for a while was now teaching at the school, which helped get the plan quickly approved. So far, it had proved to be the smoothest of the Seven Mysteries to produce.

“And the playtest for that is tonight?”

“Yes. Our company actually helped out with the production of the quest last year. They’ve asked us to bring as many people along as possible, including my sister and the other employees. You two are invited, too, if you’re available.”

In the little reception room of Klever’s house, which was only a guest room in name, Nayuta was arranging her bed. On the other side of the open door, Klever sipped on an after-dinner coffee.

“So Koyomi, Mahiro, and I are allowed to join you? We have nothing to do with the quest…”

“The others are all grown adults, so they’d really like to know what the younger generation thinks. But there’s no part-time pay, and as always, you don’t get to keep anything. But…this is less of a true test than just a final quality check combined with an unveiling. Come along and have a good time.”

Nayuta placed a fresh sheet over the inflated air bed and reminded herself of the situation.

I’m going to sleep here tonight.

It was Klever’s home, a place that she had visited many times

to prepare his dinner—but she had never spent the night.

She put on a brave face around Klever, but Nayuta was not an automaton. She was a young woman of a delicate age. She knew that, in society's eyes, what she was doing would be considered dangerous, and she also knew that it could be causing him considerable trouble, depending on the circumstances.

And yet she insisted on it anyway because…

"By the way, when is your water heater repair supposed to happen?" Klever asked, changing the subject.

"I'm not entirely sure. According to the property manager, I should wait another four days."

The water heater in her apartment had been installed almost twenty years ago and was eligible to be replaced rather than simply repaired. Unfortunately, the vendor who would install the heater was out of units, and they had to wait for more to arrive from the manufacturer after the weekend.

"Four days… Well, I'm not expecting any visitors for a while, so take your time, I suppose."

"I know this is a burden on you, but it's really a lifesaver for me. A water heater's something I take for granted, but once it's broken, I feel really helpless. If you'd said no, I would have had to fill my tub with cold water and add hot water from the kettle on the stove," Nayuta said, tidying up her belongings around the bed and moving to the living room.

"Now that's just torture," Klever said, smirking. "Even a small tub holds around forty gallons. Maybe you can get it to the level of a heated pool, but at that rate, you might as well look for a business hotel with a vacancy."

The mention of that specific number struck Nayuta as suspicious. "I'm guessing you've tried this yourself before?"

"When I was a student. It was not a fun experience."

Apparently, this was just the kind of trial that everyone experienced in their life.

"Well, I think it's time to log in. Make sure that you lock the door to this room. It's not a matter of trust toward me, just the minimum courtesy you can do for me."

"I don't really understand what makes this a courtesy," Nayuta said gravely, "but I'll do it. Since I'm the one asking for favors, it's only right that I follow your rules."

“Good. I trust you when it comes to that, too.”

It was hard to tell which of the two of them was the delicate maiden.

Still, it was apparently true that Narafushi sometimes stopped by unannounced, which is why it would be a bad thing if Nayuta were in the living room with her AmuSphere on when it happened.

She locked the door of the unfamiliar, impromptu bedroom and laid down on the simple bed she’d just set up. It didn’t feel as bad as she expected. To be perfectly honest, she found it more restful than the bed in her apartment.

I wonder why he’s so nice to me…

Given that Nayuta was a minor, there was an undeniable social risk for him to act this way. But despite his concern and fear, Klever was not trying to keep her at arm’s length.

Sympathy for her plight.

Responsibility toward his dead friend.

But recently, she had realized that these things were not the whole story.

When she’d been taking care of Klever as he suffered through his sickness, he had been tossing and turning and muttering in his sleep. Presumably, the fever was to blame for that, but she happened to catch her brother’s name—and her own—in his mutterings.

Nayuta had protected herself from the shock of losing her brother and family by simply numbing her emotions and fleeing from them.

But because of Klever’s rational personality, he did not have that option. With the death of Akihiko Kayaba, the object of his revenge, she could imagine he had been grappling with a melancholy that had nowhere to go.

In her mind, he was unconsciously seeking salvation.

And at the same time, he hoped that by saving someone else, he himself could be saved.

The guilt of having made it through an event that killed his friend—a classic case of survivor’s guilt—was common among *SAO* survivors. Some managed to overcome that feeling, while others drowned it in and never recovered.

Nayuta was not a survivor of *SAO*, but she was a victim of it.

And thanks to Koyomi, Klever, and others, she was finally learning to move past it.

But while Klever looked fine, he was still deep in the swamp. And the only way he could claw his way out of it was by saving someone else.

And it was because she could feel it that Nayuta was so active in pushing closer to him.

§

School is fun.

School is hard.

School is strict.

School is annoying.

As people grow from children to adults, they learn the ways to deal with their fears.

Fear of others. Fear of the unknown. Fear of danger. Fear of society…

The ways to avoid or conquer these fears are not all alike, but just about all of them can be lessened through experience—by becoming accustomed to them.

When you grow up, you naturally come to understand that it wasn't actually dangerous to go down the hallway to the bathroom in the middle of the night. That was the nature of experience at work.

But going to a bathroom in the middle of the night can still be frightening if it's in an unfamiliar scenario, such as at a public park.

Even that, however, will no longer be as frightening once you get used to it.

However…even if the feeling of fear lessens, it doesn't change the underlying danger of the situation.

The chances of a ghost appearing in your own bathroom at night do not change, whether you're used to the idea or not. In this case, those chances are basically zero. But when using a public bathroom late at night or walking along empty streets, the

possibility of being attacked by a practical danger like an unhinged person or robber is certainly higher than zero.

Such danger is too great to ignore entirely. Every day, more people are victimized by and commit such attacks.

Many fears, regardless of the presence or absence of danger, can be conquered with the repetition of experience—and it doesn't matter if the danger is there or not. Many, many tragedies have unfolded over the years because of the illusion that everything was safe and would continue to be safe forever—until at one point that changed.

But on the other hand, living in fear, grinding down your nerves with stress and panic day after day, is no way to live a life.

In a sense, getting accustomed to fear is a necessary evil.

But that familiarity has the chance of causing a fatal surprise at some point in time.

To many children, the first time they understand the fear of the unknown and the experience of repetition outside of the home is school, where they are taken from their parents' side.

Which is why school is scary.

"…So, like, you know what the scariest thing at school is. Right? You know? Bears. On campus. A black bear just hanging out. I thought it was a big dog and got closer, only for it to be like, *roooar*… Man, that was freaky… Little Koyomi thought she was gonna get gobbled up in the second grade…"

"…That's not a story about being scared of school. It's about being scared of bears."

As Koyomi related a rather dangerous childhood story of her hometown, Nayuta browsed the promo website for the third of the Seven Mysteries, School (Temporary Title).

Mahiro peered over her shoulder at the screen and remarked, "So it's meant to look like a modern school. A reinforced concrete building, very normal-looking… It has a fright index of two to eight and a difficulty of two to eight, depending on the route you take… So is this a multibranch story?"

"Yep. It sounds like the main map is a re-creation of the private school the company is collaborating with. But…I'm amazed they

got approval for this," Nayuta said, looking awkwardly at Mahiro, who returned the look. They were on the same page with this one.

The promotional site the three were examining was a school orientation guide. It showed a bright and clean school building, students with brilliant smiles, and a number of statements about hopes and dreams, full of optimism and sparkles—and coming off as very, very fake.

If it was a parody, it was a vicious one, but this was a collaboration with the very school all of this was modeled after. You would think that a place of learning would be against forming the setting for a horror story, but maybe Nayuta's way of thinking was just old-fashioned.

All of the playtesters were in a waiting room arranged by the developers. It was like a hotel lobby with its red carpet and windows that offered a night view of a big city skyline.

Including the three girls on the sofa, there were roughly thirty people involved—though not all of them were there yet, and there was a bit of time until it was supposed to start.

It wasn't just people present, either; there were over ten cats walking around on two legs. Like Tochimori earlier, they were special avatars the company lent out to visitors. They had no game stats attached to them and no attack power, so the system treated them like invulnerable objects that enemies could not recognize.

Among them were the chairman, principal, and several teachers from the school in question, all laughing and chatting as walking cats. It was kind of sweet, in a way.

Klever the detective, who had met them before, was going around to greet them all from his knees.

"Oh! They're already here! Nayutaaa, Koyomiii, Mahirooo! Hello, hello!" said a boundlessly cheery voice as a blond archer leaped onto them from behind.

It was Klever's sister, Ririka Rougerie, the divine archer. She leaned over the back of the sofa between Nayuta and Mahiro, draping her arms around them and squishing her cheeks against them, rubbing them like they were pet cats or dogs. Nayuta's mouth clamped shut—she wasn't put off by it, but she didn't know how to react.

Koyomi promptly put up a hand and said, “Oh, hey, Ririka. Don’t hog all the merchandise. Gimme one of them!”

“Hmmm…okay! For being so honest, Koyomi, you get the prize of Nayuta!”

“Yaaay! One Nayu for me!”

Ririka released her grip on Nayuta, only to be replaced by Koyomi. Nayuta held the girl at bay with one hand and replied with a neat little bow.

“I would prefer it if you didn’t greet us with demonstrations of the slave market. Good evening, Ririka. Your companions seem shocked.”

There were two men standing behind Ririka. One was young. His job was unclear, but he wore a string-tied *hakama* and coat with a tube-like object slung over his back. He grinned lopsidedly, and one side of his mouth seemed to be permanently turned upward in a smirk.

The other was a grumpy-looking tea master around thirty years old who was pressing a finger between his eyes with annoyance. His black hair was slicked back in the vein of a classic office worker.

“Oooh, yikes… This is the cutie the boss has been hitting on…? Well, I guess I can’t blame him… He is a man, after all…”

The tea master punched the young man lightly on the shoulder. “Shut your mouth, Senjuya. Don’t say anything stupid while our business partners are around.”

“Oh, sorry. Want a hard candy, Mr. Oogaki?”

“No. I’m going to greet everyone with the president. You keep an eye on Ririka so she doesn’t go berserk,” said the fussy man.

Ririka rounded on him in a full pout. “Oh, Mr. Oogaki, that’s a bad attitude to have! Remember our company rules: Wear a courteous smile when you’re around girls!”

“That’s not a company rule. Don’t forget we’re here to work,” said the tea master, who quickly rushed off to Klever without introducing himself.

Nayuta already thought she knew who he was based on his name. “Um…that was one of the detective’s employees, correct?”

There had been a number of personal rooms with names on them when they toured the virtual office, and his name had been one of them.

The young man in the coat smiled and rubbed his hands together. “Hi there, nice to see you again, Mahiro. And it’s nice to meet *you*. I’m Senjuya from Kuroneko!” He even gave her a very shameless wink. It was clear he was the class clown.

Ririka straightened up. “Senjuya handles all of our visual material, like graphics and design. He looks shallow, but he’s quite the artisan and is really talented. He can draw in so many different styles! He just doesn’t have much of a personality…”



“Right? That’s my problem. It’s why I can never go independent,” Senjuya replied, slapping the top of his own head. Nayuta bowed but didn’t really know what to say to this.

“And that unfriendly man from earlier was Mr. Oogaki, our head of operations. He’s kind of like Kaisei’s business aide, I guess? He’s older than Kaisei and pretty much handles all the negotiations and meetings with our business partners. When Kaisei got sick recently, he was absolutely killing it with the meetings! He might not seem friendly, but that’s just his default state. He’s much nicer when it counts.”

It didn’t seem like a good personality to have if you were in sales, but watching him speak with their business partners, he seemed like just a classic salaryman type. From a distance, his expression was much softer, which suggested that he was good at altering his mannerisms as needed.

And while he wasn’t present, there was one more person Nayuta was curious about.

“So is Mr. Hachidori not here, then?” she asked, referring to the developer of the Mental Output System she’d tried the other day.

Ririka just shrugged. “He’s a rare character around the office. We see him every now and then, but people outside the company __”

“Oh, I’ve met Mr. Hachidori,” said Mahiro happily. “It was when I went to Mr. Kurei’s company to ask about searching for Daddy. Of course, it was just a VR avatar since the visit was virtual…”

“Oh? What was he like? A total genius or something?” Koyomi asked.

Mahiro didn’t seem like she knew how to put the answer into words. “What was he…like? Well, um, I guess I would have to say…normal?”

“Yes, normal,” added Ririka.

“Totally normal,” Senjuya agreed.

“Aww, c’mon,” pouted Koyomi. “He’s a genius, right? You don’t have *anything* on him? Any stories about him being a crazy weirdo?”

Senjuya waved a hand in front of his face. “Oh, he’s crazy, all right. Total weirdo. But when it comes to how he *looks*…”

“Yes. He looks like the kind of person who regularly takes the train for his weekday commute. But the truth is…”

Ririka and Senjuya shared an awkward look.

“Neither of us has ever met Mr. Hachidori outside of VR.”

“Kaisei’s the only one who’s met him in person. Besides, I live in the States. There was even a joke among the company—the Hachidori AI Theory—but as I understand it, he’s a real, breathing human being.”

So despite his appearance, he was indeed a bit eccentric. Mahiro continued, “Mr. Hachidori did some searching for Daddy and found out that he had gone on the run due to investment fraud. I don’t know *how* he found all that out, but it was very quick.”

Ririka smiled awkwardly. “That’s the thing. Kaisei’s got his police connections still, plus other means…but Mr. Hachidori is very sweet on children. Of course he would’ve gone into serious mode when he saw you. Just look how cute you are!”

She proceeded to rub her cheek against Mahiro’s face. The younger girl giggled uneasily. Meanwhile, Senjuya had turned his gaze to the view through the window and clicked his tongue.

“The girls are so lucky… They can share physical contact without it being a crime…”

“Isn’t that nice?” Ririka smirked. “Aren’t you just dying of jealousy? But if anything, it’s Kaisei who’s having the best time right now. You want to be jealous of anyone, look to him.”

“Nah, the prez is fine. The guy’s been through so much, he deserves to get a win by now,” he said quickly.

So Klever was widely respected by his employees. Rather than being rewarded for it, however, it seemed like Nayuta was going to give him an ulcer instead. At least his diet was getting much better.

Senjuya turned his face away and tried to get it under control. “…The prez deserves a win. Otherwise, Yakumo will never rest easy,” he murmured.

The mention of that name briefly clutched at Nayuta’s heart.

Deep Sea Maid Café: Rule Yeah

The word "maid" has two meanings, actually.

One is *meido* ("road to hell"). It is the realm that leads to the world of the dead.

The other *meido*, written with different kanji, refers to the afterlife itself.

In the West, of course, maid means "female servant," but this means that what people call "maid cafés" also have a secondary meaning of "*meido* cafés" or, in other words, "an avenue straight to hell."

The prison guards of hell are masters at writing in bloody red letters on the food and will sometimes draw a symbol representing a grisly abstraction of the human heart upon their dishes that they then serve to the dead to reinforce an ominous message: *You are already dead.*

As the saying goes, "Even in hell, money talks." As long as you can pay, premium service awaits you, but the cruel lesson underpinning this is that the poor cannot even get in the door. Bringing these lessons to the VR space at a low cost proves the keen foresight of Rule Yeah, but unfortunately, its creator is unknown. We can only whittle down a list of suspects as follows.

The Favorite: Hachidori

The Also-Ran: Senjuya

The Outside Shot: Ririka (and Hubby Ethan)

The Dark Horse: Kurei

Some suggest this was the work of a support AI gone rogue, a prank perpetrated by ghosts or demons, or even a virus planted by a competitor, but all we know for sure is that nobody knows what the freakish *thing* that rests in the back truly is.

Perhaps, when he finally awakens, the catastrophe that signals the end of humanity will be at ha

THE MESSAGE ENDS THERE.

Beach Café: Shark Hell

At first, this place was designed with the idea of being a fun and cheery seaside hut where gorgeous babes in bikinis serve you drinks and food. But once it was actually implemented, there were no bikini babes at all, just an absolute hell full of all manner of man-eating sharks.

Now, in the creative fields, it's not rare at all for things to end up in a completely different state from the original plan, but in this case, it feels like a deliberately malicious choice.

In fact, there were multiple creators. It was the Golden Duo, a derogatory term for Senjuya the designer and Hachidori the developer. On top of that, Ririka Rougerie got into the act and requested a number of malignant "improvements" to the design, resulting in something that was not suitable to be shown to anyone else.

Because the Kuroneko VR office was developed by Hachidori for his own personal uses in the middle of the *SAO* Incident, it doesn't use the Seed engine. So there are no game concepts like levels, items, and skills. That also means there's absolutely no defense against the onslaught of sharks, giving you a taste of what it's like to be the very first victim in a shark movie. In fact, that's the only taste to sample here.

Also, because there's no concept of HP or life, guests eaten by sharks just get teleported back to the entrance. Gruesome details like bite marks, oozing blood, and visible organs were just some of the wonderful details that only Kaisei Kurei, president of the company, could argue to have removed.

When an organization is running out of control, you need one of those rare levelheaded types to stop the rampage.



Chapter 3 The Seven Mysteries (School)

Nayuta and the rest of the playtesting group were led to a place with a very unexpected presentation. And when she saw it, despite the horror theming, Koyomi's eyes lit up with delight.

"N-Nayu! Your uniform jacket is so cute! And Mahiro, you look adorable! And Ririka's in a sailor-type school uniform! Just like a fetish model!"

"...Um, was that supposed to be a compliment?" asked Ririka, her smile taking on a certain homicidal tinge.

The playtesting group had been brought to a classroom in the middle of the night. The room was bright because the fluorescent lights on the ceiling were on, but they also made the darkness outside the windows and in the hallway more distinct.

And along with having been placed in this location, they were all dressed up in school uniforms for some reason.

Klever had a collared school jacket and an old-fashioned uniform cap. He sighed, "So this was the extra presentation. This was actually mentioned in the planning meeting where we offered advice and guidance. I know that Senjuya suggested the players should be automatically put in uniforms, but I seem to remember that everyone else just laughed him off and moved on..."

"I gotta say, I do good work," said Senjuya smugly, wearing a blazer jacket.

Oogaki, who had a collared jacket, adjusted his glasses and said, "The designers did good work. All you did was run your mouth."

“Oh yeah. Good point. Hey, that collar looks good on you, Mr. Oogaki.”

“Not as good as on the company president.”

Klever gave his older subordinate a pained look. “Don’t tease me, Mr. Oogaki. This look is a stretch for us, but my poor sister got the worst of it.”

“…Excuse me, Kaisei? Would you mind not pretending to be self-deprecating while throwing me under the bus?” said Ririka with a deceptive smile. Her short sailor skirt gave her a certain adult allure because there was no hiding the figure of a mature woman under that thing.

Koyomi’s uniform had the same design, but in her case, she just looked like a regular old middle school student. It fit her appearance so well it was a bit concerning, in fact.

“I wonder how they decided who gets a blazer and who gets a sailor uniform?” Nayuta wondered.

“Hmm. Probably random, right? The cats’ clothes are all mixed up, too. Between the neckties and ribbons and shoes and accessories, they’re all slightly different,” Koyomi pointed out. Even though they both had blazers, Nayuta’s had a necktie while Mahiro’s had a ribbon.

The rental avatar cats were dressed in school uniforms with collared jackets and blazers, too, but the fine details were slightly varied in each case.

“Ah, this is Class 3-E.”

“It’s quite a good recreation. Even the timetables and exam date printouts are accurate.”

“Look, they got the dents in the teacher’s desk… This is incredible.”

“God is in the details, as they say,” murmured the cats, who peered around the room, impressed. Nayuta was concerned about a different detail, however.

“Um, Detective? We don’t have any weapons or armor. Are we going to be expected to beat a dungeon?”

The amount of a player’s stats conferred by gear in *Asuka Empire* was quite huge. Now that she’d been changed into a school uniform, Nayuta’s overall strength had plummeted dramatically. She was still stronger than Klever, who had put all of his points into luck. But while the gap in their strength was like

the difference between a rabbit and a tiger when all geared up, now it had shrunk to more like a mouse and a cat.

Klever winked. “That’s right. The Mysteries from last month and this month were pretty tough for new players, but this school quest coming out next month was designed to be playable by anyone, from veterans to newcomers. There is a bit of combat, but it’s tuned to be beatable with a bit of ingenuity. You’ll be getting special weapons and gear within the quest.”

So the idea was that even high-level players could start this quest with nothing to experience that starting-all-over-again feeling.

“After all, we’re inside a school. We’re the students who are about to learn everything there is to know,” he added cryptically. Nayuta found it somewhat anxiety-inducing to wear uniforms that were very similar to real-life ones. She couldn’t exactly throw out kicks in combat while wearing a skirt, and if she jumped, it was going to flip upward.

“For some reason, having such realistic uniforms is making me more nervous.”

“Well, that’s because it’s not a combat-focused outfit. I feel strange about it, too, although for a different reason than you do,” Klever grumbled quietly.

“I get it,” said Koyomi. “That high collar makes you look even fishier than before, Detective… Is it because of your face?”

“I won’t deny it. But as for you… How should I say this…? You look *too* natural.”

“Really? Damn, so I can still pass for a high schooler.”

No one made the obvious joke that she was more like a new seventh grader.

A speaker over the teacher’s desk let out a muffled bell toll to inform them that the quest was starting. A faded announcement followed.

“Th…th…the time…to leave…s-school…has…passed. You…are all…stuck here.”

The lights in the room suddenly went out.

Koyomi flinched and leaped onto Nayuta, but the cats who

came from the school were all murmuring for a different reason.

“That was Fujii on the loudspeaker, right?”

“He really brought the atmosphere down. Did he say his future dream was to do TV voice-overs?”

“There was a growl to his voice that wasn’t usually there. Very impressive.”

They seemed to be enjoying the developments rather than cowering in fright. Since they were part of the collaboration, maybe they already knew what the quest would be like beforehand.

After the announcement, a girl wearing a sailor uniform came into view by the teacher’s desk. She had a bowl cut, and her face was indistinct and hard to see. Her limbs seemed abnormally skinny, and her body was translucent.

There was no life to her presence, and her motions were mechanical, so she was probably a ghost-type NPC who was just there to read from a script.

“…I will be your guide through this playtest. In this quest, School (Temporary Title), your goal will be to escape a cursed school. I will not be appearing in the final release. I am only appearing as a guide to this test.”

Beside the darkened desk, the girl bowed. All of the cats were staring up at her.

“First, players taking on this quest will be teleported to a classroom where they will hear that same address. Once they have left the classroom and gone into the hallway, they will be able to mingle with other players already progressing in the quest. Because this is just a playtest, there will be no other players aside from you, but we expect a few thousand to a few dozen thousand players inside the school at peak times once the quest is live. For now, please exit the room into the hallway.”

The group followed her lead and shuffled out into the hall. Moonlight shined upon the corridor, which seemed to go on and on—into infinity. The far end was totally out of sight, hidden by darkness.

“As you can see, the hallway is an infinite loop, shifting in length, width, and number of rooms to accommodate all the players present. If someone were to leave the group and forge on ahead, that person would eventually rejoin them from the other

direction. The stairs work the same way. Whether going up or down, you will just end up on the same floor."

So it was a looping dungeon, a mysterious escape room for any number of simultaneous players.

"There are a large number of escape routes that will evolve depending on factors like time progression, possession of certain items, and trap activation. The difficulty level and item rewards change depending on the route. It's classified as a cosmic-mysteries-tier quest, but every playthrough will feel significantly different based on each player's actions. There are also over sixty endings, including bad endings. If you collect at least three good endings and three bad endings, you will have access to the true ending."

Each quest in the 108 Apparitions campaign had certain limits on the number of players that could play it at one time.

Dares were solo quests exclusively for one player.

Take-alongs were only for a registered party of players.

Chance encounters were quests where you could run into other parties while you played.

And cosmic mysteries quests were persistent quests in which all players existed on the same map at the same time.

In cosmic mysteries quests, the first day of the quest tended to be a wild and chaotic affair with thousands—if not tens of thousands—of players attempting to access it all at once.

A month after their launches, the number of players settled down, so the experience was more properly horror-like, but plenty of players preferred the crazy atmosphere of that first day. It wasn't as scary, but there was so much more communication with other players you'd never met before.

The ghostly girl in the sailor uniform led them out into the hallway and monotonously said, "Now please check your item lists. As this quest is set in a school, you cannot bring any personal articles…meaning equipment or items. They were all confiscated at the bag check. You will, however, be granted three items at random when you begin the quest. You cannot take them with you after the quest is finished, so please expect to make use of them. Working with the players around you and using your items effectively will be your shortcut to finishing the quest."

Nayuta opened her item list. She did indeed have three items

in a special “rental item” slot, along with a message explaining that they couldn’t be taken out of the quest.

“Let’s see… I have an emergency ration, paint, and a meal ticket…”

Her demon puppet, Onihime, had temporarily been removed from the item list, too. The ration was an ordinary HP-healing item. Presumably, the meal ticket was an event item that could be used at the cafeteria. But she didn’t know what the paint was for.

Koyomi checked her list, too. “I’ve got a flashlight, an exorcism seal, and some prayer beads. They seem normal. How about you, Mahiro?”

“A substitute doll, a long nail, and a spirit camera. Looks normal, too.”

All of these were items they’d seen before in other quests and didn’t seem particularly valuable or noteworthy.

Nayuta glanced over at the detective. “What did you get?”

Klever’s gaze was less than thrilled. “A hand grenade…a sniper rifle…and an electric chainsaw. I feel like my theme is quite different…”

This was surely an effect of his excellent luck stat.

“It just being a ‘sniper rifle’ is kinda vague,” Senjuya cackled. “If this were *Gun Gale*, they’d have fully recreated a P90 or M&P, but they don’t go to those lengths in *Asuka*.”

“You can’t expect that level of detail. It’s just not that kind of game. I doubt they have licensing deals with gun makers, for one thing… The grenade and chainsaw are pretty simple, but I guess I should examine the rifle to see how it works,” Klever said, removing the sniper rifle from the list.

Even at first glance, it was very clearly not just some gun. It had a white barrel and a number of obscure readouts that made it look like a futuristic sci-fi gun.

“Hmm? I’ve never seen this model before… In fact, is this…?”

Senjuya clapped his hands together. “Oh! That’s a beam sniper rifle. I used one of those in the From the Depths of the Sky quest where space creatures show up. It was a rental weapon exclusive to that quest, but the penetrating power was crazy. You could blow a hole right through a metal door but not anything designed to be impervious, like floors or walls.”

So it was more than just a different style of mission—this gun

practically came from a different world entirely.

“No way… That seems way OP… So is the detective going to be our heavy hitter this time?” Koyomi muttered incredulously.

The guide spoke up. “Now enjoy exploring the area. As this is a playtest, if the group gets stuck, I will appear again to offer more detailed guidance.”

She bowed and vanished into thin air like a ghost.

The players proceeded to fan out and explore the hallway. Some of the cats stretched as tall as they could to peer through the windows.

“Oooh, they even got the courtyard area right.”

“The cafeteria’s supposed to be a zombie den, right?”

“No, I think they reconsidered that one. People didn’t want them associating the food items with zombies, so…”

“Yeah, they’re all rotting. You don’t want to be having unsanitary thoughts…”

“Hmm, good point. So what did they decide on?”

“The cafeteria’s a rest spot now. I think they have ghosts serving light meals.”

The faculty members of the school, all playing with cat avatars, chatted amiably about the quest design. Meanwhile, Klever leaned over to Nayuta and whispered, “Is something wrong?”

“…Huh? No, nothing in particular,” she said, feigning complacency, but she was startled by his keen eye.

The name “Yakumo” that Senjuya had mentioned earlier unnerved her; it was the player name that her late brother used in *SAO*. She didn’t really want to go over that in this semi-public place with plenty of strangers around, however.

“You just seemed a little downcast to me… I apologize if I’m talking out of line.”

She was in an in-game avatar. It couldn’t possibly translate every tiny nuance of her expressions, but Klever’s keen eye was still sharp enough to pick up on the shift.

Behind them, Ririka bounced forward in her sailor uniform and said suggestively, “You’re so sweet, Kaisei! ♪ Go! Now’s your chance! Be aggressive! You can take her!”

Oogaki promptly cut between Ririka and Klever. “That’s a very bold suggestion when there are educators present. Why don’t we

go and introduce ourselves to the clients, Miss Head of PR?”

“Wh-what? Hey, wait. I’m only here to hang out with Nayuta today…”

“Work comes first. You need to earn your salary.”

He grabbed her by the collar and dragged her off toward the herd of cats.

“Oh, you must be Ririka.”

“We’ve only ever communicated by email before.”

“You live in America, don’t you?”

Soon there was a circle around her, forcing her to put on a pleasant, obligatory smile and greet the group. Koyomi watched this play out with admiration.

“Man, that guy is tough…”

“He sure is,” Senjuya agreed, shrugging. “His strength stat is pretty high, but in terms of his personality, he’s a beast. He’s the second-toughest guy in the company after Mr. Hachidori. The guy always has the right idea in any situation.”

Within Nayuta’s internal hierarchy of the company, the president, Kaisei Kurei, continued to fall. He didn’t have a counterargument, either.

“Mr. Hachidori and Mr. Oogaki are older than me, and they have tons of expertise in their respective fields. I’m consistently in their debt for what they bring to the company. Now,” he said, loosening the collar of his school uniform, “since we’re here to test out this quest, let’s get started. I think Mr. Oogaki was keeping the pressure off of us, so let’s not let it go to waste.”

He had peeled Ririka away so that she couldn’t bother Klever and foisted her off to play host to their clients, allowing Klever to work with Nayuta and Koyomi. Despite his brusque and stiff attitude, Oogaki was also a very considerate man.

Koyomi peered around like a curious kitten. “We need to look for hidden passages, right? But this is just a hallway, so if anything’s hidden, it’s going to be in other classrooms, the bathrooms, the stairwells…”

“Also, the panels to the fire extinguisher closets, the ceiling, the floor, and the windows. Pay attention to any spaces that don’t seem to have any features, too. The activation conditions are randomized, but sometimes the space can distort, like a wormhole. The guide said we were free to explore on our own,

but the first floor here is also the entrance to the quest in that it's meant to funnel players off into separate areas efficiently. We don't even have to do any exploring for it to force us into other zones more or less."

He had barely finished his thought when a scream suddenly arose from the group of cats.

"The p-principal and Mr. Oogaki were swallowed by the hallway!"

"Oh dear… Well, if I abandon him now, I'll never hear the end of it… I ought to get going. See ya! ♪ " chirped Ririka. She turned to the wormhole that had opened up in the hallway, put a hand on her skirt to hold it down, and hopped in.

Some cats hastily followed while others were too panicked to react, and Koyomi was so terrified that she just clung to Mahiro. The wormhole quickly closed up, leaving the rest of the group behind to stare at one another.

Nayuta couldn't help but feel her heart skip a beat at the bewitching beauty of Klever's face in the pale moonlight, but she didn't let that show on her face.

"…Anyway, I think you get the point now. By the way, if you let yourself be swept along without taking any action for yourself, you'll get a bad ending. You need to look for escape routes and special items before the quest automatically moves you onward."

"That makes sense. It's pretty much the de facto style for multi-ending escape games."

A tabby cat in a blazer jacket, one of the several that had been left behind, sauntered over. "That was something… Wasn't expecting to see a giant hole appear out of nowhere. I was hoping to speak with Mr. Oogaki a bit more…but it's nice to meet you, President Kurei. I showed up a bit late, so I didn't get the chance to say hello."

The tabby grinned up at Klever. He got down on a knee to say, "Hello there. Uh…"

"Ah! If only I could hand over my business card in this playtest. My name is Hishikawa, from Shankara Japan. I've been helping the client school with their system structure. When I heard about this playtest, I asked for the chance to be included," the cat said in a very friendly manner and held out a paw for a handshake.

Klever smiled back and carefully took the paw. “Oh, please forgive me. I didn’t realize there was a representative from Shankara here. This is a surprise, but I’m very pleased to meet you. My name is Kaisei Kurei of Clover’s Network Security Corporation.”

While they were meeting “in person” for the first time, he seemed to recognize the other man’s name. They seemed to be acting normally, but Nayuta couldn’t help but feel a bit nervous about the unspoken tension.

Koyomi wondered, “Isn’t Shankara that big multinational conglomerate? Wait, is this cat someone important?”

“Lest you forget, Mr. Tochimori, who you treated like your own pet cat, was also very important. But yes. Please keep yourself under control.”

During the VR office visit, Klever had been out sick, but Nayuta described the experience to him over tea to pass the time.

The tabby waved a paw in front of his face. “Please, please. We’re in a game. Let’s shelve all the formalities… I’ve been hoping to have a talk with you, Mr. Kurei. I also wish to apologize for that business with Mr. Hachidori. It sounds like my associate was pushing his luck, and I want to express my regrets over that.”

The cat bowed its head deeply, a gesture which Klever returned. “Not at all, not at all. Hachidori said it was too generous for the likes of him, but as he is an investor and the vice president, he didn’t feel it right to abandon his current position…”

Nayuta, who was only overhearing this, could discern part of the situation based on their comments.

So the man from Shankara tried to hire Hachidori, the detective’s coworker, but was rebuffed…I guess?

She was probably close, even if she wasn’t on the mark, but she was certain that it had something to do with that Mental Output System. After all, anyone in possession of it could use it in a great variety of ways.

Senjuya clapped a fist into his palm. “Mr. Hishikawa from Shankara… Oh yes! The one who brought that marriage arrangement offer to the president? Wow, what a coincidence to meet you here!”

The cat winked and laughed. Klever pressed a hand to his

forehead in exasperation.

“Ah, did Mr. Torao tell you about that? He declined to send the offer along, claiming that he didn’t actually know you that well…”

“…Senjuya…”

“Huh…? Wait, did I just step in it…?”

Klever’s baleful glare and Senjuya’s panicked confusion felt like they were reaching Nayuta muffled, as though coming through a wall.

*A marriage arrangement…? You mean, like…*that *kind of marriage arrangement…?*

She couldn’t even react in the moment. Her face went completely blank. Koyomi, however, was positively buzzing with curiosity.

“Ooooh. You hardly ever hear about those these days. So what’s the connection there?”

The cat chuckled awkwardly. “It was the first time anyone’s ever asked me to relay such a request. It was from the daughter of an acquaintance of mine. Apparently, she caught sight of President Kurei at a party and fell in love at first sight. They asked that I try to get in touch if I knew anyone in-between, and that was when I remembered that Torao from *Asuka* worked with Clover’s often… Was I overstepping my bounds?”

Klever put on a little smile that was very obviously an act. “Oh no. You have to understand that we’re just a new company making our way in the world, so right now, I’m just drowning in work.”

“That’s not a good thing, though. You’ll want a life partner who is capable of supporting you in your private life—”

“Hngyaaaaaa!”

The cat Hishikawa’s response was drowned out by a sudden, bestial scream from Koyomi. Nayuta spun around to see what she was reacting to and froze in place.

Hanging like stalactites from the ceiling were countless skinny arms, grasping and reaching. Koyomi had collapsed to the ground, where she tried to scoot away while the ghostly arms writhed and snatched at her feet.

Several of the arms had already grabbed cats by their collars and were pulling them toward the ceiling. They were too late to save already.

Nayuta grabbed Koyomi and stood her up, then called out, “Detective, I thought the enemies were supposed to ignore the cat avatars!”

“That’s right. It means those aren’t enemies. It looks like a horror creature, but they’re more like stage props meant to force the players along and separate them. I’m guessing that attacks will do nothing against them,” Klever replied calmly. He almost sounded relieved, probably because it was a welcome distraction from the topic of marriage arrangement.

Hishikawa from Shankara looked up at the many arms retracting into the ceiling and scratched his furry cheek with a claw.

“Hmm… It doesn’t look like we’re going to get the chance to talk in a relaxed setting… Would it be possible to have some of your time after the playtest, President Kurei? I’ll find a good spot to bow out of the test.”

“Ah, I see… Well, I am taking part in this playtest as part of my work duties, so while I’m very sorry, I don’t know if I’ll have any extra time after this. I would feel bad about leaving you waiting, so…”

Hishikawa patted the detective’s knee with a squishy pad. “Don’t worry about me. I’m logging in from home. There’s no need to be wary. I have no hostile intentions for your company. This is just my desire to apologize for my coworker mixed with a little personal interest… Am I right in hearing that you once played *SAO*?”

Klever’s expression shook with alarm. Nayuta had been listening in and noticed the shift very clearly.

Very casually, but with a bit of a hoarse edge, Hishikawa continued, “Maybe this isn’t appropriate to say in a venue like this, but…my son was also…a victim of the *SAO* Incident. The day that it all started, I carelessly pulled the NerveGear off of him, and then he died. In other words…I killed my own son with my own hands.”

The air in the room froze.

No one said a word.

It was such a shockingly heavy confession, combined with the question of *why* Hishikawa would suddenly admit to such a thing out of nowhere.

No one knew what to say, and because of that, no one realized that the mirror put up in the hallway had rippled like the surface of water. It was like the mercury just bulged right out of it, making the mirror extend unnaturally.

“Nayu! Behind you!”

“Huh?”

As soon as Koyomi’s scream drew her attention, Nayuta felt bundles of hair, extending from the mirror, grab her limbs tightly.

“Hngh…!”

She couldn’t break free.

It lifted her body until her feet dangled in the air, then pulled her right into the mirror.



Klever lunged for her but never made contact with her outstretched fingers.

§

The *SAO* Incident.

Around four thousand people perished in that tragedy, and that meant there were tens of thousands of family members left behind to mourn them. If you expanded that beyond immediate family to include friends and acquaintances, the number of people affected by the incident might include hundreds of thousands.

Some were victims of combat or dungeon traps—killed by the game's tools.

Some were victims of the trap contained within the NerveGear itself—killed by a brain-frying microwave.

Some were victims of simply living alone and having no one to care for them—killed by wasting away.

And some were killed within the game by other players…

All of these deaths were unfair in nature, and if not for being victims of the game, they each had a variety of possible futures ahead of them.

"…I see. So your brother was a victim as well?"

"Yes. The detective…excuse me, Mr. Kurei was friends with my brother in real life, though I wasn't aware of that until quite recently."

Nayuta was walking through some other part of the school building with a jacket-wearing cat trotting along beside her.

They were probably still on the same floor. The bundles of hair that came out of the mirror had dragged her into the mirror world, and now she was in the same place, just mirror-imaged left over right.

The bulletin boards and clocks had also been flipped. Even the position of the locks on the windows felt *off* because of it.

"…Wow. That's really heavy…"

Somehow, Senjuya had also gotten dragged through the mirror. He sounded oddly lonely.

Nayuta, the Hishikawa tabby cat, and Senjuya had been the three victims of the mirror hair. The quest had locked their messaging ability, leaving them unable to contact Klever and the rest of the group. She could imagine how Koyomi was carrying on right now.

I just hope that Mahiro's keeping a firm hand on her reins, Nayuta thought. She glanced down at the cat and said, "I wasn't expecting to hear that confession. What made you say something like that?"

Hishikawa smiled sadly. "I'm so sorry for that. I felt that President Kurei might have the wrong idea about me, so I decided to be open and tell him something very important. It just came out that way…"

He exhaled.

"…It's true that our company is interested in the Mental Output System. You're right that we tried to hire Hachidori away from them and failed… But the fact that I tried to approach President Kurei with an arranged marriage offer was completely unrelated to that. In fact, I only learned about the matter with Hachidori after mentioning the marriage thing to Mr. Torao, and it was then that I realized how that must have looked to him."

He was quite effusive now, sensing that Nayuta and Senjuya might be able to help him clear up the misunderstanding.

"The young woman who was so taken with him is the daughter of an acquaintance of mine. To go into more detail, this was a person I met through the *SAO* Incident victims' association. His daughter was a surviving player of *SAO*, but she lost a friend in the game and was quite traumatized upon her return to the real world…"

They walked through the darkened school, Nayuta allowing Hishikawa to speak. Because the hallway was a loop, there wasn't much point in continuing to walk like this. It just felt like too heavy of a conversation to have without moving.

"Earlier, I said that she saw him at a party…but in reality, it wasn't anything as fancy and fun as a party. She saw President Kurei at a memorial service for the *SAO* Incident. Have you been to one of those, Nayuta?"

"No. I try not to get involved…"

Nayuta used VR as an escape from her parents' and brother's

deaths. The idea of actually going to a memorial ran completely counter to this desire.

Hishikawa hunched over and nodded his furry head. “I see. Well, there were so many people there that I didn’t know President Kurei had been there, too… But she happened to see him leading an active life, recovering from his experiences and doing something positive, and she found that to be extremely heartening. I thought that it might be perfect, as sometimes people who bear the same scars have much in common. There was no ulterior motive to the arrangement discussion beyond that, I swear to you… It was just terrible timing,” he said, smacking his tiny forehead with a paw in a silly little display.

He was undeniably in a bit over his head. Like Nayuta, he was a grieving family member of an *SAO* victim.

Senjuya, meanwhile, slumped his shoulders and admitted, “Well…I guess *SAO* victims and people who knew them have more common than I thought… Technically, I’m a survivor, too. But I keep things so chill in my life that I sometimes feel guilty about it…”

Nayuta wasn’t shocked by this. She had expected it, in fact, ever since he had mentioned Yakumo, her brother’s character.

For Hishikawa, though, this was news, of course.

“You too? And did you meet President Kurei through the game?” he asked.

Senjuya’s head bobbed up and down. “Yes. At the time, he was still a police officer. I was in the Aincrad Liberation Squad with him. After being trapped in the game for two years, I had completely lost any kind of momentum on getting a job and was wondering what I should do with my life… Then Kaisei said he was starting a company and told me to come on over if I was bored. You never know where life is going to take you.”

“Yes, indeed… That’s so true, for better and for worse,” murmured Hishikawa thoughtfully.

This put a thought in Nayuta’s head. “Does that mean that Mr. Oogaki from earlier and Mr. Hachidori are *SAO* survivors, too?”

Senjuya hastily shook his head. “No, no, not them. Mr. Oogaki had been falsely accused of groping someone on the train when Kaisei was still an officer and got fired from his job…but Kaisei proved his innocence. He’s felt a debt to Kaisei ever since. The

company rescinded their decision and offered him his job back, but he said that he had lost faith in a company that would cut him loose so quickly and moved on to a different job. After the *SAO* Incident, Kaisei went to him asking for advice on starting his company, and Mr. Oogaki joined right up with him. He's super knowledgeable about taxes, patents, and legal matters, so he's really great to have around and very dedicated. He's way more talented than a tiny company like ours really deserves."

He was so smitten with Oogaki that Senjuya was practically bragging.

"And what about Hachidori?"

"…No idea. I've asked, but he didn't tell me. But I do know that he's known Kaisei since before he was trapped in *SAO*."

So the mystery man remained mysterious. But now that she understood more of how these people had come together, Nayuta felt relieved.

The mention of an arranged marriage agreement had worried her, but it was all just a plan hatched by other people, and Klever himself had no intention of being part of it.

Hishikawa looked up at her with narrowed eyes. "By the way, young lady, you seem to be rather close to President Kurei, is that right?"

She wasn't sure how to respond.

If the two options were "close" or "not close," she would have to say that the answer was "close." They frequently ate dinner together, and she was logged in from his house right now. It would be straining credulity to claim they weren't close.

But if she were to admit that truth to Hishikawa, who seemed like a clever, sensible member of society, that could cause problems. First and foremost, it could affect the social standing of Kaisei Kurei as an individual.

"I wouldn't say we're close…but he has helped me in many ways," she said vaguely.

Senjuya stifled laughter. "Oh, come on. Since you started helping our company president out, he's changed a ton, Nayuta. It's like the ghost that was haunting him disappeared. He used to be dragging around so much weight, I was afraid that one day he was just going to keel over and die."

Nayuta didn't have a frame of reference for the detective on

how he was before she met him, so she couldn't say if this was true or not.

"Do you think…it's because he was dragging around the memory of my brother?"

"Yep. There were plenty of people who died, so it probably wasn't all Yakumo…but Yakumo was definitely his biggest source of trauma. Even in the game, he used to mutter about him in his sleep."

Nayuta had witnessed him doing that just recently when he was in bed with a fever. She, too, had stopped having as many nightmares since she met Klever. Since she said goodbye to her virtual family and cried her eyes out to Koyomi the next time she logged in, it had felt like she'd left that part of her past behind.

She still missed them, of course. Part of it was that she had grown used to being lonely, but maybe a better way to put it was that she had learned to accept and be content with her loneliness.

And that was thanks to Koyomi and Klever, of course.

You could become accustomed to loneliness. But getting used to something could end up being a vicious cycle that just ground down your ability to feel anything.

New encounters, friends, even lovers—people understand on an instinctual level that these things will fill the emptiness of being lonely.

It's why things like multi-level marketing, cults, romance scams, and other forms of deception and manipulation will never go away.

In the past, Nayuta wondered how people could possibly fall for such things. But now she felt like she understood. When one's heart was in a weakened state, it was hard to maintain the vigilance needed for wise decision-making.

What would have happened to me…if I hadn't met Koyomi and the detective…?

Just imagining it sent a chill down her spine.

This wasn't just limited to the *SAO* Incident, of course.

In any and every incident, the victims—and their families—of accidents and disasters had to ask how they could manage, how they could survive, how they could keep going on…

And Nayuta didn't have the answer.

It didn't seem like there *could* be an answer to such a vague,

nebulous question.

"…Oh? There's a door over there," said Hishikawa, pointing a paw up ahead.

The hallway loop ended at a crude, metallic fireproof door.

"There's something written on it. Oh…this isn't very easy to make out."

Dark red ink that looked like blood had been scrawled across the door, but because the world was mirror-imaged, it was hard to read. Nayuta carefully rearranged it inside her head and read the message out loud bit by bit.

"Ummm, it says…'Please…turn in…my…head'…?"

"Ah," Senjuya murmured, taking a step back. His cheek twitched awkwardly.

Nayuta turned back to him. "What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, I just mean…I think we got stuck with a bad story pattern… You know the theme that pops up in horror stories…"

She wasn't sure what he meant and wrenched open the heavy fireproof door. Nothing was going to happen unless they moved onward.

"What?! No, Nayuta, wait! I'm not ready!" Senjuya panicked.

"We don't have any gear, and we can't do anything against powerful enemies anyway. I'll go in first. Watch my back, Mr. Senjuya."

"Whoa, she's so…*manly*!"

It was kind of similar to the things Koyomi said. But if she cowered with fear the whole time, she was going to react too slowly, and if she panicked, she would lose sight of her surroundings. Thinking logically, there was really nothing to be gained by screaming and running around in terror.

On the other side of the door was an old-fashioned wooden school building. They were supposed to be on the fourth or fifth floor, but out of nowhere, the area beyond the door was on the first floor.

Beyond the windows, she could see that the courtyard was not rubber paving material anymore but bare earth choked with weeds.

"It looks like this doorway takes us into a different space. Be careful. There might be traps and pits underfoot," Nayuta said, striding forward through the door.

“You have a remarkably bold nature,” Hishikawa breathed, impressed. “Even a grown man would probably think twice before walking into an old school building at night…”

“Playing 108 Apparitions gets you used to this sort of thing. Of course, I’m wary when there are enemies and events playing out, but allowing yourself to be scared just walking around is a far too inefficient use of your time.”

“…Well, look…fear isn’t really something where efficiency and logic plays into whether you feel it or not,” Senjuya murmured, glancing over his shoulder. Like Koyomi, he seemed to have a low resistance to scary stuff.

Nayuta glanced into one of the classrooms as they proceeded through the old building. There was someone by the windows.

“Wait a second. There’s someone in that classroom.”

There was very little light inside, but the moonlight was shining brightly through the window, so the figure’s silhouette was easily visible. Whether it was human, scarecrow, or anatomical model—or ghost or zombie—was not possible to tell from this distance, but at the very least, it was human-shaped.

Without waiting for Hishikawa and Senjuya’s reactions, Nayuta walked straight into the classroom.

There was a girl sitting at one of the desks by the windows. Her head spun around to face Nayuta.

It was not normal.

There were no eyes. Where her eyes should have been were just gaping black holes. Similarly, her mouth was just a circle, bristling with sharp, spiky fangs.

When Senjuya saw the girl’s appearance, he pulled back behind Nayuta, sucking in a sharp breath.

Dark blood spilled out from her eyes and mouth, and the monster let out a high-pitched shriek.

…Enemy!

Nayuta promptly clenched her fists and leaped at the enemy before it could seize the initiative. She slammed the creepy face with a merciless punch and delivered a vicious low kick, careful of the flaring of her skirt hem.

While there was no damage bonus from equipment, her body still felt lighter and more powerful than in real life, and there was a satisfying recoil to her blows.

Behind her, Senjuya shrieked, “Aieee! N-Nayuta?! What are you…?”

The monster still stood before her.

The punch had landed but didn’t finish the job. She’d shattered its knee, but it wasn’t falling. The student reached out a bony finger, her joints creaking and cracking.

“Hiyah!” Nayuta shouted, putting all of her exorcising power into her palm and driving it into the enemy’s chest. A different kind of scream erupted, and the monster flew into the windowed wall.

Normally, that would be the end of the fight, but without her usual gear, it wasn’t strong enough. She added an extra knee to the fallen enemy’s face, and when it reached out for her, she evaded its arms and countered with a straight left, then added a heel drop on its skull for good measure. The enemy was finally still.

“I’ve defeated it. We’re safe now.”

From the doorway to the classroom, Senjuya and Hishikawa just stared in shock.

“Um…I mean, ummm…”

“K-kids these days are so intimidating…”

Even Hishikawa’s little cat face looked frightened.

Once she had seen the monster begin to dissipate, Nayuta replied, “I thought I might need a little bit more work to finish it off, but it wasn’t that hard. I guess they’ve still balanced the fights to be winnable, even without your regular equipment.”

Senjuya waved a hand in front of his face. “No, that’s not right. That was one of those things where we’re supposed to scream and run around in a panic… Are you always like this, Nayuta?”

This answer made no sense. Enemies in games were meant to be defeated. The basic rule of combat was to kill or be killed. It was much better to attack and take the initiative than to run around in a panic. If an enemy was too tough to be beaten, it was better to withdraw at once, but that evil spirit was obviously a pushover.

“Because each of my hits is light, my fighting style is all about speed and number of strikes. Did the detective not tell you about that?”

The corner of Senjuya’s mouth twitched. “I heard that you had

developed to be more of a martial artist, but…um…when you go to a haunted mansion at an amusement park, don't beat up the person playing the ghost, all right?"

"Of course I won't. I can tell the difference between a game and real life."

Even when she had created her own fake family in VR, she knew the difference. Who knows what would have become of her if she'd completely drowned in that illusion?

A bloodied hand ax appeared where the ghostly girl disappeared. Apparently that was the prize she'd won from her battle.

"Let's take this ax with us. Mr. Hishikawa is a cat and can't use it. Mr. Senjuya, will you do the honors?"

"No, I'm good. It looks cursed to me," he replied, looking oddly deflated.

Nayuta swung the small ax to see how it felt. It was a little on the heavy side but still small enough that she could throw it if need be, and it was still better than nothing. The blood spattered all over it was concerning, but it had already dried and wouldn't cause her grip to slip.

"Shall we continue exploring, then?"

"Yes, Boss Ma'am," came Senjuya's odd response.

She largely ignored his nonsense, stretched, and continued tiptoeing down the hallway.

§

After Nayuta, Hishikawa, and Senjuya were spirited away, Klever's group was left stunned in the middle of the hallway.

Koyomi clung to Mahiro, shivering violently.

"N-Nayu…Nayu in the mirror…! W-we'll be okay, Mahiro! Even without Nayu, I…I-I-I…I'll p-pwotegg you…!"

"…Uh-huh. I'm looking forward to that," said the grade-schooler, who seemed much more composed than the adult. "Anyway, we've been split apart from both Ririka and Nayuta now. Let's hope we find our way back together…"

Klever, meanwhile, was stock-still, unable to react.

…I couldn't grab her…

He had reached out to Nayuta as she was being pulled into the mirror—and failed to grab her slender arm.

That in itself was not such a drastic failure. It was a minor event within a game, and if he logged out, she would be right there in the apartment.

But the sequence of events had awakened old memories, tugging painfully at the scars of the past.

Over a silly little incident like this… I'm losing it.

The instant that he failed to grab her arm, Klever couldn't help but envision her death. In just the briefest of moments, he had the ominous thought of her dying and vanishing forever, just like her brother, Daichi.

The shock of that moment still made his limbs tense.

"…Um, Mr. Kurei, are you all right? You look very pale."

"…Hmm? Must be the moonlight," Klever said, smiling back at Mahiro. He felt pathetic, having a child like her worrying about him.

Koyomi, who was still clinging to Mahiro for dear life, glanced up at him. "W-well, at least I can be relieved…that Nayu didn't end up alone with you…"

So she was still her usual self. But that helped Klever restore some of his peace of mind.

"I don't know why you would feel the need to be wary of me… Everything that happens in the playtest is logged and recorded, and I have zero intent of losing my common sense and rationality."

For just an instant, the fear vanished from Koyomi's face, and then she shot him a venomous look.

"…I don't want to admit it…but I feel suspicious about the way Nayu looks at you these days… It's weirdly softened. Like she's thinking, 'Oh gosh, there goes the detective being a lost cause again,' in a fond way… But Nayu wasn't always like that. She was cooler, more savage… This is bad news. With one more push, the detective's the one who's gonna fall…"

"You're imagining things," he said. He couldn't say her fears were *entirely* unfounded, but in his position, the only thing he could do was deny it. "Anyway, let's continue our search. Nothing is going to get better if we just stand around here."

He began to look around, forcing his mind to more immediate issues. Between pits, hands from the ceiling, and mirrors that dragged people into them, there had been a long series of traps in the hallway. This was designed to split up players into more convenient groups at the start of the quest, he assumed, but it was also a means of augmenting the feeling of being dragged into eerie, horrifying events.

The group of faculty cats had been significantly diminished after the traps peeled them off, but there were still around four of them.

“I thought this would be more like a haunted-mansion attraction at a theme park…”

“But between the looping space and devious traps, this is clearly more involved…”

“I’m starting to get scared now…”

“Let’s hope that Ririka and the principal are all right…”

Their tails trembled in fear, but they were designed to be ignored by enemies and really didn’t need to be so afraid.

“You’ll be fine, everyone. The quest is designed so that you won’t be chased around by enemies,” said Mahiro, giving them a considerate, friendly smile before Klever could act. It was easy to see her experience as a child actor being employed.

This reassurance seemed to convince the cats that she was their next guide, and they gathered around her. To all appearances, it looked like a group of cats fawning over a little girl, but in actuality, it was a single elementary-school-age girl comforting an entire group of adult faculty members. It didn’t quite sit right with Klever.

They started moving forward again—but Koyomi, who was still clinging to Mahiro, shrieked again.

“…O-oh no! Not again! Something creepy! At the stairs! The stai—huh?”

The head of frightened steam she had built up petered out rather comically.

Coming down the stairs, which should have formed another loop, was a familiar face atop a jacketed school uniform.

“Nayu! You’re all right?!”

Koyomi started to rush over to the stairs, but Mahiro quickly grabbed her shoulder.

“No! Something’s wrong,” she said.

Klever wasn’t interested in getting closer, either.

The girl who’d come down the stairs undoubtedly had Nayuta’s face. Her uniform was the same as earlier, too.

If anything seemed off about her—it had to be the small, bloody ax that hung from her hand as she stared forward without emotion. Her footwork going down the stairs was slow and wavering, almost like a sleepwalker’s.

That’s…not Nayuta, Klever decided instantly.

Koyomi reached out and grabbed Mahiro again. “N-Nayu…? Don’t do this… Wh-why are you acting like that? Don’t you know that frightening poor, sweet Koyomi is a violation of the Washington Convention…?”

“I think that only applies to wild animals and plants, though I guess you qualify…”

“I’m going to tell Nayu you said that, Detective.”

“Hey, you brought it up,” he shot back. Step by step, they backed away.

The thing that resembled Nayuta came down the stairs and, without a word, raised its ax.

“…Run!”

Klever pushed the girls forward, his hands on their backs. The other cats took off as well.

Nayuta’s speed in chasing after them was not fast. In fact, it looked quite slow, but regardless of her pace, the distance she covered was still increasing, like she was on a walking conveyor belt.

She caught up to them at once, and her ax grazed Klever’s back. It didn’t actually break the skin, but it did slice the back of his collared jacket open. Sensing that it was actually more dangerous to run with his back turned, Klever spun around.

However, with his paltry combat stats, there was little he could do. She caught up to him in no time and attacked with the ax again.

He twisted and spun, just barely avoiding it, and called out to the others, “Just run! I’ll hold her back…!”

“No, don’t be one of *those* people! When one person tries to slow down the monster, the others who run away first end up getting killed, too!” said Koyomi, who was demonstrating a

surprisingly savvy knowledge of genre conventions for someone who claimed to be unable to stomach horror movies.

Klever couldn't bring himself to attack the thing that looked like Nayuta. Instead, he dodged one swing and then grabbed her arm, hoping that by wrapping himself around the hand holding the ax, he could at least prevent her from swinging it.

Fortunately, he was taller than her, and she had no equipment bonus. For that matter, the fake Nayuta did not share her player stats, so once he was grappling with her, she was surprisingly weak.

Her limbs were as cold as ice and unnaturally stiff. It didn't feel like he was touching skin, fat, and muscle, but more like rolled paper.

"Hold her there, Detective!" said Koyomi, who had come back holding one of the items she'd been given at the start: an exorcism seal.

While Klever struggled with the fake Nayuta, Koyomi rushed up and slapped the seal on the fake's shoulder area. White smoke began to rise from the spot, and the imposter collapsed onto the hallway floor.

She jerked a few more times, then began to turn translucent. Within a few seconds, she had dissipated, leaving only the bloody ax behind. They stared at it.

"…I-it looks cursed to me…"

"But this is a valuable weapon to have, considering we didn't start with any. Let's pick it up," said Mahiro, who walked over to it. Klever grabbed her shoulder to stop her.

"I wouldn't do that. It's quite likely that the ax is an Itsuwari."

"An Itsuwari? Is that some kind of item?"

Klever nodded. "It's very similar to a special event item from the Atrocity Moon quest. It's a trap item that generates a copy of the player that picks it up somewhere on the map. The copy is treated like an enemy, only with a tenth of the abilities of the real person. It can easily lead to disaster because they can fool the player's companions."

Koyomi swallowed. The user-submitted Atrocity Moon quest was a hunting-themed quest about chasing down a weretiger in the rural mountains. During the quest, the hunter becomes the hunted, and the player's objective turns from "hunt the tiger" to

“escape the mountain alive.” It was also known for another major feature: Almost all the items you find in the quest are traps.

The bloody Itsuwari ax was an example of that. It was quite likely that Nayuta had picked one up somewhere.

“If you defeat the ax-wielding copy, it drops another of the same ax. When someone picks that up, another copy is created somewhere on the map…thus creating a chain of ax-wielding enemies. Sometimes it even generates more than one. Let’s leave the ax behind.”

“Enemies with only ten percent of the strength… It sounds like a name for a cool weapon, but is that just a pun between *ichiwari*, meaning ten percent, and *itsuwari*, meaning false…?”

“Call it a double entendre. It sounds classier than a pun.”

“…Does this mean that if you pick up a lost item, you get ten percent?” asked Mahiro.

“I…don’t think that’s what it means.”

Since many items came from user-submitted quests, they tended to reflect the creativity of the person who designed them.

“At any rate, Nayuta must have picked this up without realizing what it does. If we pick it up, it could send fakes of us to her instead.”

“Hmmm. Nasty trick to play after splitting us up like that,” Koyomi muttered. She was right, of course, but as this quest was meant to have many more players active all at once, it would just end up feeling like other students in uniform were infiltrating the quest as enemies. And because your gear was confiscated at the start, players were incentivized to pick up weapons, even knowing they created more traps.

For this moment, however, Klever did not intend to play into that cycle. He left the bloody ax on the ground and started to walk away.

But right after that, another familiar face appeared in the classroom nearby. A bewitching blond girl in a sailor uniform with a mischievous grin…

And in her hand was a small, bloody ax, just like the one on the floor of the hallway.

Klever put his fingers to his forehead.

“…That problem child…”

Koyomi and Mahiro shared an uncomfortable look.

“…I used the exorcism seal, and I don’t have another one…”

“And I’m guessing…you don’t want to use chainsaws and beam rifles against an enemy that looks like your own sister, right?”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem. Let’s shoot her.”

Without hesitation, Klever removed the beam sniper rifle from his item list, took aim, and sniped his devious-looking sister.

He felt no pangs of guilt.

§

“…Hmm, where did that come from? I just felt a weird, little pang of irritation,” Ririka Rougerie grumbled as she swung around the ax she’d just picked up off a defeated enemy.

Oogaki, the head of sales, sighed. “I think that dropped weapon is cursed, after all. Just don’t start hallucinating and attacking us. That’s all I ask.”

“No worries. You’re fine. Nayuta’s fake dropped it for us to use, so I’m going to make it count. Speaking of which…what do you think is going on between Nayuta and Kaisei?”

“No comment,” said Oogaki, who was always serious. This was what Ririka expected him to say. There were several teachers around, even if they looked like cats. They didn’t know how old Nayuta was, of course, but there was no point in careless commentary.

One of the cats said, with great curiosity, “Are you suggesting that the girl from earlier is in a relationship with Mr. Kurei?”

“That’s right.” Ririka beamed. “They deny it fiercely, but speaking as his older sister…I think they’re suited for each other.”

Oogaki readjusted his glasses and sighed. “You’re free to have your own opinion, Ririka, but I don’t think this is the place for such private matters.”

“Come on! Aren’t you curious? She might be the president’s wife one day! We’re talking battles for inheritance! Ugly squabbling over the throne!”

“…How many decades in the future are you talking about? You’re getting so far ahead of yourself that I’m beginning to question your sanity. I understand that you care about your dear

brother's affairs, but if you get too involved, you'll only ruin things that would have turned out fine. As an adult, there are times when you should simply take a step back and let things happen."

This was the sensible answer. It was Ririka's intention at first, too.

"Hmmm. Well, you know what? That was what I was going to do initially. But once I actually talked to Nayuta, she was so sweet. I just…couldn't help it! I just fell for her so hard I'd be willing to give up one or two Kaiseis for her… It's just not fair. She's amazing. Being around that girl is like cleansing your spirit."

"I don't care. And don't treat the company president like a dog or cat or fox," said Oogaki coldly.

The principal cat wondered, "She seemed to be quite young to me. How old is she?"

After a few moments, Oogaki gave a considerate, mature answer. "She looks young because these are in-game avatars. Ririka here might look good in a teenager's sailor uniform, but in reality, she's in her late twenties."

The other teacher cats laughed.

"Oh, to us, a woman in her late twenties might as well still be a child. That's very young."

"And how old is the girl?" they asked again, undeterred.

"Actually, we've never met her in the real world, either, so we don't know. She's probably in her first year out of school."

"Yes, that's the impression I get from talking to her," added Ririka with a smile, picking up where Oogaki's bold lie had left off. Ririka wasn't lying, however. Nayuta's *impression* during conversation was quite mature.

"I see. Well, it's understandable that you can easily meet people in a game like this when you're actually quite distant in real life. You said you live in America, Ririka. Do you also live somewhere further away, Mr. Oogaki? Your company is based in Yokohama, is that right?" asked a different teacher, a welcome change of topic.

"Actually, I live in Tokyo, adjacent to Yokohama, but I'm on the border to Saitama, which is on the opposite side of the city. When I do commute, the trip takes an hour or so. For the most part, we operate out of a VR office, so on paper, the company building is

the president's home. It's very rare for employees to visit him. I run the sales department, so I'm often traveling about when having meetings with other companies. Our designer, Senjuya, lives on a remote island, however. He's taking part in the playtest from there."

The principal cat nodded sagely. "It's the ideal work-from-home situation. I'm quite jealous. If only we had this system when we were students, we wouldn't have needed to travel to Tokyo and live alone just to go to college."

The other cats murmured their agreement.

"The times change so quickly, don't they? From pagers to cell phones to PDAs to smartphones… The mechanisms and uses don't change wildly, but each generation is completely isolated with that flow of time. And now, we'll have a generation that was raised on VR. As the educators tasked with teaching them, we'll have to find a way to adapt."

"Indeed. This collaborative project has been very meaningful as a kind of revolution of the teacher's mindset. There have been some unfortunate incidents involving full-dive tech, admittedly, but with the way the world is going, VR is going to be inseparable from our lives soon. There are even quality-of-life benefits in terms of medical care and nursing. Many students are looking toward that in terms of future careers. You certainly can't minimize this technology as 'just a game' anymore."

But as she smiled and nodded along with their conversation, Ririka was thinking, *These are such pretentious cats…*

Of course, they were grown adults—serious educators—but such was the power of appearances that she simply couldn't take them seriously when they looked like little cats. It was a meeting of alley cats in a school.

Then again, maybe the stray cats have some form of communication mankind can't understand that allows them to hold extremely high-level, philosophical conversations.

While they continued their scintillating conversation, Ririka's group quietly peeled away to continue exploring the school.

§

After some time strolling through the old wooden building, Nayuta's party finally reached the faculty room.

The layout of desks here was clearly different from the other rooms. It seemed clear that *something* would be found here, but nothing was sticking out.

"…There was that hint about 'return my head' at the entrance…but nothing that seems to be related to that has happened."

"…Do you think it had something to do with that thing you destroyed earlier, Boss Ma'am…?" Senjuya wondered quietly. "It had a crazy-looking head if you ask me."

The detective would have offered a more convincing bit of advice, but they had no means of talking to him now.

"She had her head on, though. If anything in a school is going to be in need of a head, it's probably an anatomical model or a skeleton from a biology class."

"Ah, I see. And there hasn't been anything like that yet," said Hishikawa the cat.

"If we're playing word association with 'head'…what about the vice principal? In kanji, it would mean 'teaching head.'"

Nayuta was getting the distinct impression that Hishikawa was much more helpful than Senjuya.

"Oooh, very nice. So when it said 'turn in my head'…maybe it was referring to turning over the vice principal's head? Do you think there's a zombie vice principal lurking around somewhere? Let's find him and hunt him down," she suggested.

Senjuya shivered. "Boss Ma'am, you're thinking like a veteran hunter… At this point, I feel sympathy toward the zombies," he said, staring at the bloody ax in Nayuta's hand.

"Do you find this scary? It's just an ax."

"No, *you're* the one I find scary."

"I'm not going to claim that I'm completely helpless, but I *am* just a girl. You don't really have anything to fear from me."

"…Yeah. Sure," he said, meekly acquiescing.

Nayuta proceeded to do a quick search of the faculty room. In the aged wooden building, the floorboards were rotting through here and there and creaking with every step. Even a place of learning that once supported dozens of teachers and students at once was a simple ruin once it had fallen out of use. This place

was just a VR environment, but you could easily find places like it in the real world.

“Hmm, I’m not seeing any items around here… About the only thing that could be a weapon is this, which isn’t great,” said Senjuya, who had found and equipped a mop from the cleaning supply closet.

Nayuta turned from her search of the walls to say, “It might not have a lot of attack power, but you can use it to keep enemies at bay, right?”

“That’s true. It can also poke traps to activate them and stuff like that… Have you found anything, Boss Ma’am?”

“There’s something here that seems curious to me,” Nayuta said, pointing out a board where members could clock in or out with little nameplates. There were no plates for the faculty members anymore, but there were a few left with generic positions on them, like principal and vice principal. Because they were in a mirror world, all the letters were mirror images.

“This board still has some plates for official positions—principal, vice principal, class heads, club advisers, student counselors, after-hours members… I’ll try taking the vice principal plate and turning it around,” she said. If not for Hishikawa’s hint, she wouldn’t have given it a second glance, but sure enough, the kanji for “head” was in the term.

The writing on the plate was black, and the background was white. Nayuta turned it upside-down and placed it back in the slot. Somewhere else, a ghostly *crack* sounded.

“Aaaah!”

Senjuya wailed and pointed at a spot on the wall. In a place where there had been nothing before, a metal door was pushing forth, rising to the surface. Below, Hishikawa’s eyes narrowed.

“It would seem we were correct…”

“Yes. A switch in the form of a riddle.”

Based on the vagueness of the prompt, “Turn in my head,” there were probably multiple correct answers. If the route ahead branched depending on which solution you used, then there probably *were* answers involving a skeletal or anatomical model and maybe a zombie vice principal. At any rate, they had found one, which was all that mattered.

Carefully but fearlessly, Nayuta opened the door.

A cold, damp breeze flowed forth to meet her. Beyond the wide landing area, a set of concrete stairs led down into a basement area.

“It looks like this will take us underground. It’s not as dark as a dark zone, but it seems to go pretty far.”

“…Eugh… Please no,” whined Senjuya as he peered over her shoulder. “Let’s not do this, Boss Ma’am. I’ve got a bit of a claustrophobia thing… I can’t do these environments.”

There was an uncharacteristic amount of force behind his words. Nayuta was convinced that he was telling the truth. Underground mazes like this definitely weren’t the sort of thing that everyone could handle.

“Very well. Why don’t you wait here with Mr. Hishikawa? I’ll go and check it out myself.”

She started walking forward, only for Senjuya’s hand to clamp onto her shoulder. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! No, no, don’t do that! Are you serious? How fearless are you?! Let’s just be safe and look for a different route!”

This puzzled her. “But it might only be a single room, and we might find a crucial item there… Just wait for around ten minutes. If I don’t come back, you two go ahead and look for a different way.”

His cheek twitched awkwardly. He had been exhibiting this look so often that Nayuta was starting to wonder if this was just his default expression.

“How is she so *strong*? Mr. Hishikawa! Please… You have to talk some sense into her!”

The cat raised a paw and said, “Then I will go with you, Nayuta. You’ll just have to wait here, Mr. Senjuya…”

“Oh! No one’s on my side!” Senjuya’s cheek spasmed even harder. He looked about ready to cry. “Mr. Hishikawa, are you abandoning me because she seems more reliable than I do?! Because if we part ways here, the game’s definitely not letting us get back together!”

The feline just smiled back at him. “Now that’s just silly. Either way, I’m here to observe the quest, so my plan is to go and see everything I can…”

“Really? You didn’t just come here to pitch that marriage arrangement to the company president?! Your so-called

observation wasn't just an excuse to be here?!"

They had hit it off quite well in a short period of time, but in the end, Senjuya was built in Koyomi's mold. And since he wasn't as cute as Koyomi, he had no choice but to be crafty about manipulating people.

"In that case, let's do this: I will go downstairs, check if there's another hallway or a room at the bottom, and then come back up within two or three minutes. If it's a room, we can spend a bit of time searching it, and if it's a long hallway, we'll give up and look for another route. How does that sound to you?" suggested Nayuta.

At last, Senjuya accepted this compromise. "W-well…I don't want to get scared waiting around…so I'll go down the stairs with you."

"So after all that, you're coming anyway?"

It seemed that the compromise didn't mean anything at all. Hishikawa couldn't help it; the chuckles bubbled out of him.

"Sorry, pardon me. As I said earlier, you're a very bold girl, Nayuta. You don't seem afraid of anything."

She turned to give him a faint smile as she made her way down the dark steps. "That's not true," she claimed. "I'm afraid of plenty of things. In more mundane terms, I'm afraid of disease and poverty, and I'm anxious about the future. But most of all… I'm afraid of being alone."

"No waaaay," Senjuya groaned. "Boss Ma'am, you were just about to go down there on your own… Nobody who's afraid of being alone would think of doing such a thing…"

Even now, he was shivering and shaking in an ostentatious manner. But Nayuta did not think that she was being untruthful.

"This is only a game. I'm not afraid of temporarily acting on my own. The thing that frightens me most is not having any family, people I'm close to, or people who are a source of mental support in my life. Right now, I have people who care about me, like Koyomi and the detective, so these things don't bother me… The truth is, though, that I can get terribly lonely. I'm not brave at all," she said.

This was the honest truth, but it was something she hadn't realized until fairly recently. After her brother and parents died, leaving her all alone, she numbed her emotions to avoid facing

reality and didn't even realize that she was doing it.

Now, she was able to both acknowledge her own loneliness and be forward-thinking, and she knew that was because of Koyomi, Klever, and the others.

At the very least, she didn't think of herself as being "alone" anymore.

And thanks to that, she could admit that she was afraid of being lonely.

"Pardon me for asking," said Hishikawa, "but I heard about you losing your brother in *SAO* earlier… What happened to your parents?"

"They died in an accident. My uncle is my guardian now, but I live on my own."

Hishikawa was briefly speechless. "I, um…I'm sorry for bringing up such a difficult subject."

She shook her head. "Don't worry about me. You've suffered from the *SAO* Incident, too, so even if the details are different, we've both felt the same pain. The detective taught me that sometimes it feels better to talk about painful memories than to stay quiet about them."

"Ahhh…I see. He might be right about that…"

Senjuya, meanwhile, seemed to have momentarily forgotten his fear. "Actually, about the president… Yakumo—meaning Daichi, Nayuta's brother—is someone he can only talk to Nayuta or his classmate Narafushi about. But with Narafushi, they're both men, and there's more of a hesitation to talk about emotional stuff like that. Ever since he started the company, he's had to just bottle those feelings up. It's not exactly like stress, but it's still hard for him."

Nayuta's head bobbed up and down. She didn't know the old Klever. But the first time she met him, she had felt an eeriness to him that was a little over the top. It was the kind of tension you could feel from people who kept their feelings suppressed on a daily basis.

"But starting around March of this year—basically, around the time he met Nayuta—he's totally changed for the better," Senjuya chuckled. "I think it all happened because you got him talking about Yakumo, Boss Ma'am. At this point, I'm more convinced than ever."

She could see what he meant by that, too. When she talked about memories of her brother, Klever's eyes were always softer than usual.

Hishikawa, though, looked downcast. "After I lost my son, I was completely unable to control my emotions…but my wife and other children have been my rock. I also had my job, which I could run to for an escape, claiming I needed to keep making a living. It's pathetic, but I liked being at work the most because at least I didn't have to think about anything else…"

She wasn't in the same position, but Nayuta understood how it felt to think like that. It was easy for people to be consumed by sadness when they had nothing to do. Work, chores, hobbies, entertainment, even revenge—as long as you had *something* to do, there was always the ability to use that as an off switch that would numb that sadness.

Hishikawa pressed a paw to his little forehead. "But…lately… I've been seeing my eldest son in my dreams. I don't know if I can explain it, but…I feel like I've been processing my son's death in the wrong way…"

His voice had the barest hint of a quiver to it. He was a grown man and didn't cry. But the emotion welling up within him did weaken his throat a bit.

"The daughter of my acquaintance—the one who was so taken with President Kurei—completely shut down her emotions after her friend died in *SAO*. I think that maybe…she's looking for an agent of change that will shake up her life. For so many of us, that incident is still ongoing. In fact, it's probably not something that *can* end. When what you've lost is so great, you don't know how you can even come to terms with it… Many of the bereaved are still in that situation," Hishikawa said and finally lifted his head. "To be honest, I…I was hoping that President Kurei, who seems to have recovered from the event, might have some words of wisdom to help her in her pain. But after listening to you, I realize that he's not actually past it in the slightest. Perhaps what seemed like great success and achievements were simply an effect of being blindly absorbed in his work, the same way that I have been…"

"Oh, that's probably true," Senjuya agreed. "Our company president works as hard as two or three people… Then again,

Hachidori easily does the work of over ten people with his Mental Output System, so he doesn't stand out as much, but there's no doubt that he's a workaholic. Not because he's that dedicated to the company—he's just scared to stop and rest."

Based on the way Klever had made time to tutor her with school subjects, she could easily believe this was true.

Senjuya told her, "The whole company's grateful to you, Boss Ma'am. Ririka, in particular, was really worried about him. She's over in America and can't just pop in to see him, so she's been concerned about his diet, so learning that you're taking care of him with home-cooked meals was a major relief…"

"Wait. Hang on a moment," Nayuta said, her voice suddenly cracking. She hadn't shown the slightest bit of fear about ghosts and monsters and stairs to the basement, but that last sentence had rattled her.

She knew that Ririka's leading question had already fooled her into revealing the caretaking she had done while he was sick, but Nayuta had believed that everything before that was still a well-concealed secret.

"D-did he tell you about that…?"

"Hmm? No, Mr. Narafushi did… Ririka ordered him to report back to her regularly about what the president's up to, and that's how I… Oh, but you're okay. We're not supposed to let that Koyomi girl know, right?"

"I'm not okay."

It turned out the leak was Mahiro's manager.

The detective himself was tight-lipped, but those around him were as soft and porous as boiled tofu. It was inevitable that Koyomi would eventually find out. Maybe Nayuta needed to come up with an excuse now to head off that conversation.

"Ah, I see," murmured Hishikawa. "So you were a couple already. Well, he's certainly not going to spring for an arranged marriage partner, then. I suppose I'll have to let the other party know."

They weren't a couple. But if she denied it now, it was going to raise a much more damaging question about the detective's public standing: *Why is a young woman who is not your partner going over to your home?*

Unable to say no, but unable to lie and say yes, Nayuta

desperately tried to change the subject.

“It looks like there’s a tunnel ahead. What shall we do? Turn back or…?”

She turned around to face them and found that the door to the surface had vanished. A concrete lid had appeared over the top of the staircase, blocking their way back.

“…I’m sorry. Looks like I’ve taken us past a point of no return.”

“Oh no. Ohhh nooooo…”

Senjuya could wail all he liked; it wasn’t going to make the situation any better.

“Um, Mr. Senjuya, if you really can’t go on, I suppose you could just leave the quest now…”

“N-no, I couldn’t do that and leave you behind… I mean, this is my job, technically speaking…”

Hishikawa pointed a claw down the tunnel. “There’s no need to be so fatalistic. From what I can see, while it looks long, it’s just a straight tunnel. This might not be a dungeon but a hidden passage. Since the path is sealed behind us, there’s no need to worry about being attacked from behind, and if we keep going, I’m sure this’ll take us some—”

He couldn’t even finish his thought before a small figure came into view up ahead.

Two figures, in fact, wearing school uniforms.

The one in the lead was a girl with long, black hair, and behind her was a young man with a hunched back. There was also a small, catlike figure near her feet.

“…Is that…a mirror?” Nayuta wondered after just a brief moment of assuming they were enemies.

At the end of the tunnel was a mirror that covered the entire width of the passage.

Realistically, this would be a dead end, but this was the mirror world, so there was a good chance that this was their exit.

“…Do you think this will take us out?”

“My gut is telling me that there’s a trick somehow…like a trap before we get to the mirror or a boss fight after we get through…”

The relative lack of combat was concerning. Most likely, they had lowered the rate of combat significantly to honor the time of the playtesters. Even still, it felt like the time was right for another battle.

When the group was a few steps away from the mirror, they stopped.

But the trio across from them continued walking closer.

Unlike the real three, their faces were expressionless masks. They didn't even blink.

Nayuta reacted instantly.

She had seen an example of herself emerging from a mirror as an enemy before in The Curse of the Mirror God. Koyomi had been with her during that quest, but their two-team combo wasn't going to happen this time.

"Here they come, Mr. Senjuya!" she cried, starting to focus her exorcising aura before they could emerge from the mirror.

"Aaaaaah! M-Mr. Hishikawa, hide behind us!" screamed Senjuya, brandishing the mop he'd found in the faculty room.

The hallway wasn't all that spacious. It was going to be a rather chaotic battle with their doppelgangers.

Nayuta took the initiative and struck at her own fake first with the bloody ax. The girl who came out of the mirror had the same ax. Blade met blade in fierce contact.

Senjuya screamed again at the sight of teen girls in school uniforms swinging axes at each other. "Boss Ma'am, I think that weapon is cursed! This is a real nasty scene!"

"Your copy is your responsibility, Mr. Senjuya! Handle your own business!"

The Nayuta from the mirror was surprisingly strong. She moved quickly and fiercely and was able to block and deflect attacks accurately.

She wasn't able to spare the time or concentration for Senjuya's double, but at least the copy of Hishikawa the tabby cat was just standing there, not doing anything. The copy was identical to the original, not having any stats. It just stood in front of Hishikawa, and both of them looked quizzically at the other.

Senjuya, meanwhile, was struggling mightily. The two crossed mops, but the real one was giving in to the pressure. If she didn't beat the fake Nayuta she was dealing with now, she couldn't help him.

The ineffectual trading of ax blows and punches was frustrating. *I'm a tougher opponent than I thought I'd be.*

When building out her character, she focused on speed and

agility, so her attack and defense were weaker than other warrior priestesses in her level range, but with her speed, it was easier to land attacks, and she could evade well, even with lower defense. If they didn't hit her, she was fine.

It did mean that she had a weakness to larger area attacks, like explosions, but as long as she could see that coming, she could always have her battle partners in the back row cast defensive spells on her.

That wasn't necessary this time because she was facing herself. But now that she was in this position, the lack of clean openings was surprising to her. If anything, the few weak points in her posture could be compensated for with sheer speed.

Their axes clashed again, and this time Nayuta lost the power struggle and dropped her weapon. Deciding that fighting with an unfamiliar weapon was only a detriment, she went for hand-to-hand combat instead. Although, to be honest, it was mainly because she didn't have time to bend down and pick up the weapon.

Immobilize her...and go for the joints!

Switching away from the tactic of blows, Nayuta blocked a kick from her fake with both hands, then pushed forward right into the enemy's personal space.

The fake was unable to maintain her posture with just one leg to pivot on and ended up falling against the wall behind them.

Nayuta grabbed her opponent's ankle, put her weight on it, then rolled over entirely and yanked the ankle to the side. She could feel the nasty sensation of a joint popping loose, and the mirror fake let out a hideous scream.

The martial arts skill Bent Bough only worked if you had total control over the enemy's joint, and their defense was significantly lower than your attack. But Nayuta knew better than anyone just how low her defense number was.

Okay, I think that—

But no sooner had she felt certain of her victory than Nayuta felt a dull pain in her own right ankle and toppled over. In a mirror image of her imposter, Nayuta's ankle had been twisted in the wrong direction.

The pain-absorbing function dulled the sensation of the injury, so it wasn't at all like what the actual thing would feel like, but it

did numb her muscles and make them feel powerless. She could barely move it.



So the damage I inflict on my fake comes back to me?! she realized with a horrible thrill.

“Boss Ma’am?! Wait, did you get hurt?!”

“Don’t damage your opponent! It’ll come back to damage you!”

It wasn’t like the mirrored enemy was unhurt. Like Nayuta, she was favoring her ankle and unable to stand on it.

In other words, these were not enemies that needed to be beaten but traps in the guise of enemies. If you were to defeat them, it would mean knocking yourself out of commission, too.

In many horror stories, there was a specific means to overcome such a challenge.

“The mirror, Mr. Senjuya! Break the mirror!”

“Huh?! Oh…! I get it!” he said belatedly.

The monsters coming out of the mirror would vanish if it was destroyed. Well, if Nayuta were the creator, she would have designed it that way.

Senjuya avoided his own fake, then thrust the handle end of the mop forward and rammed at the mirror. The mirror did not break, however.

Instead, it swallowed up Senjuya’s body like water.

“Whuh?!” he wailed, then tumbled into the mirror and out of sight.

They didn’t need to defeat the enemies—the doppelgangers were only there to serve as an escape mechanism. Being unable to break the mirror wasn’t an issue; this was even better.

“This way, Nayuta!” Hishikawa said. She reached out to lean against the wall and moved onward, dragging her ankle.

The fake Nayuta was still on the ground, but the fake Senjuya wasn’t hurt and swung back his mop to attack her. She promptly slammed a fist into his open midriff, and the fake Senjuya doubled over in pain. He was much weaker than the fake Nayuta.

“Go ahead, Mr. Hishikawa!” she commanded. The tabby leaped into the mirror. Seconds later, she followed by toppling toward the silvery surface.

After a warm, slimy sensation, her body slipped through to the other side.

It was the same concrete tunnel as before.

The fakes were still in the mirror.

As usual, the mirror surface was like water and seemed

indestructible.

How do we stop the mirror…?!

On a sudden burst of inspiration, Nayuta selected the paint can from her item list, then hurled its contents toward the fakes that were about to crawl through the mirror. Red splashed all over the mirror, dripping down and hiding the mirror doppelgangers from sight.

After that, all was still.

A few moments later, Senjuya got up from the floor nearby.

"…Ooof…My stomach is *killing* me! Somethin' must've landed a critical hit on me…!"

"Oh…I'm sorry. I punched your fake on reflex," Nayuta admitted. The damage she had done to the imposter had reflected onto Senjuya. While the sensation of the pain itself was dulled, the localized damage was still inflicted on the target.

"N-no, it's cool, I'm sorry for what my fake tried to do," Senjuya chuckled weakly, holding his stomach. "Um, is your foot okay?"

"Yes, I'll manage. I can feel it, so I won't be able to run, but I don't have to quit the quest or anything."

"That's good. What a nasty trap…"

Alone once again, Nayuta, Senjuya, and Hishikawa breathed a sigh of relief.

"Here, Boss Ma'am. Use this mop as a crutch."

"Thank you."

Nayuta didn't have the stock of healing items she usually carried around. The emergency ration in her item list would help heal her, but injured joints were treated more like ailment effects than just HP damage, so she would need the appropriate healing method to address her ankle.

"That was some good thinking back there with the paint can," Hishikawa said, impressed. He slapped his paw pads together as if he were clapping.

Senjuya shrugged and said, "That was a little too convenient to be a coincidence. I'm sure that the items they give you must come into play at these branching points. I bet that the game brought us to this mirror-world route because you had the paint with you."

"I think you're right. I also have a meal ticket, so it's possible that we could have wound up at the cafeteria…"

According to the explanation, School (Temporary Title) featured more and more potential pathways each time you played, and it was only through repetition of the quest that you could reach the true ending.

Most likely, the items they gave you changed with each playthrough, probably by changing an invisible setting on each item so that you never wound up with an item you'd already used before, ensuring a fresh, new experience each time.

Or maybe they just added more items to the overall pool after each time you beat the quest.

For example, maybe players who have fulfilled the right criteria will get a fourth item that serves as the key to the true ending, Nayuta imagined. When you played online games for long enough, you started to learn all the tricks that developers used to make things interesting.

She used the mop as a crutch to get up to her feet. But a quick glance around left her baffled.

Huh…? Hmmm?

There were two Hishikawas now.

Both were tabby cats wearing jackets, but one was the real, speaking Hishikawa, and the other one was obviously the fake that had come out of the mirror. Apparently, it had managed to squeeze through the mirror between the streaks of paint.

"…Um, Mr. Hishikawa? You're multiplying."

"Pardon?"

Even Hishikawa hadn't noticed and didn't react until he looked at where Nayuta was pointing. The fake Hishikawa stared boldly back at the real one, ears twitching.

Senjuya squawked, "Uhhh…what do we do with it…? It's an enemy, right?"

"…Well…it doesn't seem to be hostile, so let's just ignore it," Hishikawa said. He could have walloped the fake that looked like himself, but he wasn't the sort to torment a cat, even if it was just an NPC. Besides, after seeing what happened earlier, fighting the fake would only cause Hishikawa damage.

Huh? But it's just a blank avatar with no game stats of its own, so I doubt you could even beat it if you tried…

Nayuta was unsure of how to interpret what was happening. For now, though, they continued through the tunnel. The two

Hishikawas followed, trotting along behind them.

The real Hishikawa reached out and held the paw of the other cat.

"…My son loved cats. At the time, we had a tabby cat just like this one. It was older than he was, and it didn't treat my son as a little brother but like a son of his own… The week after my son passed, the cat died of old age. Maybe he just couldn't stand to see my son move on all alone and wanted to join him…"

"Yeah, animals can be like that," Senjuya sniffled. "We had a dog at home…but it died in the two years I was stuck in *SAO*… Two years is a long time for a pet. All I wanted was to hug it and ruffle its fur when I got out, but I was too late."

"That's hard… It's such a sad thing when you can't be there at the end of a person or pet's life."

While the two men spoke, Nayuta considered the past experiences of this particular trio, who had all met for the first time today.

Hishikawa had unintentionally caused his son's death on the very day the *SAO* Incident started.

After two years of being trapped in the game, she lost her brother just months before *SAO* was beaten and then lost her parents to an accident not long after that.

Senjuya had somehow managed to survive to the end of the game, but couldn't find a job until Klever had mercy and took him in.

Each of them had their lives upturned by *SAO*, but through some twist of fate, they were here together in a different game. The strangest thing about it was that, despite being strangers before this point and having had different experiences, they were each in a position to understand and sympathize with the other two.

It was easy to imagine that the ease with which Hishikawa talked about his son here was elicited by the sense of solidarity between victims.

A place to talk about sad memories…

Until very recently, Nayuta hadn't had such a place, either. Ghostly Orchestra had created the opportunity for her to change.

Since that quest, where the group came together for Yanagi's sake, everything in her surrounding environment had changed

for the better.

While it might have looked like Nayuta was the one helping Yanagi, in reality, she was the one who came out the furthest ahead. In that sense, she was grateful to Kiyofumi Yanagi, the grandson who created that quest.

In life, Kiyofumi and Nayuta didn't have the slightest connection, but the creation he left behind was the reason she came to know Klever, and thus it had indirectly helped make her life better.

These connections were very strange and fickle things.

You never knew what might connect you to other people and how, even after your death. Maybe Nayuta herself was saving the life of someone else right now without realizing it. People were unable to have perfect knowledge of everything happening in their vicinity. That seemed like an obvious fact, but it was easily overlooked.

The barren, concrete tunnel exited not into the faculty room of the old wooden school building but to the backstage area of the gymnasium's stage.

They stood in awe.

"Whoa…this looks bad," groaned Senjuya, peering out into the wide-open room from the wing of the stage.

It looked like a new school year ceremony or perhaps a graduation.

Chairs were lined up in rows, filled with mannequins dressed in uniforms. There were hundreds of them, perhaps a thousand, dressed in both male and female uniforms, but all with the same body type, same style, same posture. There was no way to tell any of them apart.

Rather than the usual celebratory red and white banners hanging on the walls, they were black and white, and the speaker's pulpit was decorated with a huge display of white flowers.

And the faculty members lined up against the wall were headless—every last one.

The side entrance to the gym next to the stage was locked. There was a lot of empty space around there, clearly because there was some kind of trap awaiting them.

Just in case, Nayuta asked Senjuya, "Do you think this is all just

a bluff?”

“…If nothing at all happens here, I would assume it’s either a bug or a failure of design…”

“Exactly.”

Senjuya hung his head in despair and trudged after Nayuta, who used the mop as a walking stick to go up the short staircase to the stage itself. She wasn’t frightened, but she didn’t feel good about fighting on her ankle the way it was now.

She had just reached the edge of the stage when an announcement started blaring out of the speakers overhead.

“A warning…to all students… There are intruders…on the school grounds… If you should see a suspicious intruder…beat them to death…”

The muffled, monotone statement ended, and as one, the rows of mannequins in the seats stood up and pulled clubs from their uniforms.

“Aaaaahhh!” Senjuya shrieked. Up on stage, Nayuta tensed for combat.

Without the free use of her leg, she was bound to be surrounded and taken out if she went down to the floor. It was better to stay up on stage and fight off any enemies that tried to climb up the little stairs to reach her.

“Mr. Senjuya, Mr. Hishikawa, if the worst should come to pass, run back into that underground tunnel. I’ll hold off the enemies up here,” she said, standing boldly upon the stage.

“Seriously, how are you so manly?!” Senjuya wailed. “The mop! Give back the mop! Also, you still have some paint in that can, right?!”

“The paint? I didn’t use it all up, but…”

It was a large can, so there was still a little left at the bottom, but not enough to splash on an enemy to blind them.

“I’ll take it! But…if you can hold out for five minutes…no, three! Then maybe…”

Nayuta didn’t have time to listen to the details. She just hurled the paint can behind her. The lid was on tight, so it didn’t matter if it fell, but Senjuya caught it cleanly anyway. She didn’t know

what he was going to do; the horde of mannequins was nearly upon her.

They rushed and swarmed her, lunging toward the edge of the stage like zombies in search of fresh meat. They toppled and banged into one another, causing a logjam at the stairs, but she stood boldly before them and casually struck the head of the student mannequin in the lead.

She didn't back down a step from there, continuing to punch the mannequins as they came within range. It wouldn't last long. There were two sets of steps, one on each side of the stage. They didn't have the intelligence to form two groups and come at her from different directions and were simply rushing to the nearest stairs, but in less than a minute, they would flood the base of the stage and spill over onto the other side, where some would inevitably climb the far set of stairs. Once that happened, she would be helpless to stop them, given her injured leg.

I guess this is the end for me…

The layout of the battle made it clear to Nayuta where it was heading. But she clenched her fists anyway, determined to struggle to the very end.

Three mannequins bearing clubs rounded upon Nayuta at once. A right punch stopped one of them, and a left took out a second. A knee from her injured leg finished off the third. As long as her pivot leg was strong, she could still get some power in her other knee.

Ordinarily, she would have gone right into another kick, stepping forward to shift her center of gravity, but her injured ankle was too weak to do that now. She lost her balance right after the knee kick and had to use a hand to prop herself up.

Oh no…!

If she had to use her arms, the basis of both her attack and defense, to support her body, then Nayuta was totally helpless. The opportunity it afforded her enemies, who came flooding forth in droves, was too great to overcome.



…I'm going down!

She tensed up, unable to get to her feet.

Mannequin clubs descended on her from every direction.

"Nayuta! Stay down!"

From a distance, she heard a young man's voice that shouldn't have been present.

A hot beam of light passed right by her body, bouncing off the floor of the stage and leaving a little char mark. A mannequin arm blasted off, severed by the beam. The laser passed through the area again—then again.

After the shots went off, a corner of the gymnasium erupted with a blast.

"Koyomi, I cleared a space with a grenade! Go now!"

"Got it! What the hell do y'all think you're doing to my Nayu?! Time to meet your maker!!!"

From the upstairs passageway leading to the lights, a small figure bearing a chainsaw leaped down. She was wearing a sailor-style school uniform, unlike her usual outfit, but there was no mistaking her.

"Koyomi?! What are you doing here?!"

"Are you all right, Nayu?! Just wait! They're gettin' what's comin' to them!"

Koyomi was like a little tornado, charging into the midst of the mannequins and swinging around an electric chainsaw—or maybe it was the chainsaw that was doing the swinging.

A storm of artificial limbs flew into the air, scattering wildly around her. After she passed by, there was an open path in her wake. Meanwhile, the beam sniper rifle continued to provide backing fire from upstairs.

Klever's aim was surprisingly weak, though maybe he was just being careful to give Nayuta a wide berth so as not to hit her by accident. Still, he managed to take down several enemies in her vicinity, buying her enough time to get back to her feet.

Meanwhile, Senjuya cheered, "Boss! You showed up! We made it in time, too!"

Nayuta looked back to see a creature about ten feet in size,

drawn in bright red lines, standing next to Senjuya. Its limbs were thick and short, but its gaze was powerful, and sharp fangs jutted from its mouth.

Most of its body was transparent and as bony as a wire frame, but it was clear at a glance that the edges were crudely drawn lines.

“Go, Kotetsu!”

On Senjuya’s order, the red beast rushed past Nayuta and attacked the mannequins bearing down on her.

Before she even had time to be shocked, she understood what she was seeing. Senjuya’s character job was “artist,” a job similar to a summoner and capable of calling forth familiars from magic circles. Instead of generating circles, they painted images and used a special skill to bring the images to life.

An artist could draw followers in a variety of styles—like offensive, defensive, and support—in accordance with their skill level, and the more involved the art, the stronger the summon would be in battle.

But because a painting brought to life could only be active for a few minutes at best and involved a long and laborious preparation, the popular opinion of the artist job was that it was more of a hassle than anything to play. Who could stand around carefully drawing a creature to summon in the midst of a fierce, frenetic boss battle?

The dog he’d drawn with the mop and paint was a European breed, probably a Welsh Corgi, and short and adorable. Between Koyomi’s tornado and the fierce rampage of the Corgi, the mannequins were dropping left and right.

At this rate, it was simply a massacre. Nayuta could only watch in amazement as it unfolded around her. Meanwhile, the two Hishikawas padded up to her.

“So that’s the pet dog that Senjuya talked about having… And he remembers it every time he draws it. How fascinating. As a means of revisiting the memory every now and then, it seems like a fine way to mourn…”

Now that she no longer needed to fight, Nayuta could relax enough to talk. “I’m not sure if that’s the best way to remember someone…but I suppose everyone should be free to choose the best way to mourn and remember those they’ve lost. In the case

of painful memories, one might not want to remember certain things. I'm sure that trying to face the agony of losing your own child would cause anyone to lose their sanity."

Hishikawa closed his eyes without a word.

Nayuta chose to sit back and watch the mannequins being destroyed all around her. Koyomi had nearly finished cleaning up the area and came rushing back toward her, chainsaw in hand.

"Nayu! Nayu, Nayu, Nayu! I'm so glad you're safe! It's really you, right? The real thing?!"

"Please put the chainsaw down before you hurt someone. Yes, it's really me. Why, did you run across an imposter?"

Koyomi dropped the chainsaw at her feet and leaped onto Nayuta like a whining puppy. "We did! And the detective was doing the most horrible things to her, touching her and squeezing her and perpetrating all sorts of unspeakable acts that I could never describe in polite company, and—"

"That's not true. He simply got her in a headlock and allowed Koyomi to place an exorcising seal on her," Mahiro said, who had suddenly appeared at the stairs next to the stage. The faculty cats were crowded around her feet. Somehow, Mahiro had become their leader, it seemed.

They approached the group in a tizzy.

"You're all right, Mr. Hishikawa!"

"What a shocker. We went through a hidden passage and wound up in the lighting scaffolding with all those mannequins down below…"

"Oh, hang on, everyone. That's a copy of me. I'm the real one over here," said Hishikawa. They had all singled out his mute imposter and gathered around it without realizing their mistake. The fake tabby narrowed its eyes and nodded benignly. It was supposed to be unthinking, but it somehow had a magnanimous, regal air.

At last, the tension drained out of Nayuta, and she stumbled. Koyomi hastily helped prop her up.

"What's the matter, Nayu?! Are you all right?! Did you get hurt somehow?!"

"I twisted my ankle… I'll be fine. I can't run, but I can still walk."

Koyomi was instantly in protector mode. "H-healing items!

Anyone have a poultice?! Or toad oil or dragon palace ointment or dispelling horns?!" she cried, going from person to person, but the cats were just passive observers and hadn't even received any items.

Then one man approached and held out what she was looking for.

"…I do have some toad oil here. It's yours."

"Oh! Thank you!"

Nayuta was startled to realize who it was.

"Um…Mr. Oogaki?"

Ririka was behind him, waving hello. They had just met up with the group, too. And next to her was Senjuya, murmuring unnecessary comments under his breath.

"There we go. It's Oogaki's mean-to-friendly seesaw again."

"Right? When he does something nice with that mean scowl of his, it just makes him seem even sweeter. Isn't it strange?"

"Shut up, or I'll give you more work," he warned. Ririka and Senjuya carefully averted their eyes and pretended to be examining something else around the gym. The power balance at the company was apparent at a glance.

Oogaki cleared his throat and turned to Nayuta. "Pardon me. I have been lax in introducing myself. I am the head of business at Clover's, Oogaki. I understand our president has been in your debt…so allow me to extend my gratitude."

"Not at all. We've done nothing to deserve thanks. If anything, we're grateful to him," Nayuta replied politely. But Oogaki had a very stern, determined look in his eyes.

"This is not just a social formality. I'm very glad about your presence. He was in a much worse state than you probably realize just a few months ago. He took no days off and worked himself to the bone day after day… When I warned him that it was unhealthy, he shrugged it off and ducked the topic, but since you started hanging around his office, it's been a good outlet for him to relax. I'm sure that his work has been less efficient, but his body and mind are in a much better state now. It pains me to ask this of such young ladies, but…I do hope you will continue to serve as a source of solace to him."

Koyomi paused in the act of applying the toad oil to Nayuta's ankle, looking confused.

“……Was that……BL?”

Oogaki beamed.

There was so much pressure behind it that Nayuta felt her spine crawl.

“…It would seem the young lady there has a mind that works the same way as Ririka’s. I’ll choose to overlook that comment because you are not an employee, but if you aren’t careful, I can take you to court for slander, so please mind what you say. To put it simply, unlike the company president, I *do* get into fights if others start them. I just do it legally.”

“I’m sorry. Zipping my lips now,” said Koyomi, prostrating herself. She seemed fearless and crude at first glance, but she had a keen, animalistic sense for those she shouldn’t cross. Nayuta, when she was truly angry, was one of them, and Oogaki was clearly adjacent to her on the list.

When Oogaki turned to approach the faculty members, Koyomi hissed into Nayuta’s ear, “Well, can you blame me for thinking that? If a coworker of the same sex is getting all heavy with personal concern, anyone would start to wonder, right?!”

“Wrong. A normal person would think, ‘Oh, he’s just very considerate.’ Or maybe they’d think that he’s a worrywart… At any rate, I think he’s a very sincere and dutiful person,” said Nayuta. She’d just been regaled with stories about the Klever of the past from Senjuya. It was starting to get exasperating, hearing about how much concern he was causing his employees.

As for Klever himself, he descended gracefully from the scaffolding. There wasn’t a single mannequin left at this point. Even the rampaging Welsh Corgi painting had returned to Senjuya, wagging its tail and frolicking. The difference in size made it look like it was eating him, but Senjuya was laughing and praising the dog.

Klever approached Nayuta and said, “It looks like everyone’s made it back together. I hope Senjuya wasn’t too rude to you.”

“He did nothing wrong,” Nayuta said smugly.

They had only been apart for less than an hour, but somehow, his foxlike features seemed fonder and more nostalgic than she remembered.

§

Hishikawa viewed the game from a cat's-height perspective. When you were shorter than a child, the world seemed so much larger.

The girl he'd been traveling with was much younger than him, but through a cat's eyes, she seemed like an older, grown adult.

Nayuta…

She was pretty and acted with grace but was also quite proactive and fearless. It was quite a combination of traits for a young woman. Based on what Senjuya had said, she was Kaisei Kurei's lover, it seemed. He already had an inkling that Kaisei was spoken for, and that was a common reason to decline the offer of an arranged marriage. The other party would understand, and they had known it was a long shot to begin with. So there was no problem.

Instead, Hishikawa was worried about something else.

In the center of the gym, which was now strewn with bits and pieces of mannequins, a girl wearing a sailor uniform wavered into being.

"Well done, everyone. You have finished today's playtest. You have succeeded in escaping this school, but you did not undo the curse. By repeating the quest, you will open up new routes and locations, gradually unveiling the true curse placed upon our place of learning…"

She gestured toward the exit of the gymnasium with an upraised palm.

"While this is the end of the playtest, we do have a bit of a meet-and-greet with the development staff in the cafeteria over there. If you're not already busy after this, we would be delighted to hear your feedback on your experiences. Regardless of if you stay or not, thank you for your time today."

The girl bowed and vanished. The cats clapped their little paws together. Between the sounds, Hishikawa picked up the conversation of the nearby human players.

“A meet-and-greet? But we’re not really part of this collaboration… What do you think, Nayu?”

“I hate to do this after they just fixed up my ankle, but I think I should log out for today. I haven’t had my bath yet. It’s probably time for you to get to bed, too, Mahiro.”

It wasn’t late night yet, but it wasn’t a good hour for children to be up and about.

Hishikawa approached Nayuta. The fake Hishikawa followed right on his heels.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done tonight, Miss Nayuta,” he said. “I hope that we have the chance to meet again someday. I suppose it’s most likely to be a memorial ceremony.”

She shook his little paw and smiled. “I suppose you’re right. Maybe I’ll attend this year.”

“You’ll have to come with President Kurei.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll invite him if the timing works out.”

Koyomi grabbed Nayuta and leaned against her, eyes darkened.

“…And you think you’ll be allowed…to go somewhere alone with the detective? Well…if it’s for a memorial service, then…I guess…it’s just barely acceptable… Maybe…”

Hishikawa realized that Nayuta and Kurei’s relationship was still a secret from this girl. He didn’t want to make a mess of anything and wisely decided to refrain from commenting.

After Nayuta, Koyomi, and Mahiro logged out, he headed to the cafeteria for the meet-and-greet. There, he found himself sitting across a table from Kaisei Kurei, dressed in his collared school uniform. For some reason, the copy of Hishikawa sat right next to him.

Hishikawa placed his hands on the table and lowered his head. “President Kurei, I apologize most profusely for what my company’s employee has done regarding Mr. Hachidori. And, while it was a pure coincidence, my timing in bringing up the marriage arrangement matter could not have been worse…”

Kurei reached forward to grab Hishikawa’s arms and forced him upright. He would have grabbed Hishikawa’s shoulders, but that was much harder to do to a cat than a human.

“Please don’t let it trouble you. I heard the broad strokes from Senjuya just now. I’m very sorry to hear about the loss of your

son. And having heard that the young lady who wished to make my acquaintance was an *SAO* survivor… It all adds up now. It didn't seem to make sense to me that the discussion over the Mental Output System would evolve into a discussion of arranged marriage. That was a stretch."

Hishikawa scratched the back of his head with a claw. The fake sitting next to him yawned widely.

"I feel ashamed… When your company has so many employees, it's hard to keep track of what happens under the surface of other departments. The egg is on my face."

Naturally, an entire company did not think and act with one mind. It was made of a collection of individuals, arranged into departments that each had its own ecosystem. They might share broad directional collaboration, but what each group did within their own private quarters was not always meant to be discovered.

Kurei fixed him with a stare. "Still, I have a broad understanding of your situation now. But I'm afraid that, while flattering, the offer to meet about a marriage arrangement isn't __"

Hishikawa waved his paws in front of his face, interrupting. He certainly wasn't going to present such an offer to someone he knew was already taken. "No, please don't trouble yourself with that," he insisted. "But after talking with Mr. Senjuya, I was curious about something… Am I correct in believing that you attended the memorial service last year, President Kurei?"

"Yes, I did. It was a bit hectic because I was seeing a number of different acquaintances, but…"

"…Did you sign the guestbook yourself?"

This took Kurei by surprise. "The guestbook…? Ummm…hey! Senjuya!"

"Yoooo. Wassup?" said the young painter, who sauntered over to their table. It wasn't the sort of thing a proper adult did, but Kurei didn't mind it.

"You left the island to go to the memorial service last year, right? They had a guestbook…"

"Oh yeah. You were so busy saying hi to everyone that I signed it for you. What about it?"

Hishikawa pressed a paw to his mouth. *I had my suspicions,*

but I didn't think they would actually be true.

"…Mr. Senjuya, do you remember more about that moment?"

"Huh? Uhhh," Senjuya murmured. "It wasn't anything special. There was a line for the guestbook, so I started waiting… There was a cute girl behind me who seemed to be feeling under the weather, so I left the line to buy some water for her…then I came back, got in line, and wrote the president's name in the book…"

Hishikawa cut him off, keen to get to the pertinent detail.

"So…you didn't write your own name?"

"Oh… Nah, I don't like leaving my name and address on registers like that. Felt like they'd just send some nonsense all the way to the island. So I just put down the president's name instead," Senjuya chuckled.

Kurei put a palm to his forehead. He was smart enough to see where Hishikawa's line of questioning was taking this. Hishikawa had heard from the other party that Kaisei Kurei was "friendly and extremely cheerful," "very personable and humorous," and "was a nice young man who also seemed a little shallow."

She had said that she knew his name from seeing it in the guestbook, but she never said that he had foxlike features, which was the first thing you'd expect. He'd considered that maybe the difference in impressions was down to the distinction between business mode and personal mode. But now he had a more logical answer: She got the wrong guy.

Hishikawa bowed once again. "President Kurei… Once again, I must apologize for this. I think you, too, have realized what happened with that marriage arrangement. I will explain to the other party and use photos to confirm what I suspect to be the truth if you don't mind…"

"Certainly. Please get in touch again once you're done. I will pay the travel fare personally, if needed, to drag him back to the mainland."

Hishikawa and Kurei shook hands. This one had a bit more force behind it. Senjuya, meanwhile, looked at his boss and the cat with befuddlement.

"…Huh? What's up? Did I do something again…?"

"Don't worry about it. You're always doing stuff. For better or for worse," Kurei said wryly. Hishikawa grinned. Next to him, the fake Hishikawa was licking its paw and wiping its face.

The workings of fate were mysterious indeed.

§

Nayuta sank into a bath that was not her own, allowing her mind to empty.

It felt as though she might have scrubbed herself more thoroughly than usual and for no particular reason. She certainly felt that she understood well enough the detective's personality, and his sense of restraint.

I mean… It's him…

She trusted him enough, for better or worse, to sum it all up that way.

After the bath, she dried her hair, put on a tank top and pair of shorts for pajamas, and made her way into the living room.

"I'm done with the bathroom. Thank you very much."

"…Um, sure," Klever replied vaguely. He pressed his fingers to the corners of his eyes as though trying to relieve a headache.

"What's the matter? You seem exhausted," she asked, pulling a chilled container of barley tea from the refrigerator.

Klever managed to say, "I am not tired… I agreed to give you the use of my bath. We haggled over it, and I agreed to let you sleep here. But…Nayuta, I don't want to have to complain at such a late moment, but that outfit is simply too careless. I've said this many times, but you lack the proper amount of caution around me. If it wasn't me in the room with you right now…"

Nayuta sighed. "I wouldn't think casually of inviting myself to stay over at anyone else's home. This is usually what I wear around the house in the summer. Are you expecting me to wear long johns and sleeves in the heat?"

"Well, there must be something else… Like normal pajamas or even a tracksuit. That nightwear is just a little too…realistic."

This criticism was unfair, and she shot back, "This is real life, not VR, so of course it's realistic. I'm only going to fall asleep after this, so don't pay me any mind."

"…Yes, of course. All I have to do is ignore you, and it's not a problem…"

Klever returned his gaze to the laptop. Nayuta helped herself to a seat on the couch. She was already quite comfortable in this room, if not quite to the level of the VR detective's office. It was her first time spending the night, but she no longer felt any hesitation about using the furniture.

"Aren't you going to use the bath?"

"Later. I'm putting together some notes about what I noticed during the playtest."

This was definitely one of the reasons that his employees claimed he was a workaholic.

Nayuta ran her fingers through her drying hair and murmured, "That man today, Mr. Hishikawa… He lost his son to *SAO*, didn't he?"

There was a pause before Klever replied, "So I hear…but I think he may have lied about one thing."

"Lied?"

The detective stopped working and closed his eyes. "I think it's true that he lost his son. But the one who took the NerveGear off wasn't him. I think it was the boy's mother."

Nayuta was speechless.

Klever explained, "I have no evidence. But before I quit the force, I read a number of reports about victims of the incident. One of the early examples of deaths was a case that sounded very similar to what Hishikawa described. I forget the name because many of them were aliases or initials, but I recall the family structure and ages being very close."

She realized that her throat was parched and lifted the glass of tea to her mouth.

He continued, his voice heavy. "Even without knowledge of the trap contained within, Hishikawa would have known that it was dangerous to remove a contraption that is sending an electrical signal to the brain. But the boy's mother wouldn't have known that, assuming it was a game console, and yanked the NerveGear off her son's head, thinking that it was time he stopped playing and got to his schoolwork. As a result, he became a very early victim of the *SAO* Incident on its first day, according to the case report."

Nayuta's shoulders shook. If Hishikawa really were lying about what happened, there would have to be a good reason for

it.

"…You think he's defending his wife…after she killed their son?"

"The wife, in this case, went into shock and had to be hospitalized over what she'd done," Klever explained. "And the husband, trying to bear his half of the guilt, began to tell people that he was the one who killed his son. Of course, the police would have taken detailed statements, but they're not in a position to punish the parents for what happened. So based on what he said, the public around him accepted that it was the father who caused the son's death as fact. Thanks to that, the wife did manage to leave the hospital, albeit with a bit of a memory block, and she had recovered to the point that she could take care of herself again—according to the report at the time, that is."

The *SAO* Incident lasted for over two years before it finally came to an end. So when Klever returned alive, over two years had already passed since the very first wave of players died, and many families had suffered during that time.

The Hishikawas were one of those families.

"It's possible that she remembers performing the action that took her son's life. But if her husband is lying about it to protect her, it's possible that his act of kindness is what's keeping her going. The fact that Hishikawa explicitly told us, strangers he'd never met, that he killed his son was surely a demonstration of his desire to strengthen that lie. He might be a department head for a major company and leading a successful work life, but he's still struggling with being a victim of the incident."

Nayuta thought back on a number of things Hishikawa had said during the playtest.

"I feel like I've been processing my son's death in the wrong way…"

Perhaps what he was really wondering was if he should finally stop lying about it.

She put her arms around her knees and wondered, "How can the families of the victims…finally move on from this?"

Klever grimaced. "Everyone's dealing with different situations, and their personalities factor into it, so I don't think there's a single answer of 'just do this.' But in my case, your existence is helping me move on."

She looked up with a start. She hadn't expected to hear that.

He didn't look at her. He was leaning as far back as his chair could go, and the angle of his laptop was just right to block her view of his face.

After a long silence, Nayuta said quietly, "I'm sorry… I didn't hear that. Could you repeat what you said?"

"No. Upon reflection, I realize that I was one step short of a big, big problem. Forget what you heard."

Nayuta looked at the clock on the wall. It was almost midnight.

Ordinarily, she would be asleep at this hour, but tonight, she felt like staying up a bit later.

"…In another five minutes, it won't be a problem anymore. So I'd like to hear what you said again."

"Five minutes? Why would that…?"

Klever glanced at the clock, then hastily closed his mouth.

"Wait…what's your sign?"

"Cancer."

Anyone born between June 22 and July 22 was a Cancer. He collapsed over the desk and groaned.

"I'm sorry. I didn't get you a cake or a present or anything…"

"Of course you didn't. I didn't tell you when it was," she said, annoyed. "If you had them ready, I would find it creepy."

In just a few minutes, it would be tomorrow: her birthday. At the age of eighteen, she would enter a new phase of her life in legal terms.

She put her arms around her knees again and mumbled, "If anything, I should be apologizing to you instead. I'm sorry, Detective. I knew that you didn't really want a young woman like me hanging around and getting into your business…"

Klever was assuming a risk just having a high school student like her in his home. The actual risk was almost nothing because there was no parent or guardian in a position to accuse him of wrongdoing, but it was clearly running afoul of his own sense of morality.

He had bent his own risk-management protocol to allow her in because, after great personal turmoil, he decided it was safer for her than letting her stay at a twenty-four-hour Net café. She had anticipated that decision and tipped the scales by pleading with him to let her stay.

“All of a sudden, I got scared of being alone on my birthday. I was fine last year… Well, maybe I wasn’t fine. I don’t really remember. But this year, I thought, ‘Oh, what if I’m alone on my birthday this year, next year, and every single year after that?’ That’s when I suddenly got scared…”

That was the childish reason that Nayuta was here tonight: She didn’t want to be alone on her birthday.

Somehow, Klever was sitting on the couch across from her. His familiar foxy features looked more serious than usual.

“And your broken water heater. Was that…?”

“Oh, that part is true. But after I realized it was broken, I started thinking that I could use it as an excuse to stay at your house… I didn’t think it would actually work, though.”

“…I felt a lot of self-loathing after I agreed to let you stay.”

“I get that. I’m sorry.”

She sat up straight and lowered her head. She had gone too far and was solely at fault for this one.

But Klever shook his head. “Actually, I’m thinking that I’m glad I didn’t turn you away. In fact, I want to praise myself for being careless for once. It’s already late, so you should get to bed. I don’t have any plans tomorrow, so I’ll take off work. If there’s anywhere you want to go…”

“I want to hang out here.”

She wasn’t being reserved. At this moment, she wanted the peace of mind of a slow at-home day rather than the stimulation of going out somewhere.

“…Oh, but you’re almost out of soy sauce and rice, so I do want to get groceries. Will you carry the bags?”

“……After all of your begging to stay over, it feels unnecessary for you even to ask that question,” Klever said lifelessly. He got up from the couch. “You asked how the families left behind can move on. I don’t have the answer. This might sound clichéd, but how about focusing on the life you have now and treasuring it? The thought just crossed my mind as we were talking.”

Nayuta giggled. She couldn’t tell if it sounded like the most Klever-ish answer or not at all. In any case, it was clearly an answer he devised out of consideration for her. In that sense, it was very much in character.

“Maybe it’ll work. I won’t know unless I try it. Will you help

me with that, Detective?”

“…I’ll give it proper consideration. Happy birthday, Nayuta.”

The minute hand on the clock was past the hour.

“Thank you very much. Good night.”

“Good night. I’ll go ahead and use the bath now.”

Even that simple, mundane set of statements filled Nayuta with joy at this moment.

She went to her makeshift bedroom, laid down on the inflatable bed, and fell right asleep.

She’d completely forgotten to lock the door.

Planetarium Café: Dark Nebula

People who like stars come in three broad categories.

1. Those who don't really like stars but say they do because they think it makes them look smart.
2. Those who do like stars but only for superficial reasons so they can look at twinkly little lights and say, "Wow, pretty," like a seven-year-old.
3. Those who are hardcore entranced by stars and are drawn so heavily to the mysteries of the cosmos and their stunning, abnormal grandeur that it makes people wonder if they might fail a sanity check.

It's easy to tell the difference.

If you bring up the topic of stars and they say, "Mars this, Jupiter that," then they're the first kind. If they say, "Deneb this, Altair that, Vega that," then they're the second. If they say, "25143 this, 162173 that," then they're the third.

Incidentally, if they say, "Hyades this, Arcturus that," they're a different type of third category. You should reply, *"Iä! Iä!"* and helpfully guide them to the neighboring café of Rule Yeah, at which point they will be most appreciative.

As for the planetarium café Dark Nebula, as the name suggests, it is themed around a dark nebula.

The nebula will be visible before you like a black storm cloud while you dine on Crisped Dark Matter, Fried Pegasus Wings, Jupiter Dumplings, Stardust Steak, Black Hole Donuts, Bear Stew (from Ursa Major), Grade-A Slices (Alien Sashimi), and other space-related dishes.

All of these dishes are slightly too futuristic for human tastes now, and sadly, the only menu items we can safely recommend are water and salt, but the greatest treat of all at this café is the grandeur of its dark nebula.

This room was designed by Mr. Oogaki, head of sales. It is very much in character for him, being both practical and yet harboring a great, vast darkness.

Teahouse: Foxfire

This is a café modeled after a traditional teahouse along the banks of the Kamo River in Kyoto. In terms of taste, it is perhaps a miracle among all of Kuroneko's creations. There is not a single trap or design meant to freak out guests. It was designed, of course, by the company's president, Kaisei Kurei.

At first, the café designs were handled by Hachidori and Senjuya to serve as showrooms for clients, but because they all ended up completely inappropriate for entertaining business guests, the president himself was forced to clean up their mess and make his own.

There are no employees here. Simply tap on the menu, and the desired item will appear in the empty space on the table. Not all of the items are traditionally Japanese in style, either; you can order cream puffs, shortcakes, cheesecakes, and even grilled onigiri and frankfurters. All the choices are tasty and tasteful, and their accuracy to the real thing is impeccable.

Because this set was designed to be a showroom for clients considering purchasing a VR office model, it can be flexibly adjusted. Users can add or subtract rooms, expand or contract them, and alter the exterior views and interior arrangement with the press of a button.

The name "Foxfire" was chosen because of the room's ability to make first-time visitors think they have been bewitched by a trickster fox.

While there are no freaky or nasty tricks awaiting visitors, there are reports of some strange phenomena, such as rare sightings of a white fox inside the building, an order of *kitsune* udon that does not include the fried tofu that foxes are said to love, or orders of three *inari* sushi rolls wrapped in fried tofu that only come to the table in sets of two.

There are no traces of tomfoolery in the event log, and no audits of the programming turn up anything wrong, but after Kurei decided to install an altar within the teahouse and offer fried tofu at regular intervals to please the fox god, the strange events stopped happening immediately.

In a sense, this café might hold more mysteries than even Rule Yeah.

Chapter 4 Otherworldly Rails

Say that a party of players has five members.

If all five are the same sex, male or female, there are no issues.

Obviously, individual personalities will differ, but in a broad sense, it's easier for groups of the same sex to reach a common understanding and pursue a common goal. This has been proven in middle school and high school sports teams, for example.

Next, consider a group of four men and one woman. This is a scenario often seen in *Tokusatsu* hero teams. She's "the girl" of the group. Fictional stories aside, this is a tricky setup in real life. There are unflattering terms for the negative effects that can arise: the princess of an otaku club, a community bicycle, or a Yoko.

How about three men and two women or two men and three women? These are simply groups of friends and rarely experience problems as long as romantic triangles don't arise. If you wind up with two couples, one person is left out, but in these cases, many times the odd one out has a romantic partner outside of the group, and it's an effective way for same-sex friendships to bloom. This is why adolescent dramas themed around romance and friendship often use arrangements similar to this one.

Lastly, one man and four women. From the outside, you might call this a harem. It's the kind of scenario that other men envy and that women look upon with raised eyebrows.

But unless this man is some kind of polygamist oil sheikh, an otherwise normal man of good sense placed in such a situation is not living a dream: It's a nightmare.

If all four women are attracted to him, for example, their jostling for attention and favor are enough to give him ulcers, even if it doesn't devolve into actual violence.

On top of that, if there is nothing particularly romantic about the arrangement, and he is simply one man mixed in among a bunch of women, he will end up on an island without any allies, forced to be a servant without any reward, and be at risk of being slapped with false charges of a scandalous nature if he so much as looks at anyone wrong.

He'll be treated like trash within the group, subjected to cold stares from those without, forced to do all the heavy lifting and dirty work. His plight will be a modern-day form of slavery brought about by the distortions of contemporary societ…

"……Okay, can we talk about how the detective's delusions of persecution have reached a level of parody never seen before? As his blood relative, do you have anything to say about this?"

"…Hmm? It's not *my* fault."

"What happened in the detective's past…?"

While Klever droned on, expounding upon his ideas—perhaps complaints, perhaps delusions—about the male-female ratio in a party, the trio of women gathered in his detective agency's office treated him to cold gazes: Koyomi the ninja, Ririka the divine archer, and Nayuta the warrior priestess.

The last member of the party, Mahiro the tactician, had not logged in yet.

Four women, one man.

In the face of this undeniable reality, Klever had one last, undignified form of resistance.

"…Yes, I realize this is an extreme argument. The problem is, you three—Nayuta, Koyomi, and Mahiro—on your own are fine. But when you add my sister to the mix, my sensitive stomach simply isn't up for the task. As a bodyguard during a tour guide stint, she's excellent, and she presents an attractive appearance for dealing with customers, but in her own free time, my sister exhibits a psychopathic level of abnormal behavior, and I have no guarantee that you all won't be infected by her madness. Just look at how she's tamed you to do her bidding," he ranted. There was a tinge of despair in his voice.

Koyomi, who was dressed in her capybara suit and curled up

on Ririka's lap, pouted, "Well, Nayu's standing behind Ririka, so who else's lap am I supposed to sit on?"

"…Ahhh, yes. Nayuta, that's the spot. A little harder—ahhh, yessss!"

"Like this…? You don't *seem* that tense to me…"

Klever put a hand over his eyes. He was already being treated like he wasn't there.

His older sister, Ririka, was seated on the couch with Koyomi curled up on her lap and Nayuta standing behind her, massaging her shoulders.

As a generally helpful and considerate person, Nayuta wouldn't decline such a request. A VR massage wasn't going to do much of anything, but the brain still imagined that it felt it, so you could still enjoy the sensation that you had gotten a massage.

Having ensnared two innocent young women, the evil witch gave her loving brother a wicked grin. Klever's spine went cold. He felt like a fox trapped in the gaze of a tiger.

"All that aside, Kaisei, I feel so sad and lonely… When you took that trip to the hot spring in May, you asked Hachidori and Senjuya if they would go with you, but when they said no, you didn't talk to your dear older sister, did you…? While I was eating my sad lunch all alone on the other side of the world, you were having a grand old time cavorting with these cute young girls, weren't you…?"

He fixed her with a legitimately hard glare. "You were on vacation with your husband at the time, Ririka. When Yanagi hired us to help him beat the Ghostly Orchestra quest, you asked for extended time off for your trip. I wouldn't think that a person who takes at least one long break to enjoy life every two months would throw a fit over not getting to go to a hot spring in VR."

Of course, he wasn't planning to invite her in either case, but it was a fact that she was on vacation at the time. After that eloquently devastating riposte, Ririka's eyes filled with tears. All avatars had the ability to produce fake tears when needed.

"How could you say that? You were such a sister's boy as a child! You kept saying, 'Sis, Sis,' everywhere we went, following me around like a precious little duckling… How could you have grown into such a heartless beast of a man, Kaisei?! What happened to the devastating cuteness you once had?!"

“Stop inventing false memories. I was a solitary child who liked to read books. Do you remember who kept taking my books away, then kicking me like a ball when I pleaded to get them back?”

“Who, some mean bully from the neighborhood?”

“It was you.”

Even Nayuta had to admit that this one shocked her. She stopped massaging.

“Ririka…that’s just torture…”

Sensing that the tables were turning on her, Ririka hastily spun around toward her. “Wait, no! I was just lonely because Kaisei was so focused on his books that he didn’t pay any attention to me! Also, I didn’t kick him like a ball! All I did was, you know, put my foot on him so he couldn’t get away! It was so cute, the way he struggled to get free! Like a turtle whose shell is being held down!”

“Whoa…you *are* a psychopath,” Koyomi remarked, hopping up from Ririka’s lap and scurrying to the wall for safety like a small rodent. The capybara suit’s Summon Furball ability activated, generating a wombat in the empty space she left behind.

Ririka hugged the wombat and began to cry crocodile tears. “Yes…yes, you’re right… I’ve been a terrible big sister… I suppose I can’t complain if you choose to get your revenge on me, now that you’re a grown man…”

The wombat in her arms began to struggle against the pressure she was inflicting. But she clutched it even harder, keeping the animal trapped in her pale arms.

Klever just sighed. “This was back in childhood, and I don’t hate you enough to want vengeance for anything. But it frightens me that some fundamental part of your mentality hasn’t seemed to have changed since then. You’ve learned to be smarter about when and where that behavior is appropriate, but you’ve also learned how to take advantage of that knowledge to get away with things.”

Ririka stopped pretending to cry and puffed out her cheeks. The wombat finally gave up on escaping and slumped despairingly in her arms.

“What? That’s not true. My husband still scolds me and says I need to be smarter and exercise better judgment.”

“That’s no good. You can’t abuse your judgment, but you still need to have a good sense of it,” Koyomi pointed out.

“But you know what?” Ririka said with a grin. “Ethan always says that’s what he loves about me! ♪ ”

“…And then she transitions to sappy talk. Wow, what a forgiving husband…”

“I’ll admit I’m a little envious of that kind of married couple.”

“Ethan’s a very sensible man, but I’m afraid he’s too used to having eccentric friends and acquaintances, so his yardstick has gone a little wonky…”

Once everyone had gotten their kicks in on Ririka, there was a knock at the door.

“Good morning. It’s Mahiro. I’m sorry for being late.”

Nayuta promptly went to open the door and invited her in.

“Hi there, Mahiro. Don’t worry! You’re still before the meeting time.”

“Oh, good! I slept in a little, so I knew it was a close call.”

The pigtailed tactician walked into the room and turned to greet the group that was already present. “So everyone else is already here! I’m very, very excited about this trip… Thank you for inviting me, Nayuta!”

Klever couldn’t help but avert his eyes from her dazzling, naïve smile. Somehow, Koyomi was standing right next to him. She taunted, “And are you going to give that beautiful smiling face the same speech you told us about male-to-female ratios…?”

“…No. I’ll just hold it in.”

He couldn’t bring himself to harm a child’s innocent smile.

Plus, Klever was belatedly realizing that it was simply rude of him to place Mahiro and Nayuta on the same level as his sister and Koyomi.

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It was just after the students entered summer break that Nayuta suggested to the detective that she wanted to help Mahiro have some fun for a change of pace since she was feeling down about her father’s arrest.

“Mr. Tochimori gave us advance tickets to a new event as thanks for accompanying him on his office-observing trip. It’s a two-day, one-night trip on the mystery train, the highlight of their fall excursions season. He gave me enough for you, too, so please do join us,” Nayuta informed Klever, who easily accepted the offer, to her surprise.

“That’s a good idea. Mahiro’s putting on a brave face, but she’s still just a young girl. Now that she’s on summer break, she’s going to have more time to think about depressing topics, and I’m sure that she’s feeling lonely. You have a mysterious kind of generosity of spirit beyond your years. I think you’ll do a great job of making her feel comfortable.”

Nayuta didn’t think that she had anything as grand as a “generosity of spirit,” but she was pleased to hear him compliment her anyway. He had been so reluctant to join them on the hot spring trip prior to the holiday week in May, but things were clearly different now. Nothing in particular happened during her stay while the water heater was fixed, but the distance between them had shrunk.

However, he didn’t expect his sister Ririka to be involved, and his anxiety about that had turned into bitter complaints in the office earlier.

What is his problem with having such a nice and beautiful sister…?

Sure, she was a bit of an oddball in some regards, but it seemed like that was part of her charm to Nayuta. As someone who tended to be less outwardly emotional and friendly, Nayuta found people with natural cheeriness, like Koyomi and Ririka, to be quite appealing and fascinating.

They had also asked some of the other employees, but no one accepted. Oogaki had meetings with other companies, Senjuya was going to go out fishing with someone from his island, and from what she heard—she still hadn’t met him—Hachidori grumpily resisted the idea.

In any case, after Mahiro’s smile obliterated whatever resistance Klever still had to the idea, they headed for Ueno Station. When they arrived at the wedge-shaped station, the other players going on the mystery tour were already there.

There were about fifty in all, including Nayuta’s party of five,

almost all of them acquaintances or family members of the developers. In order to take part in the tour, participants were required to fill out a survey afterward, which would help the team make adjustments and additions to the experience.

A girl approached them dressed in a robe called a *suikan* that had traditionally been worn by dancing entertainers in the Heian court. She was part of the tour staff, it seemed; there was a band that read GUIDE around her arm.

"Hello there. Are you the Kurei party from the Three-Leaf Detective Agency? Mr. Tochimori assigned me to be your tour guide today. My name is Izuna."

She was definitely older than Nayuta, but her short hair was cute, and she had the vivacity of a new hire, fresh out of college. None of the others had their own tour guide, so this was a bit of a special favor from Tochimori.

Klever gave her a gentlemanly bow. "That's very kind of you. We're grateful for your help. If you don't mind me asking…are you with the development team? Or…?"

Izuna the dancer giggled. "I'm not an AI. I'm a staff member in training. I'm sure you know more about VR tourism than I do, Mr. Kurei. I would be grateful for your feedback during our trip," she said, which came off as a little odd.

"VR tourism…?" Nayuta repeated.

"Yes," said Izuna. "I'm part of a new team within the company called VR Tours. In the past, the prevailing view was that in-game tourism could not be a successful business, but now that Mr. Kurei's tour guide service has received very high reviews from wealthy overseas patrons, the company is considering giving a real look at treating the game world as a natural resource worthy of tourism. They established our division when they opened Maneki-ya Hot Spring Resort Hotel recently."

"Ahhh, so Mr. Tochimori decided to take me up on my advice," Klever said thoughtfully. "If you really want to get into the tourism business, though, you should probably break off an entire tourism department to be independent of game development… Oh, shoot. I'm guessing he probably wanted to talk to me about that when he did his office tour."

"Really? But he still could have talked to me about it," Ririka said.

“But you don’t know where this is all coming from. The tourism business is a means of getting the elderly into the VR system. That means they need experiences with a very low bar of entry for anyone to try out, unaffected by stats and battle and gameplay mechanisms. It’s completely different from the classic forms of challenge, growth, and reward that gamers are used to, so if they’re making it with the same people, tools, and departments as the regular game, they’re going to get their creative directions jumbled up. Basically, if they’re going to take this seriously, they needed to set up their own independent department to work separately.”

“That’s right,” said Izuna with a smile. “For example, let’s say we want to provide a cheap and stress-free experience that is equivalent to pricy hotels and destinations that are hard to get reservations for. Mr. Kurei offered a good example of that: a journey on a luxury sleeper train. I had been working on a sleeper car as a hobby that just happened to align with this concept, and that’s why I was transferred from the executive department to this new team. It was like bringing a fish to water—or a train to tracks, in this case.”

“You’re the creator?” Nayuta asked, stunned. “Did you also do the night express to Maneki-ya…?”

Izuna nodded sheepishly. “I did. The hotel itself was a collaboration between many different people at the company, but the train part of the trip was pretty much just me. I’d been stockpiling materials as a hobby since I was a student, so the chance to create my ideal train and have people actually compliment me for it was just the most exciting thing I could imagine.”

The gleeful look on her face left no room for doubt just how fulfilled she was to be doing this. Koyomi just seemed dazed by this revelation.

“Wait, I think you just glossed over something… You were in the executive department, Izuna? And you made that amazing train? What does that mean? Do they use dev tools and stuff over there?”

“No, they don’t have the workstations set up for that within the department,” Izuna admitted. “But we can use some of the dev tools through the AmuSphere, thanks to some experimental

VR office arrangements. Also, our dev team works insanely hard, so you can't keep up unless you're young and healthy. Once you reach a certain age, you tend to get transferred to different departments. That's what happened to Mr. Torao in the error-testing department, and there are a few more in the executive department. Sometimes they pitch in with dev work or design items and such. I was hired right out of college to work in the executive department, but I was surprised to find out that the company operates this way."

"Very impressive. And that company culture is how you wind up with quality creations like the hotel and the night express," murmured Klever with admiration. Izuna smiled awkwardly.

"It was an after-work kind of thing, like an extracurricular college club, and that's how it ended up getting more and more eccentric. By the time it was being finished up, people on the dev team were adding a helping hand. I think they were all starving for some free expression that wasn't dictated by a project sheet."

They had arrived at the train platform. The night express they'd ridden before was a rounded, retro-looking train, but this one was notably different.

"Whoa. It's black!" Koyomi exclaimed, which happened to be the exact same thing that everyone else was thinking.

The black, gleaming exterior screamed quality, but for some reason, there didn't appear to be a single window on the train. The lead car was as streamlined as a bullet train, but without even a front window for a driver to look through. It almost looked as though some freakish, three-dimensional shadow of a train had come to the platform.

Some of the other passengers seemed unnerved by this. From the loading door, a crew member stepped out wearing a black cloak and a fox mask. The dark green uniform and cap were fine in make and detail and painted a very slim, attractive picture.

Koyomi's eyes flew open wide at the sight of the crew member.

"...*Two* detectives...?!"

"I had a feeling you'd say that. Learn to tell the difference between my face and a mask," he snapped. She was joking, of course, because they were nothing alike, but they did share a certain air to them.

The masked crew member spoke in a loud, clear voice.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. I am Kohaku, your conductor and guide for this mystery tour. We will be leading you on a two-day, one-night trip to another world. The name of this train is Zuisho, meaning ‘good omen.’ You are free to relax in your cabins or walk about the train as you enjoy traveling luxuriously on our deluxe sleeper train.”

The pristine way the conductor bowed at the entrance to the train gave Nayuta a sudden burst of intuition.

“That’s…an AI NPC, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Izuna confirmed. “There’s no need to have an actual company employee give the same speech for each tour, and if it proves to be popular enough, there could be multiple tours in progress at the same time. One of the benefits of this test run is seeing if our tour guide AI, Kohaku, can react and respond properly to various situations before we put them into public use.”

In 108 Apparitions, the various NPC *yokai* were designed to talk as little as possible to preserve their eerie, otherworldly atmosphere, but the leader of a tour group didn’t offer the same luxury.

“The greeting speech is simple because it just repeats what’s already been recorded, but the actual conversation ability in practice is a little iffy. Please try talking to Kohaku if you get the chance. The more pieces of data, the better.”

“But…he really does look like the detective,” Nayuta said, unable to shake the strange feeling. “He’s wearing a mask, yes, but the height and figure and overall atmosphere are very similar.”

Izuna stuck out her tongue. “You can tell, huh? As a matter of fact, Mr. Kurei was our model. After that invitation to Maneki-ya Hot Spring Resort Hotel, some of the black cats working as staff there began to copy him by making and wearing their own fox masks. It was so adorable that fox designs became a big thing among the VR Tours team.”

The detective made a disgusted face. “I didn’t hear a word about this…”

“Oh, I have pictures,” said Izuna, quickly going into her menu window and displaying some screenshots. Round little black cats walking on two feet were wearing white fox masks and

traditional coats and doing a festival dance.

“Ah…that’s so cuuute!” squealed Mahiro, her eyes sparkling. Despite her grown-up look and mannerisms, she was still a little girl on the inside.

Ririka and Koyomi joined in on the reactions, too.

“Awww, how sweet! Those are really good masks. Very round and chubby!”

“What devious cuteness! Are artificial intelligences these days able to fine-tune their own looks like this?”

Izuna looked as proud as though they were praising her own children. “The cats at Maneki-ya were designed to do dances and make things from the start, but I didn’t expect them to make masks. The placards are impressive, too. Their ability to copy things is incredible. They recently made a miniature train for children to ride around the hotel, with rails and everything… The AI made their own guest attraction, with cats dressed up as rail employees driving the train around.”

“Wow, that sounds like so much fun,” said Koyomi, who was small enough that she might be able to ride it, too.

The world was all abuzz with Alice, the latest and greatest bottom-up AI, but the cats in *Asuka* were evolving in their own way, too. Though it was a rather eccentric evolution, to be sure.

The passengers began to file into the black train, so the group got in line with them.

“Right this way, Miss. Your room is in Car Three,” said a fox-masked employee, giving a key card to Koyomi, who was at the front of the group.

The moment they stepped onto the train, they were met with a wafting smell of perfumed oils.

“Oooh-la-la! *Très luxueux*!” Koyomi remarked.

“What is that supposed to mean…? Never mind, I get the idea.”

Despite the shining black exterior, the inside of the train had a gentle beige theme, and the walls were finished with a velvety texture. On one side of the train hallway were the cabins, and on the other side were nothing but unbordered windows. It looked like there were no windows from the outside, but that was only because it used a kind of one-sided magic mirror. In reality, they had a great view of the outside.

“Whoa…so that’s how it works. Makes sense,” Koyomi

muttered, wandering around the train. Ririka and Mahiro followed her, then Klever and Nayuta, and lastly, Izuna.

The guide seemed to be watching their reactions. Nayuta decided to ask about this.

“It briefly seemed a bit eerie from the outside…but the interior is rather bright and futuristic. I was expecting something a bit more horror-ish.”

“The concept is a train from the far future. There’s a reason that it looks so flat and smooth…but we’ll get into that during the trip,” Izuna said with a smile. Despite her very polite manners, there was definitely an air of trickery around her.

I thought she was just an ordinary office lady at first…but there’s definitely more than meets the eye with her, Nayuta thought, suddenly wary.

Meanwhile, the others had stopped at a door.

“Car Three, Cabin Six, known as the ‘Potter’s Wheel’… This is it! It seems like there are lots of cabins for each car. Does that mean they’re going to be fairly cramped…?” Koyomi said nervously as she used the card to open the door.

The first thing they saw was a wall of borderless windows, a fairly tall ceiling, and a space that was not only *not* small but clearly larger than the train car itself, as seen from the outside.

It was a VR trick, of course, and it felt truly unfair, considering how real-life sleeper car designers had to agonize over every square inch of space.

From the doorway, the forward part of the cabin had six reclining seats along the spacious window, along with conveniently sized tables, with a lowered space behind them including a sofa.

The rear part of the cabin was split into two floors, with the ground floor being a simple kitchen and bar counter and the upstairs having a bedroom space and bathroom.

Even the ceiling above them was in the style of a magic mirror; you could see the ceiling of the train station through it. Everything about it felt both luxurious and grandly spacious while still being inside of a train.

“Wowwwww… This is amazing… What a nice train car!” Mahiro exclaimed.

“It really is. It’s much bigger than I thought! You’ve expanded

the space, haven't you?" Ririka asked, turning back to Izuna.

"Yes. The width is slightly larger than the exterior of the train, and the length of this six-person cabin is about…one car's length in total, I suppose. This one has a vaulted ceiling in a maisonette style, with the beds and bath on the second floor. The ceiling upstairs is also a magic mirror, so you'll get the feeling of sleeping under the stars. The bath is nearly pool-sized, so you can all fit in at once, and we have rental swimsuits available. I highly suggest you all enjoy that later. I'm very proud of that detail."

Klever came to a stop outside of the cabin. "Ahhh, this is very well done. Now I'm looking forward to the single cabins."

"I beg your pardon?" Izuna asked. After a brief, awkward silence, she gave him the unfortunate, merciless truth. "Um…this six-person cabin is the only one we've arranged for you."

"Hmm?" the detective said, putting a hand to his chin in thought. "Just a moment… One cabin? I'm supposed to stay here, too…?"

"Of course. Mr. Tochimori said I didn't need to split up your rooms. Oh, and if you don't mind, I'll accompany you as your guide as well…"

"Yes, *you're* one thing, but I can't be in here. Even in VR, I don't think it's right for a man to be mixed into an overnight stay with a group of women," he said logically, though it seemed a little late for that.

Nayuta walked up behind him and pushed him through the doorway. "Why are you bringing this up now? You were fine at Maneki-ya."

"But that's because there were tons of cats…"

"Well, we're all here today, and you have the weakest stats of the whole group."

"…Ah, I get what you're sayin'. So he's helpless if *we* decide to attack him. The detective's the one in real danger!" smirked Koyomi, much to Nayuta's distaste.

"It is not going to come to that, so don't worry. Ririka and Mahiro are here, too, so let's all just relax and enjoy ourselves like we do at the agency office."

Even when she stayed at his place for multiple nights in the real world, nothing happened to Nayuta, and she didn't do anything to him. At most, she ensured he ate well, and she came

away with a greater familiarity with the water fixtures of Klever’s home.



“Well, I suppose you’re right, but…”

Klever’s gaze fell upon his sister, who was grinning gleefully at him. Feeling sympathetic for his plight, Nayuta whispered into his ear, “Remember, this is all for Mahiro.”

“Very well. I’ll just have to deal with it…”

When kids were involved, the detective was a real pushover. He gave up and allowed himself to be pushed into the cabin. Nayuta closed the door after her.

He was probably thinking that he could always log out to escape to the real world. Nayuta wasn’t inclined to keep him trapped in every sense. She was hoping that he would enjoy the train journey enough that he wouldn’t feel the need to escape it.

Ririka, meanwhile, watched the two of them rather gleefully—to the point that Nayuta, in addition to Klever, felt a bit nervous about it. It was the smile of a little devil plotting something.

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Just as the train left Ueno Station, a calm, relaxing voice came over the train’s loudspeakers.

“This is Kohaku, your conductor. Thank you so much for taking part in VR Tours’ ‘Sleeper Train Zuisho’s Two-Day, One-Night Trip to Another World.’ The train will soon be ushering you into an entirely unfamiliar world, but the train itself is safe, so please relax and enjoy the otherworldly sights ahead of you. We are scheduled to arrive at our first destination, three thousand Torii, in an hour’s time. Do enjoy the experience until then.”

Koyomi had her face pressed right up against the window. She let out a cheer. “Oh! I can see the torii already from here! Whoaaaa…”

Her voice trailed off from the shock of what she was seeing. Around a sudden curve, there was a sequence of countless torii gates straddling the rails. They led into a deep forest that hid the view of where they were going, but it was certainly eerie.

“So is this a railway version of Fushimi Inari Shrine and its corridor of torii gates?” Klever wondered.

“That’s right,” replied Izuna, smiling. “The torii is said to be the

gateway between the land of the gods and the mortal world. And in this case, by passing through three thousand of them, you can arrive at the three thousand realms—in other words, the cosmos. But most exciting to me is the sleeper car clicking and clacking its way through a forest at night. It's so exotic! Wrapped up in your blanket, staring out at the scenery while you're lying down, it feels like you're really experiencing something different and special… That's one of the delights of a rail journey, in my opinion."

The sparkle in her eyes and the fervent way she finished made it clear that she was no longer just performing a role but giving in to her inner railroad nerd. Nayuta wasn't especially enamored of trains, but she kind of understood where it was coming from.

She'd heard that many young children like to envision themselves soaring through the air or traveling through darkened forests while they snuggled in their beds. It had to be tapping into the same emotion as that.

Nestled inside the safety of a vehicle while looking outside at frightening terrain—it satisfied the desire for security while also offering the stimulation of seeing something thrilling. In this way, the mind could enjoy two opposing desires at once in a satisfying way.

Soon the train was rattling its way through the torii gates. It moved fairly slowly to make sure you couldn't miss the torii, and the gentle rocking of its progress was comforting. Beyond the torii, the darkened forest loomed.

In a real train, the mountains and forests would be so dark at night that you couldn't see a thing, but in VR, it was easy to adjust the amount of visible light. The trees and leaves gave off the faintest glow, so the gamma adjustment was tweaked a little for easier enjoyment.

The windows also didn't reflect the interior of the train car, so the view looking out was almost shockingly clear.

"Wow…there's such a mood to all of this," said Mahiro, who was entranced by the ride through the torii. She put her hands on the window and took in the view.

"Oh! There was a bear!"

"What? Really?!"

"Yes! It had something in its mouth, probably a bloody human

arm," said Mahiro with childish excitement. Koyomi, who had luckily missed the dramatic moment, threw a skeptical gaze at Izuna.

"…Oh, so it's going to be one of *those* trips, is it…?"

"Well, uh…there may be some hidden characters. Just a little dash of horror to spice up the trip. But in terms of fright index, it's only a one or two and appropriate for all ages," Izuna said, though her attempt at a reassuring smile seemed a little unsure of itself. Maybe they should have expected this when the train left from Ueno Station in Ayakashi Alley, rather than the game's main hub of Kiyomihara.

Klever crossed his legs and closed his eyes. He painted a vivid picture of a master detective lost in thought, but even though Nayuta was used to seeing this, she still had to admit that he looked rather suspicious. "Bewitching" was an exotic-sounding word, but it was hard not to imagine that he was coming up with some wicked idea.

"Is something bothering you, Detective?" Nayuta asked.

"A little," said Klever, without opening his eyes. "It's all well and good to have a thousand…er, three thousand torii, but it seems a bit boring to me that this is all we'll see for the next hour until we reach the next station. Not the most exciting first leg of a journey."

"Don't you think?" Izuna said, nodding heartily. "As a matter of fact, we have something to counteract that. You should be hearing the next announcement soon." She glanced at her watch and placed a finger to the side of her mouth.

In just moments, a young man's voice came over the loudspeaker.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your conductor, Kohaku. From now until we reach our next station, we have a little game prepared for you. It's a game of hide-and-seek. We have some mischievous little tanuki and foxes who have hidden themselves away throughout the train. Group yourselves into parties of two or three before you go seeking, and the three highest-scoring teams will receive a humble prize for their trouble."

The whole group glanced around at each other in surprise. But the announcement wasn't done going over the rules.

"Furthermore, during this event, the other guests on the train

will vanish from sight, so explore all of the cabins and facilities to your heart's content without worrying that you will disturb anyone else. If you do not wish to take part in the game, please look at the nearby screen that has popped up and select 'cancel event.' If you do not select this button, you will automatically be registered for the game, where you will be assigned to a partner from your group or between solo passengers. You are able to leave the game or send messages at any time, so please enjoy it as casually as you like. The game will begin in three minutes."

Klever nodded and grinned to himself. "That makes more sense. An event where you can look all over the train without anyone else seeing you. It's a good way to become familiar with the layout and will be a good conversation piece later in the trip. A very clever idea."

"I'm very glad to hear that, Mr. Kurei. You will all be taking part, I hope?" said Izuna, who seemed positively giddy.

Again, Koyomi shot her a suspicious glance. "Sure…but it's not going to be scary, right? It's fine?"

"There is nothing startling or frightening about this particular event. It is meant to be enjoyed by everyone, including small children and the elderly. The tanuki and fox pups are very fluffy and cute. And as Mr. Kurei said, it also allows you to see the rest of the train, so I highly recommend it."

With such an enthusiastic invitation, it was hard to say no. Koyomi raised a hand and asked, "Can we choose who we want to pair up with? I'm fine with either Nayu or Mahiro, but I dunno about being with the detective, and if I have to be with Ririka, I feel like she's going to pick on me…"

"Oh, how mean. What a cruel thing to say, Koyomi! I'm obviously not going to wait for the right moment to play a terrifying trick on you. At worst, I'm just going to whisper a little ghost story or two into your ear. Is that so bad?" said Ririka. It did seem like she and Koyomi would have some problems working together.

Izuna had the grace to smile uncomfortably. "Your partner will be chosen at random from your group. You cannot choose your own. As a staff member, I can't take part in the game, so in your case, you'll be split into a pair of two and a trio."

Koyomi grumbled. "Meaning, the biggest thing I should be

concerned about is Nayu and the detective being the pair? Oh no. I can already see it! The detective turns into a beast and gives in to his carnal urges with the poor, innocent—”

“That’s not going to happen. Think of the difference in battle stats. At the very least, when we’re in *Asuka Empire*, there isn’t a single person that the detective is going to overpower with sheer strength.”

Klever’s extreme distribution of points into the luck stat served the purpose—among other things—of acting as a buffer against unfair and false charges. If some hypothetical victim were to lie and say that he subdued them with force, he could always demonstrate through his stats that it was numerically impossible for that to be true.

He gave Koyomi a look of loathing. “I would have to be an absolute idiot to do anything that foolish where it’s going to be recorded on the player log. You’d be insane to think that anything’s going to happen.”

“Exactly. If anyone’s going to be doing something like that, it’ll be Nayuta subduing and having her way with Kaisei,” Ririka joked.

Nayuta smiled back at her. “And the reason he acts this way is because you kept kicking him to the ground as a child, wasn’t it? So I’d say you bear some responsibility for that,” she said.

“…Whuh…? I’m sorry…,” Ririka said, wilting in the wake of Nayuta’s cutting retort. The detective actually looked impressed.

“You’re stronger than my sister… This is quite a discovery.”

“Oh, that’s just because Nayu is the straight-man type, while me and Ririka are the jokesters. It’s just a natural personality hierarchy,” Koyomi said. With the way she was talking about comedy types, she sounded like someone from Kansai, the birthplace of Japanese two-man comedy, but Nayuta didn’t know much about that stuff.

Soon three minutes had passed, and a quiet electronic chime sounded over the train speakers. Everyone else in the cabin turned transparent and began to vanish.

“We will now begin the game of hide-and-seek with baby tanuki and foxes. The game will last forty-five minutes, which is until we reach the next station. You will be able to travel anywhere on the train, including the driver’s compartment. Also, I, your conductor,

will be hiding somewhere. You won't get points for finding me, but you will receive a small token to memorialize your feat."

There was another tone to signal the start of the game, and the rest of the people around vanished like mist. Nayuta turned around to see, sitting at the window with his cheek resting on his fist, Klever the detective.

"I didn't expect that this would happen…but I'll admit that I feel relieved. Mahiro would've been fine, too. I just really didn't want to be in a pair with Koyomi or my sister."

Nayuta rolled her eyes. "You really have it out for your sister. I'm sure that attitude is partly why she enjoys teasing you so much."

"You're correct, of course, but this is just the way it is. She helps out at the company, of course, and I'm grateful for that. But if I demonstrate that feeling, she'll only take advantage of me. It's very difficult dealing with her," he said, rising from his seat and driving the point of his walking stick into the floor.

Meanwhile, Nayuta received a message from Koyomi.

NAYUUUUU! RIRIKA AND MAHIRO ARE WITH ME OVER HERE! YOU AND THE DETECTIVE ARE THE ONLY ONES MISSING! ARE YOU TOGETHER?! RUN FOR YOUR LIFE! GET OUT OF THERE NOW! BEFORE HE TURNS INTO HIS TRUE MONSTER-FOX SELF!

"…So what do you think I should say back to her?" Nayuta asked, showing the message to Klever. The detective sighed.

"Well, it's largely what you already told her, but just say, 'Think about the difference in our stats.'"

"I can tell how you're feeling. If I were to make a move on you now, you couldn't escape me. I bet your legs are trembling with fright right now," Nayuta said, repeating Ririka's bad joke.

Klever snorted with laughter. "I see you've learned to have fun with that, too. Even from the first time we met, I had you pegged as a girl who would say what needed to be said, but…"

Her first encounter with the detective was half a year ago. She thought back on the time they shared with Yanagi, the elderly monk she had helped guide to the detective's office on Yoiyami Street. He was no longer alive, but the strange connection she now shared with the detective still was.

Her initial impression was that he seemed sketchy, nothing more. When she heard the amount of money that Yanagi was

offering, she began to wonder if he was a scam artist. But once they had completed the quest, she found that he was actually a very sincere, well-meaning, and talented detective.

Plus, there was one more surprise: He was a close friend of her late brother.

Through a VR hot spring vacation, a search for Mahiro's father, and a period nursing Klever back to health after a sickness, she had even spent her birthday with him. They were closer than ever before at this moment.

It was this six-month evolution that Nayuta thought about as she typed a reassuring response to Koyomi.

"What did I seem like to you on our first meeting?" she asked, intending it to be an idle chitchat kind of question.

Klever considered his answer for a while. "Well, if I'm being honest, you just seemed like a well-meaning typical player at first. I thought your face was attractive, but that's often the case in games."

When creating an avatar in *Asuka Empire*, players had a choice of a number of general facial styles. You could have a face close to your own in real life, a more beautiful version of that, others that didn't look like you at all—a number of options were presented all at once to choose from, but you couldn't fine-tune the look from there.

"So a well-meaning, attractive character. Was that it?"

"If you want a more detailed analysis, I could go on forever. A warrior priestess who's equipped for close combat was a rare combination. You spoke very carefully and politely, like a young lady from a rich family. Plenty of hypotheses like that. And also… yes, there was something about you that was just a bit familiar," he added, to her surprise.

"Familiar?"

"Yes. I didn't know it at the time, but looking back at that moment, I might have seen something of Daichi's face in yours. You're not particularly alike, and you're much quieter and more reserved in comparison to how loud and boisterous he was. But your consideration for other people, your unconscious generosity of spirit… Those elements of simply being a good person at heart shined through. I never noticed you were siblings until I found out your last name, though."

Nayuta beamed at the compliments. “I was surprised, too. It was a shock to learn that you were friends with my brother.”

The reason they continued to spend time together after completing Yanagi’s request was because of their mutual concern for one another. In Klever’s case, Nayuta was the sister of his late friend, a child living alone as she went through school. Nayuta herself understood that anyone would be worried about a person in that situation.

And from Nayuta’s perspective, Klever was a young man with a suspicious look but a kind and awkward personality—a strange person, one she didn’t feel perfectly secure in relying upon.

Her brother Daichi was a meddler in other people’s affairs, and she was the same way. They had a habit of worrying more than necessary about someone who drew their interest.

Around her birthday, he was the one who was more concerned about her instead. But over the course of time, as their connection deepened, she found herself simply unable to ignore his affairs.

She closed her messages screen and turned to face the detective, all business now.

“Well, shall we be ‘it’ in this game of hide-and-seek? We’re looking for baby foxes and tanuki, so I would imagine they could be hiding in shelves and cupboards.”

“Let’s search this cabin first. I think I’ve found one already. There’s a tail peeking out from behind the sofa.”

A fluffy yellow fox tail was holding itself still, right above the floor. Nayuta giggled and walked over to it. When she peered over the edge, she found a fox that looked just like a little stuffed plushie, staring back at her. It wagged its tail excitedly.

“*Yip!*” it barked and leaped into her arms. She lifted it up so that the baby fox could nuzzle her cheek happily.

“Aww, it’s so cute. This is a very cute fox. I’m sure Koyomi is having the time of her life right now.”

Between the *keukegen*, the cats at Maneki-ya, the capybaras and wombats, and so on, for being a horror-focused event, 108 Apparitions certainly had a lot of cutesy characters to look at.

The detective was already walking back from the cabin’s kitchen with a little tanuki in his arms.

“I suppose they put some in easy-to-find spots at the start. Let’s

keep looking for more. If I'm going to continue to sell my services as a detective, I can't put up a bad score, lest it damage my reputation."

"Oooh, the tanuki is cute, too. Let's see… Do you think we're supposed to bring them with us?"

The fox pup in Nayuta's arms pointed its paw at the upstairs part of the cabin. That was where the beds were. It jumped out of her arms and ran up the stairs, then hopped onto the nearest bed.

The little tanuki climbed down from the detective's grasp, too, and waddled up the stairs after the fox. Apparently, each one they found would go and run to the beds on its own.

They didn't find any others in the cabin. "Shall we go to the next cabin, then? Or look around the train's facilities, like the dining car?" Nayuta asked.

The detective twirled his walking stick. "Personally, I'd like to see the services first. I'm assuming that the cabins all have a similar layout, so we can save them for last. The point of this event is to get you to see all of the train's features. I expect that more of the foxes and tanuki are hidden there," he said.

Nayuta shared his opinion. She found it a little bit exciting that he felt the same way. "I'd like to look for the conductor in the fox mask, too—oh, another message."

Her notification sound interrupted her, so Nayuta opened the game window again. This one was not from Koyomi, but Ririka.

I SUPPOSE YOU'RE ENJOYING A NICE LITTLE DATE WITH KAISEI NOW! I'M ROOTING FOR YOU, GIRL! OH, AND DON'T WORRY. KOYOMI'S OBSESSED WITH THE TANUKI AND FOXES. SHE'S ALREADY FOUND SIX OF THEM.

"That was fast," Nayuta remarked, skipping past the nonsense in the first half to read the rest of it.

"What was?"

"It's from Ririka. She says Koyomi's found six already… I'm guessing she's got Mahiro running around to all the cabins with her."

"Hardcore hide-and-seekers, then. They'll be worthy adversaries."

She decided to erase the word "date" from her recent memory.

"Shall we continue, then, Detective?"

"Yes. We'll go to the dining car next door first."

Despite the most efficient tactic being to split up and search

different areas, neither of them suggested it.

§

After about half of their allotted time was gone, and they had released their twenty-third catch to hurry back to the room, Nayuta got another update from Mahiro.

KOYOMI'S FOUND HER FORTY-FIFTH. SHE'S CRAZY.

"…They're already up to forty-five. Mahiro's actually calling her 'crazy,' which itself is kind of crazy."

"They just keep doubling up our score… They're seriously formidable opponents to go up against."

Nayuta and Klever felt like they were moving quickly, however. They were finding one every minute, but Koyomi's pace was simply abnormal. She was maintaining one animal every thirty seconds.

For their part, the two had gone through the very fancy dining car, then an observation lounge downstairs, complete with a rather baffling engine room, then a banquet hall and a salon room, and finally, the reservation-only kotatsu room at the very end of the train.

She read the sign outside the room and wondered, "Is it just me, or is it weird that they have a kotatsu room in the middle of summer? And it's reservation-only?"

"Never underestimate the appeal of a table with a comforter over it and a heater underneath. There are people who would hang out under a kotatsu any time of year, as long as they could handle the temperature. There's going to be demand for a kotatsu that everyone can sit around, sipping tea or playing mahjong. And when it says it's by reservation, that means it'll be the same as what we're experiencing now: You won't see or be bothered by any other guests there. In reality, everyone can come back here to use the kotatsu room at the back of the train, and unless you agree to meet up here ahead of time, you're guaranteed to find that it's empty when you arrive, I assume," explained the detective.

Nayuta reached out to open the sliding door. On the inside, it

was much more spacious than she expected, with each wall being that same magic mirror as before, granting them a very grand view. Because this was the last car of the train, you could see all of the scenery as it went by.

The kotatsu itself was next to the very last window, surrounded by a proliferation of cushions, soft rugs, pillows, and other comfortable accoutrements to lean against.

“This looks like a perfect place to take a break in. Detective, since Koyomi’s going to get first place by a landslide, shall we relax here for five minutes or so? I’m feeling a little tired.”

“True. I think it would be nice to sit here and watch the torii pass over us. Would you like a drink?”

There was a touchscreen panel in the corner of the room for ordering light refreshments and snacks.

“Do they have green tea?”

“Let’s see… Yes, they do. I’ll have that, too.”

Nayuta knelt down next to the kotatsu and sat. It was the middle of summer in the real world, so she wasn’t quite in the mood to get under the table’s blanket. Instead, she reached inside of it to pull out the baby fox that had been hiding there and hugged it like a cushion.

The detective sat across from her and crossed his legs. “Just the one?” he asked. “I would think there are more among the shelves.”

“Let’s look for them later. I just want to relax.”

The stream of torii gates continued past them. On either side of the tracks, the forest had receded, putting them out in the open. On one side was a lake. The moon and stars shined in reflection on its surface, and a massive plesiosaur swam regally across the water.

The fox clutched to her chest sniffed around and booped her cheek with its nose. Klever took a sip of his tea and laughed.

“Pretty girls and small animals make for a fetching image. If Koyomi were here, she’d want to take a picture.”

“You looked cute with that little tanuki, too, Detective. I suppose you make a good pair with animals aside from foxes, too,” she shot back and let the fox rest on her lap instead. She stroked its soft fur and decided to ask something that came to mind. “I’ve thought about having a pet like this…but I live alone,

and when you start thinking about the cost of food and everything else a pet needs, it's tough. I'd hate to leave it all alone when I'm out of the house. In that sense, it's nice that you can just casually come by and interact with animals in VR with no strings attached."

"There will be a lot of demand for that, I'm sure. But in your case, Koyomi sometimes seems like your pet to me. Especially when she's wearing the capybara suit and lounging on your lap. You look just like a pet and its owner."

"Only because Koyomi is good at spoiling herself. The truth is, ever since I first met her, Koyomi's been a lifesaver for me," she said sincerely. "Have I told you about the first time we met, in fact?"

"I've heard that you got the wrong order at the Monster Cat Teahouse. Nothing more detailed than that."

"That's right. It really started as simple as that…"

They weren't looking at each other but at the torii gates passing over the rear of the train. Their passage was regular and rhythmic, like a physical representation of the passage of time, ticking past at fixed intervals. While Nayuta thought back on the past, the train continued forward, following the tracks.

She took a deep breath and continued, "I was…in a bit of a bad state, mentally. I'd gone to my uncle's for New Year's, and while it was perfectly fine, it did feel like I was being treated with kid gloves… The reality of being without my parents and brother felt more painful than usual. That whole time, I just stifled my emotions and let the time pass alone, trying not to think about anything."

Klever listened carefully, not interrupting her story.

"Right around that time was when Koyomi reached out to me… I'm sure that it was a totally normal, mundane gesture to her. But to me, it wasn't. She didn't know my situation, but she was friendly and kind and helpful. That was nice enough, but from that point on, whenever I was feeling lonely or sad, she picked up on it and made sure to be around… Koyomi seems very willful and selfish most times, but she's very sharp and very sensitive to changes in people's moods. I can't tell you how much that meant to me back then."

His eyes narrowed. "To you, Koyomi's not just a friend you met

in a game but someone who really did something special for you. I can tell that you have a very warm friendship, but I didn't know all of that. In that case, it was rude of me to call her your pet. I apologize," he said, bowing his head.

"I actually think that Koyomi *wants* to be doted upon and treated like a pet sometimes," Nayuta said, smirking. "I've hallucinated that she had a wagging tail before. When she wears that capybara suit these days, she's literally hoping to be treated like a pet, I think. It seems like her work's been tiring lately, so if letting her lie down on my lap so I can brush her fur helps remove some of that stress, I'm happy to do it…"

Right now, however, it was not Koyomi on Nayuta's lap but a baby fox that was fast asleep. It looked supremely comfortable there.

"…Would you like to try it, too, Detective?" she asked, teasing him.

But his response was more practical than she expected. "No, I think I'd look like a nightmare with that capybara suit on…"

"I wasn't talking about that. I meant resting on my lap. I doubt it's all that great, but Koyomi waxes philosophical about its comfort and so on."

"I'll refrain, but thank you. I'd be in trouble if anyone found out, and if I succumbed to its temptation, I think I'd wallow in self-loathing."

"Well, at least you see it as a temptation. That's a relief."

"…Hmm?" he murmured, frowning.

She tried to take on a casual tone to hide her sudden rush of nerves. "Oh, it's just, if you were treating me completely like a child, you wouldn't have said that. When I stayed over at your place, nothing at all happened between us, so I got a little nervous, but knowing that you've at least thought about it makes me feel a bit better about myself."

"…Wait a second. Not so fast. I take exception to your interpretation of a mere slip of the tongue," he protested while Nayuta giggled. It seemed that he had admitted to something that he'd been keeping close to the chest.

"Well, don't panic. I'm saying I'm delighted by it. If I had offered to let you rest your head on my lap a few months ago, you would have laughed me off and said you had enough pillows

already, I bet."

"I'm sure I wouldn't have been *that* rude to you…"

"You wouldn't? And what if Koyomi offered her lap for you to rest your head upon?"

"I would look for a hospital with the best brain-scanning experts," he said immediately.



Nayuta burst into laughter and let the fox on her lap go free. “Since we’re here and talking about it, Detective, I’m going to be clear. I’m very fond of you.”

Klever froze.

She had caught him in an ambush, and she wasn’t going to let him reject her out of hand.

“That doesn’t mean I’m asking for an answer or anything in return at all. I understand who you are as a person and where you are in life, and I trust you in all regards, including how uptight and serious you are. So what I want is for you to keep treating me the same way as you have been doing.”

“B-but I… You—”

“I’m not done yet.”

“Right.”

She smiled at him, adding pressure. The detective sat upright and still, on his best behavior.

The line of torii continued past.

The rails continued right over the middle of the lake, giving them a much closer view of the plesiosaur swimming past. It looked surprisingly placid, and there was even a baby of its own riding on its back.

Nayuta watched it pass and said cheerily, “A lot has happened in the past half-year. To be honest, it feels like it’s passed in a blink. Game stuff, private stuff, friend stuff. You’ve helped through all of it, and I’ve helped you out here and there, too. I’m not saying you owe me anything, but I think we’ve developed a bond of trust. Do you trust me, Detective?”

“Well, I… Yes, I do.”

She had laid the groundwork that would keep him from saying no, between the excuse of needing a tutor, the many dinners she cooked, and the time spent nursing him back to health.

“Then that’s enough for now. I hope this relationship will continue,” she said formally, bowing her head.

At last, Klever snapped back to reality. “Wait, not so fast. You had me going along there, but that was more or less what people would call a confe…”

She shrugged it off. “I did not confess anything to you, nor did I ask for any kind of response. Oh, and…since I’m guessing you haven’t figured it out, I’ll just say this now so you don’t accuse me

of being sneaky later on. I'm going to be a college student in another six months or so. Depending on my entrance exam results, maybe I'll be working instead."

"…I'm aware."

"As long as you're firmly on top of that, I'm satisfied. Time passes quickly, doesn't it?" she said.

When he realized at last what she was implying, Klever put a hand over his eyes. The one thing he had told himself, the conviction that would never waver—his steadfast refusal to get involved with a girl in high school—would cease to matter in half a year.

"I didn't hear a word of this. I'm begging you. No one else can ever know we had this conversation…"

"Of course. I'm not trying to make your life harder, Detective."

Now that Nayuta was eighteen, she was an adult, and any legal concerns about whom she might be involved with were gone. But the challenges of social standing and Klever's own sense of morality remained.

Now that she was certain he understood, Nayuta let out a long breath. At long last, her hands started trembling.

She had considered what might happen if he rejected her advances. But she was certain that he was not immune to her, either. Some things made themselves apparent when you spent enough time together.

Now that she was feeling a bit more relaxed, she glanced toward the entrance to the room—and saw the fox-masked conductor standing there.

"Huh?" she blurted out, completely taken aback. The detective looked over, too, and sat up straight with a jolt.

"…How long have you been there?"

The conductor bowed briefly. "Please forgive me. As a matter of fact, staying in the rear car of the train for five minutes is the condition needed to reveal my appearance as a hidden character. I thought it would be rude to interrupt your conversation, but due to my programming, I cannot vanish in this situation, so I waited for the discussion to conclude."

For an AI, it was remarkably considerate. Klever, meanwhile, paled.

"Does that mean…it's all saved in your…?"

The fox-faced conductor bowed even deeper. “I am very sorry… Your suspicions are correct. My proximity activity log will be saved and examined after this playtest to observe the state of my interactions with guests.”

So while it seemed to be considerate, there were, in fact, issues with its chosen actions. If it had stopped their conversation when it appeared, both the detective and Nayuta might have been able to avoid a fatal error.

Klever the detective had said not long ago that only a colossal fool would commit such a mistake of judgment under these closely monitored circumstances, but Nayuta had done just such a thing.

The conductor pulled out a ticket from his pocket.

“This is the prize for any guests who find me: a pair of tickets to a suite room at Maneki-ya Hot Spring Resort Hotel. You may also pay the difference to upgrade to a royal suite. They’re yours.”

“That prize popping up at a moment like this feels awfully deliberate… Are you sure you’re just an AI? There’s nobody monitoring and taking control of your processes in real time?” the detective asked. The fox-faced bot said nothing but bowed and vanished like a ghost.

In its wake, Nayuta and Klever were unable to look one another in the face. They hung their heads awkwardly.

“I, um…I’m sorry, Detective. I was careless.”

“No…it’s not your fault. It’s not your fault at all…but I think we should compose ourselves before we rejoin the others. If anyone suspects anything, it’ll turn into a disaster.”

“I agree. I just don’t think I can pull off a cover-up right at this moment…”

Back at the cabin, they would see not only Koyomi but Ririka. If both she and the detective acted suspiciously, there was no telling what they would say.

Outside the train, the steady flow of torii gates began to wane. They were close to the first stop of the trip.

Thinking about the travel still ahead of them helped to cool down Nayuta’s flushed cheeks so that she could pass as her usual, calm self.

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Naturally, the winners of the hide-and-seek event, the first on the mystery train, were Koyomi, Mahiro, and Ririka. They won handily, blowing away all of the competition.

Back at the cabin, Nayuta was giving Koyomi her prize: a nice, comfy lap pillow.

“You got ninety-eight out of a hundred in total? That’s absolutely incredible…but it sounds like you didn’t find the conductor.”

“How was I supposed to get that one?! I’m not gonna spend five whole minutes in the same room when there are so many to search!” Koyomi fumed. Still, she was in a good mood after coming in first place.

“After a while, your team really leveled off. Did you give up trying to find more?” Mahiro asked, disappointed.

“We went to the rear car and then took a little break. It was so comfortable there, we overstayed, and that’s how we were able to find the hidden character. I’m fine with it, though, because you guys got first,” Nayuta said with a smile, leaving out some very meaningful context.

Even Ririka, who was usually extremely sharp, just flopped onto the sofa due to mental exhaustion. “I’m totally beat,” she groaned. “Koyomi’s got incredible stamina. She was basically sprinting throughout the forty-five minutes. We were taking breaks here and there, but…I guess it all turned out fine since we won.”

“I’m blown away, too. That was incredible, Koyomi! It was like she knew where they were hidden from the start. She just kept going from one spot to the next,” Mahiro marveled. Her eyes were sparkling even brighter than when the train left the station.

All three of them were thoroughly enjoying the trip and, for now, hadn’t seemed to notice any changes in Nayuta and the detective’s demeanor.

Except for one person who *was* aware of what happened.

“Would you like some tea, Nayuta?”

“…Yes, thank you very much…”

Izuna's smile was wide and knowing. During the game, she had been elsewhere, keeping an eye on the Kohaku AI's activities.

After the game was over and everyone returned to their cabins, she waited until Koyomi and the others weren't in earshot to whisper excitedly, "Thanks to you, we've already got some very good data that this can be effectively marketed to marriage hunters and people looking to schedule potential arranged marriage meetings!"

That enthusiasm was much nicer than having her silently maintain her discretion, but it was probably only a matter of time before Torao or Tochimori heard about it.

…I've really messed things up for him, Nayuta thought regretfully and cast an eye toward Klever. The detective was sitting at the window, gazing outside. She couldn't tell what he was thinking, but his handsome features were the same as ever.

The speakers came to life with another announcement.

"After lunch is served, the train will pass through the sea of auroras and proceed to outer space using its mass driver system. Liftoff will take place at two o'clock, and we are scheduled to land at Lunar Station at about four o'clock. There will be some strain during liftoff, so you will need to be strapped into your seats. There will be another announcement to prepare you for this closer to launch. Next up, Tsukuyomi Station. Tsukuyomi Station…"

After that bafflingly unexpected announcement, all eyes turned to Izuna.

The young designer of the luxury sleeper train gave them her most cheerful, customer-facing smile.

"Do you understand why the exterior is so smooth and round now? It's better for leaving the atmosphere. I hope you enjoy the world's first deluxe sleeper train journey through outer space in VR. ♪ "

And with the smuggest possible expression, she left them all utterly speechless.

After an entire day of exotic and downright sketchy warp travel through space to various planets, Koyomi emerged as the

VIP of the trip for having ranked very highly in every single minigame and event.

Aerial Fortress: Tortoiseshell

In English, there are two words for this animal, broadly speaking: turtle and tortoise.

There are differences in nomenclature depending on the country, but in America, at least, the word turtle refers to all turtles, or those that live in water, while a tortoise can only be a land turtle.

And because turtle can mean any kind of turtle, they use the term "sea turtle" to distinguish those that live in the ocean.

So does that mean that the aerial fortress Tortoiseshell was inspired by the infamous Rath research float in Tokyo Bay known as the *Ocean Turtle*? No.

Aside from referring to the shell of a turtle, there is another very important meaning to the term "tortoiseshell": a tortoiseshell cat, whose coat is two or three colors.

The aerial fortress Tortoiseshell is a massive, flying secret base modeled after a tortoiseshell cat, which, in an emergency, can transform into the giant cat robot called Nekoronder without rearranging itself.

It measures 243 yards long (without its tail) and weighs 222,000 tons. It's equipped with an all-reflecting Catearium alloy tri-color armor; a Meowitron reactor that supplies unlimited power; a perfectly accurate Hairball Cannon; a Catnip Blade it swings around on unsteady feet; a Cat-Toy Whip that it can't help but play with on its own; a shock-absorbing Beans Hammer; and other varied (and useless) weapons that it uses to protect the Earth from the clutches of the evil Doggy-Dog Dawg organization. There's more to the backstory beyond just that, but it gets really nerdy from here, so we'll leave it at that.

This space was crafted by Vice President Hachidori. It was a childhood dream of his.

Monster Cat Temple: Katsuobushi Hall

This space is a fictional temple constructed by Kuroneko's designer, Senjuya, as an exercise in using the Mental Output System to craft a shrine.

The system converts the user's mental images into data, which makes it very good for creating illustrations and 3D models. He did reuse some prefabricated materials, but even still, the entire process took no more than a single day.

It's labeled a temple, but because it's a temple to monster cats, the main construction material is cardboard. Virtually all of the walls are scratching cardboard, there are catwalks everywhere, and the "wooden fish" temple block is shaped like an actual fish.

The Katsuobushi Hall, which stands in a corner of the temple grounds, is said to be built of the very finest blocks of *katsuobushi*–fermented and dried skipjack tuna–so the smell is heavenly. Even the bathtub for visitors to use is made of *katsuobushi*, so simply filling it with hot water makes you a savory dashi soup.

Visitors first cleanse their bodies in the bath, which flavors them nicely, before the attendant cat monks welcome them into the temple. However, the process has a reputation for being a bit gross because the dashi is sticky when dried.

After that, you'll experience a number of ascetic trials, such as applying oil, sprinkling fish powder, and lighting up a charcoal fire, at which point most attentive visitors catch on and wisely decide to log off.

The head priest, Sardine Tin, is roughly seven years old. He's a friendly American Shorthair who enjoys raising sparrows. His favorite saying is, "Survival of the fittest," and his favorite story is "Restaurant of Many Orders."

Depending on the time of day, you might get the chance to hear the cat monks recite the Heart Meowtra. To humans, it just sounds like a whole lot of meowing, but actually, they're talking about how grateful they are for the day's meal. Also, it's hard to know if "Meowtra" is supposed to be a pun on *sutra* or *mantra* because even the cats don't know.

Final Chapter

Connecting Shadows

The Monster Cat Teahouse in Ayakashi Alley was a strange little sweets shop, run entirely by cats.

It was known for occasionally getting a customer's order wrong, but thanks to the tireless observation of a group of players with way too much time on their hands, it was revealed that there was a certain pattern to the madness.

Age and gender did not matter, but there was a slightly higher chance of a mistake occurring if the player ordering was alone. If the player had a high luck stat, it was more likely that the order itself would be misinterpreted and lead to an experimental item that wasn't on the menu.

The *nekomata* with forked tails were the full-time employees at the teahouse, and the regular cats were the part-timers. It was the full-timers who were more likely to make a mistake, leading to a theory that they were doing it on purpose.

They had a tendency to serve the heavier items to the customers sitting closer and the lighter items to those further away, giving rise to the suspicion that they just didn't feel like carrying the heavier stuff around the table.

After all, these were cats. It was unthinkable that humans—lesser beings—could complain to them. In the Monster Cat Teahouse, cats were the law, cats were the code of ethics, and cats were the symbol of power.

Cats are supreme.

All other animals, including humans, are on a lower level.

The noble and high-minded cat would never lose in any

category to the capybara, which was merely an overgrown rat.

In early August, the Monster Cat Teahouse found itself in a pitched competition for customers with the café Nezumi, which had popped up next door.

The Monster Cat Teahouse was a sweets shop that served traditional delicacies, but Nezumi had a wide variety of black teas plus a selection of more Western-style bakery treats, like rusks and cookies.

The capybara employees offered an unhurried, slow-motion kind of customer service that captured the hearts of modern consumers used to rushing around, and in no time at all, it had become the hot place to visit in Ayakashi Alley. But the Monster Cat Teahouse still had pride as a venerable standard. It had only been open for eight months at this point, but it was still older than the newcomers.

Or so it said in that gourmet report in the block print paper...but it seems like none of the employees here actually care...?

In a corner of the Monster Cat Teahouse, Nayuta had a black cat on her lap as she savored a matcha parfait.

It wasn't the sort of thing she wanted in the middle of summer, but in the winter, such a lap warmer would be a welcome treat. The cat's shining black fur was lustrous and smooth and felt comforting to Nayuta, who wasn't particularly obsessed with cats.

She'd gone to the guinea café next door, too, but about the only difference, aside from the menu, was the turban-wearing capybara behind the counter who served her tea. The other capybaras working there were just lying around on the ground.

The "pitched competition" the article mentioned might exist in the form of sales numbers, but the workers themselves did not suggest there was any tension in the slightest.

At Nezumi, incidentally, they didn't get orders wrong, but if you weren't careful, nearby capybaras might start nibbling on your baked treats. It wasn't hard to stop them because they were so slow, but if you were too absorbed in your conversation, the plate could be empty before you knew it.

Nayuta caressed the back of the black cat and checked on the latest game news with her smartphone. There was a headline

that caught her interest.

ENORMOUS OVER-SEVEN-HUNDRED-FOOT-TALL CAT-BUDDHA STATUE APPEARS ON GENROKU CAPYBARA SCROLL MAP... NEARLY TWICE THE HEIGHT OF THE USHIKU DAIBUTSU BUDDHA STATUE... INTERVIEW WITH ST. RATLOV, HEAD PRIEST OF THE NAPPERS IN THE CAPYBARA GUILD... VIEWS IT AS A NASTY PRANK BY THE CAT-GOD WORSHIPPERS... INTENDS TO CONTRACT THE SHRINE BUILDER'S UNION TO SEE IF THEY CAN AT LEAST RENOVATE THE EXTERIOR TO LOOK LIKE A CAPYBARA INSTEAD...

She gave the article a second glance, then sat in silence, processing. It was hard to know what was what in this competition, but she felt qualified to say one thing: Both sides were up to shenanigans.

And if it wasn't her imagination, the photograph of St. Ratlov, the head priest of the Nappers in the Capybara Guild, giving a peace sign with a big smile was suspiciously similar to the young man Senjuya she'd met not too long ago. She didn't want to think too hard about this, however, and decided that it was just a coincidence.

Between cats serving customers, lazy rodents, and busy high school girls, they all do their best to get away from tedious and annoying tasks. Whether that ends up benefiting them in the end or costing them much more than just dealing with the trouble in the first place is up in the air, but overall, they'd be better off valuing their own time.

There is a lyric from a famous folk song of the very early twentieth century that says, "Life is brief, young maiden. Fall in love."

Nayuta had gone to an all-girls school, so she felt that love was something she wouldn't have much experience with for a while. The situation had changed quite a bit in the last six months.

After she'd emptied out the matcha parfait glass, she received a message from Koyomi.

SORRY, NAYU! I'LL BE ABOUT THIRTY MINUTES LATE! I FOUND A LOST OLD LADY ON THE WAY HOME, AND I'M HELPING HER FIND HER WAY. GO AHEAD AND READ A BOOK OR SOMETHING AT THE DETECTIVE'S PLACE!

Nayuta chuckled to herself and sent back an affirmative

response. As usual, Koyomi never hesitated to help someone in need. It was Koyomi who had spoken to the elderly Yanagi outside the Monster Cat Teahouse when he was in need of help. That was the reason why Nayuta and Klever knew each other today.

In fact, it was also Koyomi who had first called out to Nayuta, right after the opening of this very Monster Cat Teahouse. They became online friends, and in the eight months since, Nayuta had learned to admire her for her personality and way of life. She couldn't be like Koyomi, of course, but she wanted to learn from the example of her vitality, compassion, and energy.

Nayuta left the Monster Cat Teahouse and headed for the Three-Leaf Detective Agency on Yoiyami Street. On the way, she received another message from outside of the game.

ALL DONE WORKING FOR THE DAY! I'M GOING TO HAVE DINNER WITH MR. NARAFUSHI NOW. I'LL GET TO BED EARLY TO PREPARE FOR TOMORROW.

Mahiro was on location for a TV show shoot at a hot spring today, so she had gone up to the north side of Honshu with her manager, Narafushi. It was just a side role for a single episode, but she did have some lines and a character name. Summer vacation was a valuable period where she could arrange a work schedule without worrying about school, so it was prime time for a child actor like herself.

Nayuta sent her a message of encouragement, then climbed up the dark steps to the detective's office on the second floor.

Perhaps in preparation for the pilgrimage to the Cat-Buddha statue scheduled to start tomorrow, the statue in the entrance hall was cradling an entire bottle of sake called Cat Festival, sleeping soundly.

In order to avoid confusion, the detective's door had been locked for a few days to pilgrims, but Nayuta, Koyomi, and Mahiro received temporary keys that would get them past the lock. At this time of day, the detective was absent, performing his tour guide duties.

Knowing that no one was inside, she felt obliged to knock anyway.

Huh…?

She opened the door and stepped inside, then paused.

It wasn't the usual detective's office.

There was a beautiful mountain stream right before her eyes.

The trickle of flowing water cooled the air. The leaves and branches sparkled in the sun and swayed in the wind. Someone was dangling a fishing line into the stream from the dappled rocks beneath the trees.

She took a few steps forward and called out quietly, "Any bites…?"

"Not a one. Maybe I set the probabilities too low…"

The fisherman was around forty years old, wearing a gentle expression and a fishing vest.

Nayuta sat down on a nearby rock. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Nayuta. You must be…Mr. Hachidori?"

"Yes. It's nice to meet you, too. You don't seem surprised to see me."

He pulled back the hook, attached a new piece of bait, and flicked the rod toward the water again.

She replied, "I had a feeling this might be coming soon. I was looking forward to it."

"I'm honored. I've been hoping to meet you, too, so I performed a bit of manipulation on the security key I passed to Kurei. It was designed to teleport you to me if you tried to open the office door alone. If you're busy, you can get right back through that door behind you."

"No, I'm fine," Nayuta insisted. "I was waiting to meet up with Koyomi, but she's going to be late."

Hachidori nodded. He was still facing the water. "In that case, I might as well introduce myself. I'm Hachidori, the vice president of Kuroneko. I understand that you've been helping out the company president quite a bit. Thank you for that."

She chuckled. "I've been hearing that from everyone in the company, but I'm the one who's being helped. Also…you've been helping take care of the detective, too, haven't you?"

He stared into the river and stroked his chin. "Hmm… I'm not so sure. In monetary terms, yes, I've been a big supporter of his. I've invested more than anyone else in the company, and between the VR offices and Mental Output System, I've provided

tech that should be worth money someday. But…that's all I can do, really."

He yawned easily and wiggled the fishing rod a little.

"I leave all of the aesthetic design and visuals up to Senjuya, and I'm hopeless at anything involving laws, patents, and sales without Oogaki. Kurei handles all the talking, the business decisions, the commonsense stuff, and the personnel decisions, and Ririka's got me beat when it comes to charm and quick thinking. I'm also no good at fishing."

"But given that you're a genius and rich, I'd say you've got plenty of blessings already," Nayuta noted.

"Oh, I'm not complaining. I'm just saying that I can't do anything on my own, so it's everyone else that's helping me along. It does help quite a lot to have money, though. As long as you have money, you can solve just about any problem you encounter. Say, for example…erasing evidence of embarrassing personal history from middle school?"

"I doubt that's possible," Nayuta replied at once. He heaved a theatrical sigh.

"Ah…I see…So our tech still can't do anything about that yet… What about traveling into the past?"

"Not happening."

"Bringing back the dead to life—"

"Impossible."

He chuckled softly. "Well…as you can see, there are actually quite a few problems that even money cannot solve. No rich man can buy an endless lifespan. It's always better to have it, but just having it doesn't mean you'll get what you really want."

It felt like he'd cleverly shifted the point of the conversation. "That's not a problem with money specifically but that our desires surpass the limitations of human power. We're wishing for things we can't have," she said.

"Correct. But in my case, it's time I want more than money, freedom more than time, and peace more than freedom. In the end, the time I spend sleeping is the time when I'm happiest. My body in real life doesn't work so well, so I'm limited in how I can spend my money. Oh well."

Nayuta had a sudden realization. *What area has VR ultimately brought the greatest blessings to?*

She'd thought that she learned the answer during the story of Yanagi and his grandson, Kiyofumi, but she was taken aback to realize it was coming back around here.

Hachidori turned back with a smile and put a finger to his lips. "Only Kurei knows about it. Don't tell the other employees, all right? Things get very uncomfortable when your colleagues are all feeling awkward and sympathetic."

"…Why did you tell me, then?"

"Maybe because if I didn't, you would figure it out in the near future anyway," he said, shrugging. "After the Ghost Orchestra story, you experienced the answer to who needs full-dive tech the most. Sooner or later, someone was going to figure me out, and I didn't need that logic being unveiled at some point in front of one of the other employees. But if I told you first, I thought I could trust you to hold your silence and not let my secret slip, like Senjuya would."

He looked over his shoulder and closed one eye. It wasn't a wink but protection against the glare of the sun, but Nayuta found it rather playful anyway.

"Plus, you like Kurei, don't you? You two are going to be together for a long time, so I felt it was appropriate to make the move to introduce myself at last."

Rather than blushing, however, Nayuta was simply confused. Aside from Klever himself, only a small selection of people like Ririka and Izuna were aware of her affection for him.

"You seem to know quite a lot about me, given that we've never met."

"It's all from Ririka. Also…for security purposes, I've set up all of the employees' home connections through the company's proxy server. When you and Kurei are connecting from the same IP address late at night, it tells me something."

Even when she thought she was being sneaky, there was always a thread left unraveled. Nayuta slapped a hand to her forehead.

"Yes, I see. The detective is much more careless than I realized…"

"Oh, I think he was aware. He and I are the only ones who check the security logs, so he must have decided that it was all right if I found out. If he really were trying to hide your tracks, he

would have forbidden you from using your AmuSphere while you were staying over," Hachidori said, laughing to himself. He swung the rod to shift the placement of his lure. "So, Nayuta, is there anything you wish to ask me?"

"What sort of a connection do you have to the detective?"

When she asked Senjuya, he said he didn't know. She expected that he would shrug off the question, too, but Hachidori immediately opened up.

"I met Kurei when he was still in high school. We were members of a guild in an online game, one of the old kind, before VR took over. He was very knowledgeable and sharp for a teenager. We got along well, and I decided to ask his opinion on an app I'd been developing for fun. Using his feedback, I ended up releasing several apps…and they sold like wildfire. I sold the rights to a major company and wound up with my bank account overflowing."

He stuck out his tongue in a gesture that said, *Tee-hee, go figure*.

"That's how we know each other. I used that money to make more with investments and stocks while Kurei went to college, then joined the police force…until he got stuck in *SAO*. I started tinkering around with VR in earnest, hoping I could figure out a way to help him, but there was nothing I could do on my own. After he came out of the game, he quit the force and started a business, so I decided to offer my support."

Hachidori sighed. "Back then…he was hard to leave to his own devices. The way he spoke and acted was calm, but the look in his eyes was ferocious and driven. So watching him now, trying to figure out how to deal with a teenage girl, is a delightful and welcome surprise. All of us are very grateful to you for coming into his life."

Between Ririka, Senjuya, and Oogaki, everyone had been very supportive of her from the moment she met them. Ordinarily, a girl in high school hanging around a company president would be a cause for major concern, but it seemed that they all interpreted the situation as Nayuta succeeding at something they had all tried but failed to do.

"Yes, they did thank me for that, more or less. I can tell that everyone else really loves him."

Hachidori cackled. “I mean, isn’t he just the cutest thing? I can see why Ririka dotes on him the way she does. He feels like a little brother or nephew to me.”

Nayuta burst into laughter. She thought that she and Ririka were the only people who would ever refer to Klever as “cute,” but here was a kindred spirit.

“Yes, I agree. He is cute. He’s older and reliable, it’s true…but there’s a certain charm he has. You can’t help but worry about him. Also…there are times when he just looks agonized, and I just wish I could help him.”

“I completely agree,” Hachidori said. “This isn’t a story I would prefer to bring up to you, but…he lives with the regret of having let his friend die. I don’t know if he quit the police force so that he could start his company or because he felt that he no longer had the right to be an officer. All I can say is that, even now, he can’t forgive himself. There’s only one person I can think of who can give him that forgiveness.”

“And it’s…me?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No, not you, either. It’s the late Daichi Kushiinada.”

She understood his point now.

Hachidori continued, “Of course, there’s no way to hear words of forgiveness from those who have passed. But you can carry on their wishes from the grave. Maybe it’s just an illusion you trick yourself into believing, but it’s the illusion that’s closest to the actual answer. I think that Daichi placed your concerns in Kurei’s hands from the afterlife. Not in the sense of being a wife or partner or anything like that. I think he would have asked Kurei to watch over you and make sure you don’t go wrong before you reach adulthood or ensure that you lead a life that makes you happy. That’s why he won’t make a move on you—because his promise to his friend precedes it unless it comes from you.”

This happened to match the way Nayuta saw the situation. That was why she made her intentions to him so clear.

“It’s unfair of me, isn’t it? In a sense, I might as well be using my brother as a shield and leading the detective on. I’ve been almost shocked by the things I’ve done recently.”

Hachidori laughed until his shoulders shook. “You’re a very clever girl. But I wouldn’t say you’re ‘unfair.’ You just happened to

be drawn to him and felt that you shared certain things in common, and you've tried to place yourself closer to him for his own sake. You've realized that it's just about the only thing that can possibly save him. Am I wrong?"

"Yes, you are," she said promptly. It was too favorable of an interpretation. "It's pure selfishness that has me at the detective's side. To be honest, though, I *have* thought about what you just mentioned before. But the other day, during the playtest of School (Temporary Title), when a man named Mr. Hishikawa mentioned bringing a potential arranged marriage partner to meet with him, I realized something: I don't want anyone else to have him."

She exhaled, reflecting on her own shallowness.

"…I'm just latching onto his guilt to make myself feel better. And I plan to continue taking advantage of that. That's why I say that I'm unfair."

Hachidori snorted and turned back toward her. "I think it was the right idea to talk to you. Nayuta, you might be very clever, but you're too young to understand something very important. Our company president is not such a careless idiot that he would let someone he doesn't like sleep over at his house, even if she *is* the kin of his best friend. Don't ever get that wrong."

He closed one eye, staring at her. The breath caught in her throat; she felt like he was seeing right through her.

"He just happens to be rather clumsy in certain ways. But I can tell you that he absolutely likes you, too. He probably can't admit it because he's afraid of how that might affect his social standing, but it's only a matter of time. I think that Kurei needs you. Making you happy helps to lighten the load that he bears. I know that this really isn't my place to say, but…I hope that you'll be there for him in the long run."

Hachidori set down his rod and bowed deeply to her.

After a long silence, Nayuta nodded back.

"If there's anything I can do, I plan to do it. But…please tell me one thing. It doesn't make sense to me that you could understand so much about me, just from our IP addresses happening to match when logging in. Maybe you heard some things from Ririka…but you don't seem to be such a naïve person that you would take all of her words at face value. So I'll ask you again: How did you know so much about me before we'd ever met?"

She couldn't help but want to know. She couldn't escape the feeling that she was missing something hugely important.

Hachidori cast his line into the river again and very clearly avoided looking her in the face.

"…Ah. Um. Yes, well…I'm a genius, right?" he said, though his voice rose nervously. Nayuta continued to stare at his back. The twitching of his fishing line told her all she needed to know about his nerves.

After enough uncomfortable time had passed, Hachidori admitted his guilt.

"…I'm sorry. No, really, I am. It wasn't on purpose…but…do you remember when you were with Mr. Tochimori and tried our Mental Output System…?"

"Yes, I do."

She still hadn't forgotten the shock of that experience. It had been an encounter with a truly futuristic technology.

Guiltily, he admitted, "There's a flaw in it, actually… It logs a huge amount of data that doesn't show up on screen. Think of it like flickers in your thoughts… Normally, they don't get saved, but this time, the company president asked me to 'handle it' because it was 'vulnerable information.' So I saved the entire log in order to analyze it and fine-tune the process to be more secure, and… yeah."

Nayuta froze. He was beating around the bush, but she could tell what he was insinuating.

In the machine, Nayuta had drawn a picture of the dancing cats from the Monster Cat Teahouse. But there were a number of other images that she thought of but did not commit to virtual canvas. She hadn't even *wanted* to draw them, but she had heard about Klever being sick just before the experience, and so he was already on her mind.

"…You saw that?"

"I never showed it to Kurei. You have my word."

"Of course you didn't."

She desperately tried to hide her nerves. It felt silly, now that she had already told Klever how she felt, but this was clearly a step beyond that.

Intimidated by her quiet rage, Hachidori tried to explain. His voice was tremulous. "S-so as a means of making it up to you, I

told myself that I would give you answers to anything you wanted today…a-and I took responsibility for deleting that data. It doesn't exist anywhere anymore. B-but…it wasn't worth getting *that* angry about, was it? If anything, it seemed like a very heartwarming future. A reassuring image, given the current birth rates and all… P-plus, the kids were cute, you looked like the ideal mother, and I got to see Kurei as a fath—"

"And all that remains is to knock those memories right out of your head? So be it," Nayuta said, clenching her fists.

She was certain she could land a critical hit on him by choice right now, regardless of agility or luck. Even in a VR office without character stats, she should be able to inflict the necessary damage.

"W-well, I should be going!"

Sensing danger, Hachidori picked up his fishing rod and promptly leaped into the river. It sent up a large splash, and within seconds, the flow had taken him out of sight.

Nayuta didn't even see him go, however. She had covered her beet-red face with her hands and trembled with shame for a good minute.



She knew that the progress of technology came at a certain cost. But she had never expected she would feel that cost so keenly.

A while later, Nayuta got another message.

HEY, NAYU? IT'S KOYOMI. I'M AT THE AGENCY NOW, WHERE ARE YOU? DID YOU GO TO A SHOP SOMEWHERE INSTEAD? SHALL I GO FIND YOU?

With great effort, Nayuta got her breathing under control and let the blood drain from her cheeks. When she looked behind her, the doorway to the Three-Leaf Detective Agency was still there. She would have to knock Hachidori's memories out at a later date. For now, meeting up with Koyomi was her priority.

First, she opened the door and returned to the entrance hall with the Cat-Buddha statue.

The statue had its ears folded down, had covered its eyes with its paws, and was huddled against the wall, its back to Nayuta. It was a desperate attempt to convey the message, *I didn't hear anything*, and it left her both bemused and coming down with a headache.

Right after she passed through, the actual door to the office opened, and Koyomi popped her head out.

"Oh, there you are! What's up, Nayu? There's a huge crease between your eyebrows! Are you angry I was late…?"

"No…it's not that. I'm sorry. I was just feeling annoyed by the Cat-Buddha statue," Nayuta said, thinking quickly. She quickly changed the topic. "Did you manage to lead that lost old lady to her destination?"

"Yeah! Like, this huge black car came up, and a bunch of people dressed in black came out and were like, 'Miss Chairwoman, you're all right,' and then I got a business card!"

"I'm very curious to hear more about that, Koyomi, but I have to ask… Do you have some kind of special power?"

It seemed like Koyomi's very existence was a point around which other people met.

Meanwhile, leather shoes clicked up the stairs coming from Yoiyami Street. The fox-faced detective, wearing his inverness cape and deerstalker cap in the heat of summer, saw the two of

them outside the entrance to his office and immediately looked suspicious. He had just finished his tour guide stint for the day.

“What’s going on here? Can’t you get into the office?”

Nayuta shook her head. A smile came naturally to her face, but she wasn’t aware of it. Just seeing Klever’s face shook the memory of Hachidori clean out of her mind.

“Good evening, Detective. I just ran into Koyomi a second ago. We were about to go for our seventh playthrough of School (Temporary Title)… Would you care to join us?”

“Uh…actually, I…”

Koyomi’s eyes went wide with shock. “What?! Detective, are you under the impression that you have the right of refusal?”

“……Let’s go.”

They had gained a number of good and bad endings and were nearly to the true ending. In terms of getting good, rare items, Klever’s presence and luck were crucial. They didn’t really need him to do any of the fighting. Just his presence alone was meaningful.

They walked toward the trolley station, where the quest started. Koyomi clung to Nayuta’s arm. “Yesterday was pretty wild, huh? I thought the sailor suits and blazer jackets were the only uniforms you could get, but then I got to see you in some gym shorts… The devs do good work here.”

“…They’ve been in crunch for so long I think they must be starting to lose their grip on sanity. I think I’ll file a complaint to the team,” Klever said, squeezing the corners of his eyes.

But Nayuta wasn’t bothered. “They were easy to move in, so I didn’t mind it. The outfit was still much better than a swimsuit. And those used to be common, didn’t they?”

“…There are times when I can’t tell if you’re being serious or just have a screw or two loose,” sighed Klever. She couldn’t admit to him that she was starting to find it fun to see him get rattled.

They passed a faceless ghost in a *yukata*, and Koyomi suddenly squealed, “Oh! Isn’t this weekend the summer festival in Ayakashi Alley?! They’ll have a fireworks show and a Bon dance and a fair and a portable cat shrine and some cat dances… There’s all sorts of stuff happening. Do you think Mahiro will make it?”

Nayuta nodded. She’d also invited Ririka and Yanagi’s wife.

“Her shoot lasts until tomorrow, and she’ll be back the day after, so I think she’ll be free. You don’t have anything on the schedule, I hope, Detective?”

He smiled thinly and said, “Yes, I put that day down as a vacation, so I’ll have time to see the sights.”

As soon as the event was announced, she made sure to say, “I want to go see the festival with you.” He had made sure that this humble request was granted.

The trio made their way down Yoiyami Street, surrounded by a chaotic throng of both people and *yokai*.

The soft light of the paper lanterns from the street stalls cast a glow, and the wind chimes sang the sound of summer.

When her shadow secretly overlapped with Klever’s, she quietly reached out and took his hand.

The End

Afterword

This book, the third volume of *Clover's Regret*, once again contains stories from the *Sword Art Online Character Book*, a spin-off publication of *Dengeki Bunko Magazine*.

Specifically, the first chapter, "The Kuro-Hozuki Archer Princess," and the fourth, "Otherworldly Rails," came from this source, while the second and third chapters between them and the final epilogue chapter were written fresh for this book.

In terms of timeline, the first volume happened in March and April (the end of *Mother's Rosary*), the second volume covers April through June, and the third volume is June through August (around the time of *Alicization*). Keen-eyed readers may have already noticed that this means, at the time I write this afterword, we are very close to the timeline in the main *SAO* story.

Though I didn't point it out in the book, at the same time the detective is trembling in fear of Japan's laws protecting minors during the school quest, Kirito is neck-deep in danger with the *Ocean Turtle*.

I'm sure that if you follow Reki Kawahara's original series, you're already aware of what's going on, but if you're an anime viewer, the third season of the *SAO* series that covers the *Alicization* arc is about to begin! Look forward to more details.

Now, after two years of work, this is where the *Clover's Regret* story comes to an end.

Like Sigsawa-sensei's work on *GGO*, I found it to be quite an intriguing and fun experience to take on the world of the mega-hit *SAO* franchise and do whatever I want with it. Thanks to your support, I got to reach the end of the story I wanted to tell.

Despite their busy schedules, I certainly have to thank Kawahara-sensei for supervising, Ginta for the wonderful

artwork, the editor Miki for the valuable advice throughout, as well as all you readers, who made this possible, for your warm support, of course.

…Looking back on it now, there are parts in Volume 3 that I think, “I can’t believe they let me do that!” (Like the various café descriptions, the cat avatars, the luxury sleeper train…) But I have to attribute all of that license to the generous consent of both Kawahara-sensei and all of you wonderful readers.

Perhaps I’ll get the chance to write some more short stories for some project or another. If that happens, I hope that you’ll remember this fondly and tune in for more.

And now, I pray that we will meet again, somewhere and somewhen…

Soitiro Watase—Early Summer 2018

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