

Kaeru Ryouseirui

Illustration by Natsuki Amashiro

2

The BS Situation of Tougetsu Umidori


2
The
BS
Situation of Tougetsu
Umidori


Bullshit-chan


“Yeah, that’s not the problem.”
Even as she spoke, Umidori reached out, unconsciously toying with a lock of the girl’s hair.


Miser Clown
Kirara Seiryoin
Hurt
Ryoko Kudo

Prologue: Burial

1 A Shocking Reunion

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Umidori
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New York

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Kaeru Ryouseirui

Illustration by Natsuki Amashiro

Translation by Andrew Cunningham

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Afterword
Yen Newsletter

Prologue: Burial

Dig, dig, dig, dig.

It was the middle of the night, and Tougetsu Umidori was digging a hole.

"*Hahh*, *hahh*, *hahh*……"

Her breath sputtered. Her shoulders heaved. A bead of sweat ran down her brow, and she wiped it with the towel draped around her neck.

It was 4 AM, closer to early morning than midnight. She stood alone beneath a pitch-black sky.

"*Hahh*, *hahh*, *hahh*, *hahh*……"

Wearing a plain T-shirt and shorts, Umidori frantically stabbed the jagged tip of her shovel into the ground at her feet. *Scrunch, scrunch*—the sound of soil grinding. Each time she swung the shovel, the pile of dirt beside her grew.

—The hole open at her feet was now knee-deep. Quite a large pit.

"……Okay, that's gotta be deep enough," Umidori muttered, wiping her sweat again.

She put the shovel down……and picked up a small, overstuffed plastic bag.

"N-no one's looking, right?" she muttered, anxiously scanning her surroundings. Then she took a deep breath and turned the bag upside down.

—There was a *whump*. The contents of the bag fell into the hole.

A most bizarre object.

The surface area was exactly the size of a human head. However, this was not a single object, but a cluster formed of several smaller objects all bundled together.

"N-Namu Amida Butsu! Namu Amida Butsu!"

Umidori offered a Buddhist prayer to the mystery cluster, then picked up the shovel and tackled the pile of dirt next to her.

Once again, the *scrunch* of grinding soil filled the air as Umidori tossed the earth back into the hole, scoop after scoop. She kept this up until the thing in the hole was thoroughly hidden and the hole itself was completely filled in.

Several minutes of hard work later, she stepped onto the loose soil, tromping it down with every bit of strength in her (slightly pudgy) legs. She was 5′7″, XX pounds—but no matter how hard she stomped, she wasn't sinking in. She'd filled that hole in right; it was safe for an ordinary human to walk across.

"Whew. That takes care of that!"

Satisfied, she dropped the shovel.

"I dunno if this is much of a funeral service, but do rest in peace!" she added. She knelt, looking solemn and putting her hands together. "Thank you for everything you did. This is goodbye—but I'll never forget you."

An older woman jogging by saw her muttering away and looked alarmed.

They were hardly anywhere remote.

More like, they were right in the middle of a residential area.

Specifically, the vacant lot behind Umidori's apartment building.

The sun wasn't up yet, so a high-school girl kneeling and putting her hands together would attract attention. If this lady had jogged past a little earlier and had seen Umidori digging the hole, she might well have called the police, or at least had a lot of questions for her.

Still, even if that had happened, the lady would not have been able to identify the thing Umidori was burying. No one could. The darkness made no difference there. An ordinary person living an ordinary life would never come across what she'd hidden—the ruined remains of a bunch of pencils deep-fried in vegetable oil.

"Goodbye to the life I've led."

Blissfully unaware there was a witness to her actions, Umidori prayed fervently.

An odd sight indeed—but this was her way of finding closure on recent events.

It was May 3.
The middle of Golden Week, in the wee hours of the morning.

1
A Shocking Reunion

“Come on in! Do you know how long you’ll be staying?”

A cheery girl’s voice echoed through the brightly lit reception booth.

She worked at a mid-sized internet café that was about a five-minute walk from the nearest train station. The place had decent facilities and seat count and was right in the middle of a shopping district, so it got solid foot traffic and did pretty well. It was Golden Week, so things were far worse than busy—the shop was even more murderously crowded than usual.

There was a line at the counter of well over a dozen people waiting for reception to process them. Every last one looked annoyed as all get-out, tapping their feet as they waited for their number to be called.

“Okay, one user for two hours. What booth would you like?”

The girl working the counter didn’t bat an eye at the length of the line.

“If you don’t plan to use a computer, we recommend our manga area!” “Extension fees are applied automatically in thirty-minute intervals, so do mind the time.” “Use of the drink counter is on the house!” “Oh, a phone charger? Absolutely, let me just grab one for you.”

She was all smiles and super friendly, politely working with each customer in turn. Her service wasn’t necessarily the snappiest, but she brought a warmth to her duties that seemed to drain the customers’ frustrations away. One after another, they were led into the shop’s interior.

“Whew, what a rush!” she sighed, having finally crunched the entire line.

She was sixteen, with black hair that would reach her hips if she let it down—but it was currently in a ponytail. She was taller than your average girl, with a great figure. The name tag on her uniform read UMIDORI, which wasn't a name you saw every day.

"Still, busier times really make me feel like I'm earning my keep," she muttered, dabbing her forehead with a handkerchief.

Tougetsu Umidori smiled from the heart, as if she didn't have a negative bone in her body.



"Good night!" she called, opening the changing room door and stepping inside.

She quickly closed the door behind her and headed toward her locker, already unbuttoning her uniform. She'd worked a full eight-hour shift—not unusual—and was showing signs of fatigue. The faster she could get changed and go home, the better.

"Yeah, same to you." The answer came from a languid female colleague, already half-changed.

—Umidori merely bobbed her head once. Without another word, she opened her locker, undid her ponytail, and stripped off her uniform blouse and slacks.

Meanwhile, her coworker took no offense at Umidori's attitude. She finished changing in silence (into her uniform—her shift was just starting). The only sound in the room was the swishing of their garments' cloth, and there were no signs of either attempting even a basic level of small talk.

Which was not an indication that these two had anything against each other. It wasn't that they *weren't* talking—they weren't *allowed* to.

NO TALKING! THIS IS AN INTERNET CAFÉ!

So said the paper taped to the wall of the changing room. It was right next to the lockers, impossible to miss while changing, and the message was an ironclad rule imposed on all internet café staff.

This really is the best *place to work,* Umidori would think every time she saw the notice. This rule was her primary motivation for choosing to work here. To avoid distracting their customers, the

staff had to stay quiet, even in the changing rooms. Umidori was big on avoiding unnecessary interactions with other people, but that wouldn't cause any friction here. Even if someone did try to speak to her, she could always point to the sign and wriggle out of the conversation.

Umidori had been working here a full year now, and she had yet to get to know anyone else on staff. She'd managed perfectly cordial relations with almost everyone—but made no friends. She couldn't let herself make any due to her highly unusual nature.

As long as I do my job right, nobody will notice how I fade into the background. I can maintain a state of peaceful isolation—all thanks to this wonderful rule!

Umidori was smiling happily at the notice, wearing only her underwear, oblivious to the look her coworker was giving her. "*Haah*... Umidori, you're a sight to behold...," her coworker said with a sigh, awestruck as she drank in the sight of the valley between Umidori's boobs, her voice too small for anyone else to hear. Umidori was blissfully, blessedly oblivious to the attention.

"……Mm?"

Just then...

—*Bloop*.

An electronic noise leaked out of Umidori's locker.

The sound had come from her phone, resting face up on the shelf inside.

"……"

She stopped changing momentarily and checked the screen.

It showed a message notification from a chat app.

> *Done with work?*
>
> *We got tempura tonight!*
>
> *So don't dally on the way home.*

"……"

Those three short lines made Umidori's face *melt*. She broke into a totally different smile than the one she'd flashed at all those customers.

"……Yes, yes, I'll be right home!" she whispered, a song in her voice as she reached happily for her clothes.

^ ^ ^ ^

Fully dressed again, Umidori slipped out the back door of the café.

She walked quickly in the direction of her apartment. Five minutes from work to the station gates, a rocky ride on the local train to her station, then back out those gates, and a long walk down the road to home. The whole trip took maybe thirty minutes…and naturally, she'd chosen a workplace with such a lengthy commute to avoid the risk of bumping into coworkers near where she lived.

"……."

She reached the entrance of her apartment building exactly half an hour later, mechanically punched in the code for the door, and heard the lock release. Now she just needed to move down the hall and up the stairs to the third floor, buzz the doorbell on room 304—and then she'd be home.

Umidori made no stops, spoke to no one, and never altered her expression; she just made a beeline home, avoiding any pleasures the commute might afford. Such was Umidori's routine, her daily grind, her *normal* life.

"……Mm?"

And yet—

This trip home was *slightly* different.

—*Bzzzzzz bzzzzz.*

—a vibration from the pocket of her skirt.

"……Huh?"

Umidori jumped and reached into her pocket, pulling out her cell phone.

"……Someone's calling me?"

Could it be *her*? Were the messages earlier not enough? Was she calling to urge Umidori to get a move on?

—But that thought was swiftly dashed by the words on her screen.

"……'Unknown caller'?"

A blunt phrase that made Umidori scowl.

No matter how deeply Umidori furrowed her brow, the liquid crystal display offered no further information. And despite her consternation, her phone was still vibrating.

“……”

Giving up, Umidori tapped the answer button and put her phone to her ear—

“Hello?”

—but no response came from the other end of the line.

“……? Um, helloooo?”

She tried again, but no matter what she said, only silence answered. No words, no sounds at all—she could not even hear the caller’s breathing.

“……Um,” she said, at a loss. She scratched her cheek, wondering if she’d accidentally answered a prank call. “If you’re not gonna talk, I’m hanging up.”

She offered them one last olive branch, then made to press the END CALL button.

—But as she did…

“……Uh, um!”

A sudden voice, breaking that downright sinister silence.

“I-is this Tougetsu Umidori’s number?”

“……Huh?”

“Is this the number of Tougetsu Umidori? The girl whose name is written with the characters for ‘eastern moon,’ then ‘ocean’ like the Sea of Japan, and ‘bird’ like Tottori Prefecture?”

Hints of desperation, timidity, and anxiety.

The voice of a girl—one who sounded about Umidori’s age.

“……?” Completely floored by this, all Umidori could manage was a baffled, “Huh?”

“……That is *your voice! Tougetsu Umidori, right?”* Somehow, Umidori’s little noise was enough to reassure the caller. She let out a squeal of joy—and a sigh of relief. *“Th-thank goodness! It worked! If I’d gotten some total stranger, I don’t know what I’d have done!”*

“……”

For a long moment, Umidori listened in silence. Eventually, sounding deeply rattled, she thought to ask, “Uh, who is this?”

“Augh! S-sorry!” the caller gasped. *“I totally forgot to say!”*

She sounded highly flustered.

“I’m sure a call from an unknown number must have shaken you. But don’t worry, Tougetsu. It’s me!”

“……Oh?”

Umidori could not believe what she’d just heard.

Had this girl just called her by her first name?

Tougetsu?

“I’ve missed you so much, Tougetsu.”

Oblivious to Umidori’s consternation, the mystery caller was acting like they were old friends.

“Speaking to you again is a dream come true! Tell me, Tougetsu… have you worked out who I am yet?”



“……”

Tougetsu Umidori’s feet had ground to a halt in the hallway of her apartment building.

A veil of night extended all around her, and a spring breeze flitted past; this hallway was exposed to the elements with nothing to keep the wind out. But no matter how much air played with her long skirt, Umidori stood frozen to the spot, phone pressed to her ear.

……Huh? Um…who?

The interior of her mind filled with question marks. On reflex, she tried to dig into her memories, and that stilled her tongue. The silence went on for a solid ten seconds.

“……Um, were we, like…classmates in junior high?” she suggested, with absolutely no confidence. “I-I am Tougetsu Umidori, but I’m afraid…I don’t know who you are.”

“……!”

The gasp on the line sounded downright distraught.

“You can’t tell? Tougetsu, it’s me!”

“……I’m very sorry.”

The girl sounded so sad that Umidori apologized on reflex.

But she didn’t recognize the voice in the slightest.

No matter how deep she dug, no memories emerged.

She didn’t have a single clue.

“……Augh, you mean that?” the girl wailed, crestfallen. Her voice shook. *“Well, don’t beat yourself up about it. Honestly, Tougetsu, I was afraid of this.”*

“……Yeah?”

“I mean, I’ve changed a lot *since I last met you. Calling you out of the blue like this and demanding you remember me right away—that was always a tall order.”*

“……??”

But the nicer this girl was about it, the more confused Umidori got. *No, seriously, who the hell is she?*

Her voice was like a ringing bell.

High-pitched, clearly teenaged.

And Umidori was *highly* unaccustomed to anyone using her given name. No one outside her immediate family had done *that*.

At the very least, no one in her junior high school had ever addressed her that way.

“……Uh, I really am sorry, but I’m afraid I’m just drawing a blank,” she admitted, giving up. “Could you at least tell me your name? I hope that’ll at least jog my memory.”

“……Fine,” the mystery girl said, after quite a long pause. *“I’ll give you a hint.”*

“……A hint?”

“A little game, if you will, Tougetsu. I mean, just giving you the answer would be no fun. I will provide you with ten hints as to my identity—use those to deduce who I am.

“If you can remember before I give all ten hints, you win. If you don’t, victory is mine.”

“……Huh?”

This proposal rattled Umidori even further.

“Wh-what good is that? If you just tell me your name, we won’t have to—”

“Hint one,” the mystery caller said, talking over her. *“Actually, I’ve already given you this one. I said I’ve changed a lot since the last time we met.*

“Honestly, it’s a dramatic transformation, if I do say so myself. Arguably I’m an entirely different thing *now, enough that it’s completely understandable that you’re not making the connection, Tougetsu.”*

“……”

Umidori scratched her cheek again. *Seriously, why won't she just tell me her name?*

But if this girl was insisting on making a game of it, she had to play along.

If she got through all ten hints and Umidori still couldn't figure it out, that would be awkward as all hell. She'd have to take this seriously.

A dramatic transformation… I guess that means she's nothing like I'm assuming?

"Hint two. We did not attend the same junior high," the mystery girl continued. *"That's an answer to your earlier question. I'll add that we have shared no time together at any educational facility—not grade school, not kindergarten, nothing like that at all."*

"……Really?"

"And it goes without saying that I do not attend your high school, either. Nor have we worked together, nor have we been in any extracurricular classes together.

"Point is, our relationship is not based on any type of shared community."

"……Okay."

"Hint three. Yet despite all that—we do know each other.

"I know you, Tougetsu, and you know me. We are each aware of the other, and no one could possibly deny that we do *know each other well.*

"Even if this is the first time we have ever spoken directly to each other."

"……Hngg?"

Umidori audibly groaned at that last remark.

"B-back up, what did you just say? This is the first time we've ever talked?!"

"Hint four," the girl said, ignoring that question. *"Tougetsu, you and I* once lived together.*"*

"……Wut?"

"Under the same roof, just the two of us, every day," the girl said, pressing this point home. "In other words, that was when we got to know each other."

"……??"

Umidori was blinking furiously.

"……Seriously, what are you talking about? We lived together? You and me?"

What did that even mean?

Where was any of this coming from?

Was it a sick joke?

"Hint five. Not necessarily proof of the previous hint, but I know every aspect of your daily routine, Tougetsu."

"……? My…routine?"

"—What time you wake up, what time you go to bed, what time you eat dinner, how long you stay in the bath, how many days a week you work, how many hours your shifts last, how long it takes you to do your hair."

She was rattling through these points.

"I know every last one of these details! After all, we once lived together. *How would I not know them? See?"*

"……??!"

Umidori gulped, genuinely unsettled by the onslaught.

"……Uh, wait, what is this? Who are you?"

She was so thoroughly lost that it was genuinely starting to frighten her.

Did this girl *really* know her?

Should she just hang up right now?

"Hint Six."

But even as Umidori seriously began to consider doing just that…

"Before I began living with you, Tougetsu—I lived with Yoshino Nara."

"……*Huh?*"

That alone made Umidori's jaw drop.

Petrified her.

"To be more precise—" the girl's voice purred on, "—I lived inside Yoshino Nara's pencil case."

"……"

"Hint seven. While I was living with you, Tougetsu, I did not sleep in a bed. I slept somewhere colder, darker, and more mechanical. Somewhere filled with the scent of food.

“Namely, inside the machine this world traditionally calls a refrigerator*.”*

“……”

Umidori was staring vacantly at nothing.

……Or she looked like she was, but her eyes were actually fixed on a single point.

That point being: the lot behind the apartment building.

More precisely, the mound in the corner where the ground was slightly higher than its surroundings.

“Hint eight. I am not human.”

The girl was not even waiting for Umidori to respond.

“Hint nine—you buried me alive this very morning, Tougetsu.

“You yanked me out of the fridge and buried me in the lot behind your building. You chanted ‘Namu Amida Butsu’ over me even though you’re not a Buddhist! Then you dumped a lot of dirt on top of me.”

“……”

Naturally, no ordinary human would notice anything amiss about that mound of dirt. It was merely a byproduct of having once been dug up, then filled back in—but no one except the person who dug the hole could possibly know that.

“You can’t—can’t—can’t—can’t— This is crazy!”

Umidori was not conscious of the words she was spluttering.

“And finally, hint ten,” the girl said, extremely pleased with herself. *“I’m still in that hole! I’ve been waiting for you inside it this whole time!”*

“……Huh?”

“Heh. Heh-heh. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The voice on the line erupted in an excited peal of laughter.

“Y-you’re sooo adorable, Tougetsu! You’re holding on to your phone, all frozen up, like a little kid!

“A-and the cutest part of you? Your mouth! Just seeing your mouth hanging open like that reminds me of what it felt like to be drenched in your saliva, run roughshod on your tongue!”

“……”

“Oh, I love it! I love you, Tougetsu! This is love! You’re so precious to me! My clay-and-graphite core is tingling!”

The girl on the line had trailed off in a series of enraptured murmurings, like she was high as a kite.

“Ack! Pardon me, Tougetsu. You were just so adorable, I forgot myself.

“Uhh, so that’s all ten hints, but from the way you’ve reacted, I don’t really need to ask, do I?”

“……”

“Welp, there you have it! Congrats, you’ve won the game!”

“……Aiiiiiiieeeeee?!”

Umidori’s shriek echoed.

She went white as a sheet, slammed her finger against the end call button, and ran down the hall.

“This isn’t real! No, no, no! It can’t be happening! Not real, not real, not real!”

Forgetting to put her phone back in her pocket, Umidori wailed aloud, her face contorting into a mask of fear.

She’d figured out exactly what was going on—and that had caused a whole new wave of panic.

“H-help……!” she yelled, hurtling down the hall. “Help! Is anyone there?! I need help!”

“W-wait, stop……!”

“……Huh?”

Right as Umidori reached the stairs and placed her foot on the first of them, she paused at the sudden cry.

A girl’s voice was echoing—she couldn’t quite locate the source.

“H-hold on, Tougetsu. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you! I just got a bit too worked up. Please, don’t run away!”

No, she knew where it was coming from.

The voice was emanating from beneath the mound of dirt in the back lot.

“……?!?!”

Umidori’s knees buckled, and she plunked down on the stairs. (She’d just had her knees buckle this past April.)

“Wh-wh-wh-why? I hung up…!”

“Sorry, Tougetsu! But I’ll be in big trouble if I let you run away.”

The voice sounded on the verge of tears.

“Please, Tougetsu! Get me out of this grave! It’s cold, dark, cramped, and full of worms! It’s hell on earth!”

“……”

“I really can’t be down here anymore! Put me back in the refrigerator where I belong!”

—It was the exact same voice that had just been coming through the speaker on Umidori’s phone.



At what point had Tougetsu Umidori started just…talking to her?

“I’m home!”

Cheerily calling out to her empty apartment had become part of Umidori’s daily routine. Naturally, nobody ever answered—Umidori lived alone. That never bothered her. She took off her shoes, washed her hands, and headed to the kitchen.

There, she opened the refrigerator door, and took *her* out.

“Sorry, I’m awfully late.” “That job interview took ages.” “I told you about the internet café by the station?” “I’ve never actually had to interview for a job before, so I was totally nervous.” “They’ll email me if I get the position in a few days… Augh, the wait is killing me!”

Smiling, Umidori said anything and everything that crossed her mind. For all the world it looked like she was engaged in a normal conversation—but since *she* never said a word back, Umidori was basically just talking to herself.

“Why’d I decide I needed a job?” “Mostly because I don’t think I can keep turning Nara’s invitations down if I don’t have a real reason.” “She’s really coming on strong.” “I’m scared she might start asking me to call her ‘Yoshino.’” “But I’m way more comfortable with the distance we have right now…” “Dealing with people is so hard.”

She sighed and shrugged, shaking her head—but she never seemed like she minded that much.

“……” *She* said nothing, held tight in Umidori’s hand, unable to speak.

“You make things so much easier.” “I mean, you’re not even human!” “You’ll never be hurt by what I say, never turn on me.” “You’re the only one in the entire world I can relax around.” “You’re my ideal partner.” “We’ve gotta stay together forever!” “I love you, XXXXXX-chan!”

Umidori pulled *her* to her lips and gave *her* a kiss.

“……” Still, *she* said nothing back, even as the smooching sounds filled the room.

“……Oh, an email from the place where I interviewed?” Umidori broke off from kissing *her*, noticing her phone vibrating in her pocket. “Oh, they hired me!” “Wow, I’ve got a job now!” “They want me to start next week?” “Awesome! For the first time in my life, I’m employed!” “Oh, good. Honestly, I was pretty nervous.” “I guess it helped that I wrote my résumé in my neatest possible handwriting?”

“Either way, now I have a great excuse to always be busy after school!” “And I get paid for it, so I’d better earn my keep!” “We’ll have to celebrate tonight, XXXXXX-chan!”

“……”

And then, like she did every day—Umidori ate *her*.

She first shaved *her* down to a more edible size, then shoveled *her* into her mouth, chewing thoroughly.

Munch munch. *Gnaw gnaw*. *Chew chew*.

“Heh-heh, you make for the best after-school treat!” Umidori whispered adoringly, savoring *her* orally. *She* could say nothing back, helpless as she was gulped down.

A psycho thriller was unfolding in an ordinary apartment with no one else the wiser.

But at the time, this was Tougetsu Umidori’s greatest pleasure.

—Until…

“Hey, you really ought to throw this out.”

“……Oh?”

…one fateful evening.

Umidori was sitting at the table when a sudden suggestion made her head snap up.

“……? Throw it out?”

“Yes. No use preserving it until time immemorial.”

Bullshit-chan, wearing an apron, was peering into the fridge. She sounded rather put out.

“Tomorrow’s burnable trash day—perfect opportunity to clean this mess up. You don’t have any objections, I’m sure?”

“……Huhhh?!”

It took several long seconds for Umidori to even process what that meant, but when it sank in, she vaulted to her feet.

“W-wait one cotton-picking minute! You can’t just say that out of nowhere, Bullshit-chan!”

“It’s hardly out of nowhere. I’ve been waiting for the right moment for ages!” Bullshit-chan growled, her cat-eared hood swaying. “I mean, it’s objectively unhinged. You’re supposed to keep *food* in the fridge, so why are we keeping this pile of trash smack-dab in the center of it?”

“……! T-trash……?!”

That word hit Umidori hard, and her lips flapped for a minute.

“……No, seriously, back up, Bullshit-chan. That’s just such an awful word! Every one of those pencils is a precious treasure to me!

“Maybe that won’t make sense to you, Bullshit-chan, but we’ve lived together for a long, long time! We’ve been through times of joy and sadness, side by side, like family! I-I couldn’t possibly let them go… …and absolutely not on burnable-trash day! That’s not even funny!”

“……Huh? Like family?” Bullshit-chan scoffed. She rolled her eyes, exasperated. “But isn’t that the *old* Umidori?”

“……Meaning?”

“The new Umidori and the old Umidori are different people,” she said, slamming the fridge door. “You said it yourself. You’ve been reborn. You’re going to learn to lie, become a normal person, and be Nara’s friend in the true sense of the word.”

“……! Y-yes, but……!!”

“Take a deep breath and think about it, Umidori. Nara deep-fried those pencils, and somehow they ended up back in the fridge where they’ve rotted to this very day…and I’m certainly aware that you have a lot of history with them. But they were never more than a tool, a proxy for what you really wanted.

“Umidori, you’ve made up your mind not to content yourself with proxies, to go for the real thing—not a fraudulent substitute. No matter how long your history with these pencils, they are no longer that precious to you. They’re *just* trash.”

“……”

“I’d go so far as to say that hanging onto them at this stage of the proceedings is betraying yourself—no, betraying *Nara*.”

Bullshit-chan was really laying it on thick.

“So spare me these protests and tell me I can throw them out. I can easily fill this space in the fridge with more condiments and seasonings.”

That last line was clearly a personal desire, and Bullshit-chan’s voice dropped low enough that Umidori didn’t actually hear her.

“……”

Everything Bullshit-chan had said was objectively true, so Umidori sat there with a tragic look on her face, processing it.

“……F-fine,” she said, resigning herself. “You’re right. I really shouldn’t be holding on to them. Just…give me a little more time.”

“……Time?”

“I need to get rid of them…but throwing them out with the trash is just cruel.”

Umidori turned her gaze to the fridge.

“If I’m going to say a proper goodbye, I’ll need to prepare. It’ll take at least three or four days.”

“……? A proper goodbye?”

“Yes. What comes to mind is…a funeral.”

“……A what?”

“Like what people do when their pets die. I’m going to find a good plot of land, dig a hole, and make a grave for my pencils.”

“……”

Bullshit-chan spun around, staring at Umidori in horror, the question, *Is she insane?* written on her face.

“……Well, if that’s what you need to do to let go of them, I’m not going to object, but where are you planning to dig? I hardly need tell you digging up someone else’s yard is a crime.”

“I’ll get permission! And the vacant lot behind the building should do nicely. I just have to ask the property manager if I can bury something there.”

“……You think they’ll allow that?”

“Probably. It’s not like I’m burying an animal corpse, after all. And if I say I’ll get up at four AM, snappily dig that hole and fill it in before anyone’s awake to see…why would anyone have a problem with that?”

“……A snappy burial…”

Umidori seemed hell-bent on this, but Bullshit-chan clearly wasn’t touching it with a ten-foot pole.

“Suit yourself. Bury them in the dirt, build a funeral pyre, or send them out to sea like Vikings do—whatever floats your boat, Umidori. Just don’t drag your heels about it. Your kitchen is my territory now, and I am at my absolute limit letting you store non-food stuff in this fridge.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, Bullshit-chan. If I take too long, I know my resolve will falter. I’ll get it done over Golden Week at the latest, trust me.”

And so, Umidori resolved to throw *her* out.

She did not want to betray Nara—so she abandoned *her*.

Even though every night she’d promised they would be together forever.

Even though she’d said she loved *her*.



—And that brings us to today.

“*Hahhh*, *hahhh*, *hahhh*……”

Gasping for air, Umidori was squatting in the back lot, furiously moving her hands.

“*Hahhh*, *hahhh*, *hahhh*, *hahhh*……”

Rub, rub—the sound faintly echoed through the deserted back lot.

A cotton handkerchief in her right hand.

And one dirt-encrusted pencil in her left.

“Hngaahhhhhh!” A strangled shriek came from the filthy pencil.

“—?! D-don’t make weird noises!” Umidori gulped, glaring down at it.

“S-sorry, Tougetsu!” the pencil replied, sounding remorseful. “But when you rub me all over like that, it tickles something fierce!”

“Wh-what choice do I have? I buried all your bodies!”

—The hole beside her was yawning open.

The knee-deep hole she’d filled in that very morning.

“……”

And someone else was staring at her in horror.

A young businesswoman in a pantsuit. “……??” Likely on her way home from work, about to head into her apartment. She’d seen someone sitting by a big hole in the ground out of the corner of her eye and had been rendered speechless.

“……Mm?” Umidori turned around, sensing eyes on her. “…… Oh! Uh, um, wait, this isn’t what you think!”

“……Wh-what are you doing?” the woman asked, clearly convinced Umidori was up to no good.

Was she asking about the big hole Umidori had dug in the middle of the night? Or about the fact that she was sitting in an empty lot, clutching a pencil? Probably both, but Umidori just got worked up.

“D-don’t get the wrong idea! I’m no criminal! I just had to give this pencil’s body a good cleaning.”

“……Yeah?”

“She’s been in the ground all day long! Which is my fault, since I buried her in the small hours of the morning. Good thing I remembered I’d left the groundskeeper’s shovel by the shed afterward and hastily retrieved it so I could dig her back up!”

“……?”

Several seconds passed, but the woman just grew even more confused.

“……Huh? What?”

“—Uh, Tougetsu, you’re holding me too tight!” A wail from the pencil interrupted their interaction. “Stop! Ah, ah! No, don’t! If you squeeze me like that……!”

“……! D-did I not just tell you to cool it with the weird noises?”

“E-easy for you to say! I can’t stop it coming out!”

“Hold it in! I’m not even clutching you all that tight.”

Umidori was talking very quickly, glaring at the pencil.

“……” The woman stared at her in horror. “……!”

After a long moment, she concluded that she’d seen something not meant for her and quickly moved away. The sound of her feet pounding up the stairs echoed through the night.

“Augh! Wait, come back!” Umidori wailed, but the footsteps didn’t even falter. The woman was soon out of sight. “……! Wh-what do I do now? That lady totally thinks I’m a weirdo!”





Umidori was yelling at the pencil, on the verge of tears.

“I’m pretty sure she lives on my floor… If she starts gossiping, it’ll be a disaster!”

“…? You think so? I doubt she’ll tell anyone.”

The pencil sounded rather surprised. Naturally, being a pencil, she didn’t have a face—so she conveyed her emotions through tone of voice alone.

“You see, I’m speaking directly into your mind, Tougetsu. Nobody else can hear my voice, so even if someone sees you talking to me, it won’t present a problem.”

The pencil sounded baffled, but Umidori hung her head.

“……No, that’s worse! Now I’m just a lunatic sitting in the dark, blabbing to a pencil for no reason!”

There was no other possible interpretation.

“Also, this has been bothering me…,” she said, still brushing the dirt off the pencil. “But which one are you?”

“……? What do you mean?”

“I mean, there are a hundred of you.” Umidori gestured at the heap of dirty pencils beneath her. “Is the one I’m holding the real you?”

“……Oh! No, no, Tougetsu. All of them are me.”

“……Yeah?”

“Or you could say that any of them are, and none of them aren’t. I am a collective of a hundred different pencils.

“So even if one or two of them break or get incinerated, that won’t hurt me in the slightest. My existence is less defined by the pencils themselves than by the concept of one hundred pencils, if that makes more sense.”

“……The concept…?”

The motormouthed explanation was just making Umidori blink.

“I didn’t really follow that, Pencil-chan. But all these pencils are you?”

“That interpretation is close enough.”

“……Then I have one other question for you,” Umidori said.

She looked down at the hundred-pencil pile.

“How is it you can talk?” she asked. “When you think about it, that’s very weird. I mean, ordinary pencils don’t talk telepathically with girls’ voices.”

“……Easy for you to say,” Pencil said, clearly at a loss. “I honestly could use an explanation myself. I’d love to wax poetic, Tougetsu, but I just don’t have the answer.”

“……You don’t?”

“Don’t get me wrong, here. For starters, as you can see—I am just a collection of pencils. A pile of ordinary stationery supplies available at any stationery store or hundred-yen shop. I should not be capable of doing anything except drawing lines on paper.

“In other words, I shouldn’t be capable of thinking like humans do, or talking in a girl’s voice. These are not functions I should ever have!”

Pencil was being highly logical.

“And yet, here we are. One day I just…awakened.”

“……Awakened.”

“Yes… I just woke up! I can’t think of any other phrase to describe the sensation.”

Pencil sighed—well, she wasn’t actually breathing, so it just sounded like a sigh.

“It came out of nowhere. One second earlier, I was a speechless writing implement. But in that moment, I became *me*. No warning signs, like a bolt from the blue.”

“……Huh. I dunno what to make of that,” Umidori said, clearly baffled. “Just…like that? Pencils don’t just start talking spontaneously.”

“I know! So I have no clue what could possibly have caused this. By the way, this wasn’t that long ago. Specifically, it happened just two weeks back.”

“……?! T-two weeks?! That’s nothing!”

“Yes. So that means I’ve only been around for a handful of days. I’m basically a baby!”

Pencil laughed impishly.

“Mind you, that was only when my *awareness* began. My memories go further back than that.”

“……? Meaning?”

“For instance, I remember being manufactured. I remember standing in rows at the shop. I remember being inside Yoshino Nara’s pencil case. I can clearly recollect all of those things.”

“……Huh.”

“……Heh-heh, right you are. I remember everything!” Pencil was sounding rather ecstatic. “Every second of the joyous times we spent together, Tougetsu!”

“……Right.”

“Night after night of passionate mingling! Each moment as vivid to me as the day it happened, Tougetsu!

“I know how you’d whisper, *‘We’ll always be together.’* I can feel your lips on my paint as you swear you love me!”

“……?!” Umidori was starting to look rather alarmed. “Er, um, Pencil-chan, I…”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, don’t start blushing now. You used to rub your cheek on me, wind your hair around me, sniff me. Every intimate moment we spent together is a precious memory, Tougetsu.”

“……! ~~~~~~~~~~”

The more rapturous Pencil got, the redder Umidori’s cheeks became.

Running through her mind were any number of actions like those Pencil had described—things Umidori had actually done. *Wh-what was I thinking?! Was the old me dumb as a rock?!*

On pure reflex, Umidori brought her finger to her lips… She’d wrapped them round those pencils so often—every day—that even now she could still vividly remember the sensation. She would smooch the hell out of those pencils whenever her loneliness grew too much to bear. At the time, it had felt like restoring a missing piece of her heart—but in hindsight, it was just dumb as dumb could get.

“……I mean, I’m sitting here talking to a pencil right now. Objectively speaking, I’ve clearly got bats in the belfry.”

Pulling out of her reverie, Umidori groaned.

“Too many crazy things at once. Does this mean I’ve gone full wacko?”

“……? What makes you say that?”

“It would explain everything,” Umidori said, wincing. “Pencil-chan, if you’re not actually talking and I’m just hearing things, then everything—starting with that phone call—is just a hallucination.

“That theory handily explains anything weird—including talking pencils. All of this is a figment of my imagination,

impossible in the real world. Arguably, that businesswoman treating me like a weirdo was entirely appropriate."

"……"

Umidori sounded so despondent, Pencil was momentarily at a loss for words.

"—You think?" she asked, eventually. "I'd argue there's a much more viable explanation than your hypothesis."

"Oh?" Umidori snapped up her head at that logical-sounding intro. "There is? What?"

"Simple, Tougetsu. Mind you, this is also *just* a hypothesis for now." Pencil took a deep breath. "I bet this is a *lie*," she said.

"……Huh?"

"I mean it! A lie. You know all about them. What was it?" Pencil paused, digging into her memories. "She said…personal desires can falsify the world, making lies real. A miraculous power beyond the mortal ken of humanity."

"……!" Umidori's eyes went wide, and she let out a shocked gasp. "……Wait a minute, you know about lies?"

"And if my hypothesis is correct, Tougetsu, I have but one recommendation for you," Pencil said, softly. "Go right back to your apartment and talk to the fallicide expert: Bullshit-chan-san."

◇◇◇◇

"Like I said before, Tougetsu, I retain all memories of the time when I was *just* a pile of writing implements," Pencil said. "Naturally, that includes what took place in your room two weeks ago… I remember every jib and jab you and Yoshino Nara exchanged."

Her voice was currently emanating from inside Umidori's bag.

Originally, the bag had only contained her work uniform. It was quite a large sports duffel bag, so it had easily absorbed the stack of a hundred pencils.

"After all," those pencils said, "I was right there watching, albeit deep-fried in vegetable oil."

"……Makes sense," Umidori said, nodding at the sports bag. "'Jib and jab' hardly seems like an adequate descriptor for that series

of death-defying incidents, but… Pencil-chan, you heard every word of it, including Bullshit-chan's explanation of what lies really are."

"Exactly. Every word Bullshit-chan-*san* said." The voice from the bag emphasized that form of address.

The two girls (?) had already left the lot and were back in the apartment building hall.

"I was right there while she kept going on and on and on! Even *I* managed to grasp the salient points. A manifest lie will attempt to grant the wish of their Beliar—no matter how far-fetched that desire might be."

"……Yeah, that's the long and the short of it," Umidori said, rounding the bend. She put a foot on the first stair, and the impact of her shoe's sole on the concrete made an echo. "Pencil-chan, is this what you're trying to say? If the power of lies can make the impossible possible, then that would explain how a heap of pencils came to have a mind of their own."

"Precisely my point, Tougetsu," Pencil said cheerily. "Obviously, pencils do not ordinarily become sentient. If that impossible thing has actually occurred, then the cause must be something equally exceptional. There is no outright contradiction to this hypothesis. Lies can falsify just about anything, so it should be no sweat for one to uplift some pencils."

"……I suppose it does make sense."

Tnk, *tnk*, *tnk*, *tnk*.

Her footsteps echoing, Umidori ascended the apartment stairs.

"But Pencil-chan, while the power of lies may be great, that doesn't make them omnipotent. If you heard Bullshit-chan's speech, you should know that. Beliars can only change things they'd want so much that they'd give their life for them.

"Which means I still have my doubts. A sentient pencil? Whatever for? Would anyone actually want that so bad they'd change the world?"

Tnk, *tnk*, *tnk*, *tnk*.

"I mean, it's not like I can begin to imagine what's going through a Beliar's head. But even by that standard, granting sentience to some pencils is just baffling. Who benefits from that?"

“……I’ll admit that is a mystery,” Pencil agreed. “But Tougetsu, there’s no use debating that here. In the world of lies, the two of us are but rank amateurs.

“This, too, is a matter that must be discussed with a professional fallicider—with Bullshit-chan-san.”

“……”

Tnk.

Umidori’s feet had at last reached the destination floor. As she turned into that final corridor, she drew to a halt.

“……Um, I’ve been wondering…,” she said, looking down at her sports bag. “What’s with this ‘Bullshit-chan-san’ thing??”

“……? The cutesy-poo with the cat ears.” Pencil sounded baffled by the question. “Wait, did I misremember her name? Was it actually Dogshit-chan? Bullcrap-chan? Phony Baloney-chan?”

“No, the Bullshit-chan part of Bullshit-chan’s name is totally fine,” Umidori said, with a rictus of a smile. “And what’s with your list of alternatives? The last one isn’t even close! That’s just pure, unadulterated spite.”

“……? Is it? I’m pretty sure it’s a far more accurate descriptor of her character archetype.”

“Pencil-chan, you’ve really got it in for her, huh?”

“Yep! I hate her guts!” Pencil snapped. “I despise her so much that I refuse to just call her by that poser-ass ‘real name.’ If she’s gonna force an honorific onto her name, I’m gonna add another on top! Honestly, ‘Bullshit-chan-san’ is kind of a mouthful, but if that lets me mock her calculated cuteness routine, it’s a small price to pay.”

“……I guess I should at least ask why. Pencil-chan, you’ve barely met her.”

“Huh?” Pencil sounded downright irate. “What are you talking about, Tougetsu? I met her plenty. Our fates are intertwined!”

“……? How so?”

“Think about it, Tougetsu. That cat burglar’s arrival drove me out of your room!

“Apartment 304 was our little love nest! And then this total stranger barges in with her boots on and ruins everything! Blabbed my existence to Yoshino, put a permanent end to your pencil thefts—and that atrocity a few days back really took the cake.”

“……A few days back?”

“I hardly need explain it. It led directly to you burying me!”

“……!”

That certainly made Umidori grimace.

“If she hadn’t suggested putting me out with the burnable trash, I’d never have wound up two feet under! You couldn’t pay me to like that cat-eared cutesy-pie.”

“……! Er, um, Pencil-chan… I really don’t know what to say here…”

“……*You* don’t need to apologize, Tougetsu. What’s done is done.” Pencil’s tone grew much calmer. “Listening to your conversation from inside the fridge, I couldn’t believe my ears. All those times you said you loved me, that we’d be together forever—and now you were trying to say goodbye.”

“……”

“That was a harsh blow. I almost fainted,” Pencil sighed. “But I soon worked through it. I didn’t blame you—I knew I had to accept your decision. I am but a writing implement. If my owner is done with me, then abandonment is my only option.”

“……! S-so why didn’t you tell me you were sentient earlier?” Umidori protested feebly. “If you’d sent me a telepathic message, I’d never have buried you alive!”

“……Yes, Tougetsu. You’ve got a kind heart. That might have made you think twice.” Pencil sighed again. “But I was disinclined to take that option. I didn’t want to escape a burial out of pure pity. I am a tool, and we tools have our pride. When we’re no longer needed, we accept our disposal willingly. It’s seen as a virtue.

“……And when Bullshit-chan-san viciously suggested throwing me out with the burnable trash, you said it was awful, and you needed to give me a proper funeral. Tougetsu—I really appreciated that.”

Pencil’s voice took on a bounce.

“It would be a happy parting if you gave me a proper burial. I convinced myself it wasn’t bad at all! I faced this morning’s burial with that thought on my mind.”

“……Pencil-chan.”

“……Then, once I was actually buried, all virtue went out the window.” Pencil let out a self-mocking laugh. “I seriously

underestimated how nasty it would be. I had no idea how dark, cramped, lonely, and filled with worms it would be. Not half an hour after the burial, escaping was the only thing I could think about."

"……So you contacted me telepathically?"

"Yes. Clutching at straws," Pencil said wearily. "Anyway, that's why I've got it in for Bullshit-chan-san. I genuinely don't blame you for the burial thing, Tougetsu. It's all that thief cat's fault! If she hadn't pulled the trigger, I would never have met with such a terrible fate."

"……Um, Pencil-chan, we're on our way to ask her for help, right?" Umidori said, double-checking. "I get where you're coming from, and I'm the one who actually buried you alive, so I've got no leg to stand on, but she didn't set off this chain of events out of spite. You know that, right?"

"……Yes, no need to spell it out, Tougetsu," Pencil said reluctantly. "I loathe Bullshit-chan-san from the bottom of my heart, but that doesn't mean I'm out for payback. What's done is done, and it's absolutely not my intent to cause trouble and make things harder for you. I will be an adult when I'm around her."

"……Yeah? Well, good."

Looking rather unconvinced, Umidori nodded and headed down the hall.

Not long after, she reached the door to apartment 304, coming to a standstill by the doorbell.

But how do I even begin to explain Pencil-chan to Bullshit-chan?

Scowling at her doorbell, Umidori pondered the question. Would Bullshit-chan even believe it if she said the buried pencils were talking to her?

If Pencil-chan can speak to Bullshit-chan via telepathy, that would make it easy, but she really has it in for Bullshit-chan. If she refuses to even talk to her, that'll make this so much harder…

"—Also, Tougetsu, one thing's been bugging me."

A voice from the sports bag interrupted Umidori's train of thought.

"Why are you calling me Pencil-chan?"

"……Um." Umidori blinked down at her. "I mean, no real reason. You're a girl and a pencil, so I just called you Pencil-chan. Do you not approve?"

“—Honestly, no. I’m dead set against it,” Pencil grumped. “I’m not trying to talk shit about your naming sense, Tougetsu, but ‘Pencil-chan’ makes me sound like a discount Bullshit-chan—and that I can’t abide. Sorry, but can we come up with something else?”

“……Uhhh……” Umidori let out a long moan. “I-I wasn’t trying to make your name sound like hers! But…uh, any suggestions?”

“……Let me see,” Pencil said, considering the matter. “……! I’ve got it! How does Togari Tsukushigaoka sound?”

“……Like a tongue-twister.”

“Tsukushi is ‘dirt’ and ‘brush,’ ‘gaoka’ is often found in place names, and Togari is in hiragana, but it means ‘pointy.’ Obviously, that’s the given name.” Pencil sounded quite smug about this. “Heh-heh, so what do you think, Tougetsu? Pencil is written with the kanji for ‘pointy brush,’ so I’d call this the perfect name for me.”

“……Um? Uh, y-yeah, sure,” Umidori managed awkwardly. “For something you ad-libbed, it’s pretty cute. So I guess I should call you Togari?”

The given name was one thing, but Umidori privately wondered, *Do pencils need a family name?* She kept that to herself. If the girl liked it, then how could she object?

And starting her family name with ‘dirt’ sure made it seem like she was still holding that burial against Umidori.

“Ugh, I’m starting to feel like overthinking this is a bad idea,” Umidori groaned. Talking to Togari was really draining the tension out of her. “Whatever happens, happens,” she said.

Then she pushed her doorbell.

Ding-dong.

……

“……Huh.”

Umidori frowned.

She’d waited a long moment, but no one had come to the door.

“……Weird. She’s always here, waiting for me to get home from work.”

But, well, maybe there were exceptions. She had her doubts, but Umidori convinced herself of it and pulled out her key, unlocking the door.

With a click, the bolt turned.

Umidori opened the door and stepped in.

"I'm back! Sorry, Bullshit-chan, it took me forever."

—However, no answer came from within.

The lights were on, but the room itself was eerily silent.

"……Um, did you step out?" she asked, slipping her shoes off and stepping further in.

But why would she leave the lights on?

Frowning, Umidori opened the inner door, revealing the brightly lit living room and the kitchen.

A bunch of ingredients were laid out on the counter. Clearly, Bullshit-chan had been working on dinner.

Eggplant, pumpkin, onions, *shiso*.

Kuruma shrimp, rather damp—clearly just thawed.

And a large bowl filled with yellowish batter.

There was a wok on the stove, filled with clear fluid, and an empty plastic bottle abandoned next to it.

The label on the bottle claimed it was vegetable oil: HEALTHY! PERFECT FOR SALADS.

"……Oh, right. Bullshit-chan said she was making tempura," Umidori said, only just remembering the message she'd received after work. The yellow batter in the bowl must be tempura flour mixed with water.

"But no sign of the cook herself……," she muttered, looking around.

Had Bullshit-chan forgotten an ingredient and made a run to the supermarket? Umidori could see her leaving the vegetables out, but not the shrimp.

"—Augh!"

Lost in thought, Umidori had stepped forward and tripped over something on the floor.

"……! Wh-who would just leave something on the kitchen—?"

Mid-sentence, she saw what she'd tripped over and gasped.

It was Bullshit-chan.

"……"

Lying flat on her back on the floor, her limbs splayed out…

Eyes rolled back into her head, not moving at all.



“B-Bullshit-chan?!”

Umidori dropped the sports bag where she stood and moved to the girl’s side.

“H-hey! What’s going on? You okay? Wake up!”

“……”

Umidori lifted Bullshit-chan’s head and spoke right in her ear, but the girl failed to respond.

Listening close, she could hear Bullshit-chan breathing—but she was clearly unconscious.

“Wh-what happened? What’s going on?” Umidori wailed, at her wit’s end. “You were just messaging me!”

“—No use. She won’t wake up that easily,” a new voice said, right next to her. “I tried several things before you got back, so I’m sure of it.”

“……Huh?”

Umidori jumped and turned to look.

There stood a woman.

She was around twenty years old, with a purple bob cut.

“You certainly took your time, Tougetsu Umidori. You’re usually back faster. Did you get caught up somewhere?”

……

Locked in the woman’s gaze, Umidori said nothing.

Three seconds passed. Five. As the ten-second mark approached, Umidori finally blinked.

“……Huh? Wh-who are you?” she asked, utterly baffled.

Who was this lady?

“……Huh? Who am I?” the woman snapped, deeply annoyed. “Tougetsu Umidori, how dare you not recognize me?”

“……Um, huh?”

“……! You are the most vexing girl alive!” She wasn’t even trying to hide her fury. “Perhaps I should actually be impressed? It hasn’t even been a month since all the things I did to you, and you don’t even remember what I look like! The nerve of you! Not a care in the world!”

“……??”

“So be it! This should explain things,” the woman said, raising a hand to cover her eyes. “Tougetsu Umidori, do you recognize me now?”

“—?!”

Umidori felt as though a bolt of lightning had shot down her spine.

“H-h-h-how……?!”

With the woman’s eyes hidden, Umidori shook like a leaf, toppling over backward. Not out of logic, but a primal fear—one carved into her soul.

“H-Hurt?! Why?! How?!”

“…….Hmph.”

Noting Umidori’s palpable terror, the purple-haired woman, Hurt, snorted. “That’s more like it, Tougetsu Umidori. That look on your face mollifies me moderately, though what I’m about to tell you will spoil the fun. You need not be afraid.”





“……Oh?”

“In this state, I’m incapable of harming you,” Hurt griped, clicking her tongue. “You know that, right? You trounced me two weeks back: a humiliating defeat delivered by foes I’d deemed beneath me. I was helpless to stop this kitty cat from eating me……

“That means I’m entirely under her control. I’m unable to take any action that does not benefit the kitty cat, and that applies to her partner as well—which would be you, Tougetsu Umidori.”

“……”

“So ease up already.”

Hurt flashed a wicked grin.

“Though my bloodlust is boiling over this very instant, no matter how much I wish to repeat what I did to you two weeks ago—to repay this insult twofold—all I can do is *think* these thoughts. I cannot put them into action. My hands are tied, and this restriction guarantees your safety.”

“……!”

Hurt’s explanation really *just* sounded like a threat, and it was making Umidori cower.

“……W-wait, back up! What’s going on here?” she managed. “B-Bullshit-chan *ate* you, so why are you walking around?! Why is she unconscious?” Still terrified, Umidori didn’t dare take her eyes off Hurt—but she got the question out. “……Also, what are you wearing?!”

“……Huh? Why do you ask?”

“B-because you’re wearing my tracksuit!”

True to her word, Hurt was wearing a tracksuit.

A red tracksuit, one designated for gym classes at Umidori’s high school. Hurt was a size smaller than Umidori, so it didn’t really fit her—the sleeves in particular were far too long. Half her hands were hidden beneath the cuffs, like an old-timey *moe* character.

“Oh, this? Nothing complicated. I simply helped myself to the least restrictive outfit in this room, seeing as I was lacking clothes of my own.”

“……You……had no clothes?”

“You were there when I went down, weren’t you? My previous clothing was torn to shreds, mostly thanks to that pink-haired lie.

Personally, I don't give a damn whether I've got clothes on or not, but running around without causes all manner of commotion in human circles, and I'd rather not deal with that."

Hurt waved a hand at the tracksuit.

"But that's hardly relevant now, Tougetsu Umidori," she snapped. "You asked why I was out, and why the kitty cat was unconscious? The answer is—I don't know myself."

"……Oh?"

"I'm as lost as you are. Why is this happening?" Hurt glared down at Bullshit-chan, sounding rather miffed. "I guess I should convey what I *do* know. Ten minutes back, the kitty cat was cheerily getting dinner ready, as is her wont, when she suddenly started writing in agony for no discernable reason."

"……Agony."

"Out of nowhere. She clutched her head, wailed, and crumpled to the floor, unable to remain on her feet. A moment later, I was ejected from within her."

Hurt shook herself.

"I suspect the kitty cat herself had no clue what to make of her emergency, so she impulsively summoned the strongest card she has—me. Vexing, but with no further information provided, I was forced to stand guard over her body without anyone to complain to."

"……So you've been protecting her this whole time, Hurt? Waiting for me to get home?"

"Exactly. Well? Caught up now? You should show some gratitude, not glare at me as you would your mother's killer!"

"……Huh."

Umidori barely acknowledged that, as her mind was already focused on the girl on the floor.

What's going on here? Why would Bullshit-chan pass out while cooking?

Hurt's explanation had simply raised more questions.

When Umidori had left for work that morning, Bullshit-chan had seemed totally normal.

And she'd received a message from Bullshit-chan just after work—not long ago.

What in the world had happened to her in that brief window of time?

A new Beliar attack? But from what Hurt says, Bullshit-chan was really just cooking.

Umidori groaned, her mind spinning.

Generally, cooking alone did not make people spontaneously pass out.

"—Tougetsu, I have a question."

Just then—

—a voice came from the sports bag on the ground at her feet.

"Was she making tempura for dinner?"

"……Mm?"

Umidori jumped and turned to her bag.

"Togari? Huh? Where'd that come from?"

"Sorry, Tougetsu. Didn't mean to interrupt."

The pencil had been quiet for a long time, and now her tone was far more serious.

"Honestly, I was as shocked as you, so I couldn't speak at first. Here I was thinking furiously about how I could get revenge on her without you noticing, but finding the girl herself already knocked out sure took the wind out of my sails.

"But that's exactly why I want to be sure of this, Tougetsu. Was Bullshit-chan *really* making tempura for dinner?"

"……??"

"I may have only gained sentience recently, but I've spent the bulk of my life in a refrigerator. I'm a very sheltered girl—boxed in, if you will, whether it be in an ice box or a pencil case. My standardized education is limited entirely to internet videos I happened to glimpse while hanging out with you.

"So I find it difficult to speak with confidence unless you confirm the details, Tougetsu. The ingredients laid out in that kitchen sure *look* like they're for tempura—am I safe to assume that's the case?"

"……." Umidori looked round the kitchen again. "Um, yes, I think so, Togari. You're right. Based on the ingredients in the kitchen, it sure looks to me like she was about to make tempura. And I'll add that Bullshit-chan herself sent me a message saying she was going to make tempura tonight."

"……Ah-ha. So it *is* tempura."

"……? Um, Togari? What's this about? I see no connection between tempura tonight and Bullshit-chan passing—"

“Tougetsu,” Togari interrupted. “I may have cracked the case.”

“……Oh?”

“Why did Bullshit-chan unexpectedly pass out? And why did I suddenly develop a mind of my own?”

“……Bwuh?” Umidori squeaked.

“Ready, Tougetsu?” Togari said, her voice as calm as Umidori wasn’t. “Like I said before, I became aware just two weeks ago. I was in your refrigerator for over a year without incident, but abruptly became sentient fourteen days back. Logically speaking, we must assume the cause/trigger for this occurred at that time, two weeks ago.”

“……?”

“But of the many things that happened during that time period, which produced this change in me? Precisely two weeks back, I was doing what I always did—waiting for you to shave me down and eat me over rice.

“But one thing *did* dramatically change my circumstances. Yoshino reached into the fridge, yanked me out, and deep-fried me in oil.”

“……Oh?”

“And this time, it was Bullshit-chan. She allegedly started writhing around while cooking, then collapsed. But is that strictly accurate, Tougetsu? Would it not be more precise to argue that this happened not while she was cooking, but while she was making tempura?”

“……”

“And—getting even more granular—not just while she was making tempura, but at the very instant in which she added vegetable oil to that wok?”

“……!”

Umidori gulped, gaping down at her sports bag.

“M-meaning…what, exactly, Togari?”

“My point is— No, what I want to ask is this, Tougetsu,” Togari cried. “Do you remember where you bought that oil, and from whom you bought it?”

“……!”

A shock ran through Umidori. She glared at the empty plastic bottle lying next to the wok.

On the label were the cheery words, HEALTHY! PERFECT FOR SALADS!

"……Clue me in, Tougetsu Umidori," Hurt growled, clearly unable to take this any longer. "You've been muttering away for a while now, but who are you talking to?"

"……Mm?" Umidori blinked back at her. "Oh, my pencils."

"……Wut?"

"My pencils! Pencil-chan… Oh, right. Hurt—I haven't explained any of that yet!" Umidori patted her sports bag. "For reasons I won't get into, I buried a hundred pencils in the lot behind the apartment building this morning. Little did I know, however, that those pencils had achieved sentience!

"So as I got home from work, she sent me a telepathic SOS, and I dug the pencils back up. I put her in my bag to bring home, intending to discuss this situation with Bullshit-chan…only to find her passed out on the floor."

"……?"

Hurt was gaping at her, clearly thinking, *The hell is this bitch on about?*

Umidori's explanation might have been lacking in critical details, but no one here was capable of filling them in.

Only three present were capable of speech: Umidori, Hurt, and Togari Tsukushigaoka.

The pencil girl's sentience, and Bullshit-chan's sudden fainting spell.

These two incidents proved the impetus for Tougetsu Umidori's second fallicide.

2
A Second Fallicide

“Heave… Ho…”

A year ago.

Umidori was walking through the streets of Isuzunomiya, a grocery bag in hand.

“……Wow, this is so much heavier than I thought it would be,” she grumbled, giving the bag a baleful look.

It was stuffed to the brim with pork, cabbage, onions, *yakiniku* sauce…… A bunch of ingredients for a stir-fry.

“……This was an impulse buy, but can I *actually* cook?”

She did not sound very confident.

—She had only *just* started living alone. Nowadays, Bullshit-chan controlled the kitchen, and Umidori lived on instant food and convenience store meals the rest of the time, but early on, she’d entertained a desire to be self-sufficient and do her own cooking. She had already acquired a frying pan and a pot—the whole kit and caboodle.

This optimistic attitude would wither away to nothing over the next couple of months, and those kitchen implements would begin gathering dust…but Umidori had not yet realized this.

“Nope, don’t go getting cold feet already! Give it your best shot! I already found an easy stir-fry recipe online!”

But just as she was riling herself up, she let out a little shriek.

She’d realized something critical.

“……I-I forgot to buy oil!” she wailed, scanning the contents of her grocery bag futilely. “What now? You can’t stir-fry anything without oil!”

Turning back to the grocery store, bag in hand, seemed like a daunting proposition—but without that oil, she couldn’t make the

dish she'd bought all these ingredients for, and that meant the entire shopping expedition would end in failure. The trip between Umidori's apartment and the grocery store was a barren wasteland, without so much as a single convenience store.

I don't suppose there's a shop around that just *sells oil, is there? No, clearly not. That would be ridiculous.*

"Come on up!"

Just as her thoughts threatened to spiral out of control, a cheery voice rang out ahead, pulling her attention to the fore.

"Come one, come all, step right on up!"

"……?"

Umidori's head shot up, searching for the source of the cry.

There was a cart but a few steps in front of her.

"……Mm?"

A wooden roof in disrepair.

Rattling wheels on either side.

Red lanterns lighting up the night.

Pulled manually, it was moving along at barely a mile an hour, making quite a racket as it went.

……Wow! A sales cart? I've never seen one of these!

She blinked at it, the unusual spectacle proving quite distracting. Perhaps a few decades back, these would have been a common sight, but in modern Japan, they were truly a dying breed.

Wh-why a wooden cart? Are they selling ramen? Oden?

Completely forgetting her shopping disaster, Umidori was seized by curiosity. Without really thinking about it, she half-ran over to the cart.

Since it was not exactly moving quickly, even she easily overtook it.

From behind, she'd been unable to tell what was on sale—but now she had a clear view.

"……Huh?"

And it made her stop dead in her tracks.

The cart was laden with merchandise.

But it contained neither a ramen soup tureen nor a vat of simmering oden—

"……Vegetable oil?"

Vegetable oil.

This cart sold vegetable oil.

Not just one or two bottles, but dozens of them—and nothing else at all.

“Any takers? Movers or shakers?”

A cheery voice echoed in Umidori’s ears.

“Need some oil? You need not toil!”

On closer inspection, the red lanterns festooning the cart had the words *Vegetable Oil* written on them. Each was slightly different—clearly done by hand.

“……R-really?!”

The spectacle was so out of left field that Umidori’s voice got rather loud. *A vegetable oil cart? Who’s ever heard of that?!*

“……Mm?” The cart stopped. “Hello there, lady. Can I interest you in our finest oil?”

The girl pulling the cart spotted Umidori and turned a beaming smile on her. She looked quite young.

“Our vegetable oil is quite a bargain!”

Very young. Almost *too* young. She was quite a bit shorter than Umidori.

She was 4′5″ at best and less than ninety pounds soaking wet, orange hair tied up at the back of her head.

Owing to her height, the girl’s arms and legs were spindly, and her chest quite flat.

……Huh? What? Why is she……?

Umidori found the cart’s owner as shocking as the cart itself. Umidori was 5′7″ and XXX pounds, so this girl was dramatically tinier, looking to all the world like a third- or fourth-grader.

She’s like half my size! Why is a little girl pulling a cart around this late at night?

“……Hey, I’m not in grade school!” the girl said, clearly used to this reaction.

“Oh?”

“I know what I look like, and I get this all the time, but I’m nineteen!”

She started rummaging around in her pocket.

“See? My ID!”

She pulled out a white card and showed it to Umidori.

On the ID was a photo of the owner, and her date of birth.

A quick bit of mental math later, and Umidori realized the girl clearly *was* nineteen.

The name on the card was *Ryoko Kudo*.

"……Ryoko Kudo?" Umidori said, reading the name aloud.

Hunter's child. Feasting hall. It wasn't a name she had ever seen before—not that Umidori was in a position to criticize.

Wait?! She's older than me?! Is this girl in college?!

What a shocking reveal. (At the time, Tougetsu Umidori was fifteen, in her first year of high school.)

"Well, what do you say, lady? Gonna buy yourself some vegetable oil?" Ryoko Kudo asked, putting the card back in her pocket. "You get a whole liter for just thirty yen!"

"……Oh?"

"If you bought the same oil at a supermarket, it would easily run you three hundred! Ours goes for a tenth of the cost! Quite a bargain, isn't it?"

"……Thirty yen? That's so cheap!"

Umidori gaped at the woman, and then at the row of bottles. There were several notes pinned to the cart, proudly declaring in magic marker: THIRTY YEN A BOTTLE! WHAT A BARGAIN!

"Y-you're kidding! Nobody does discounts that steep!"

"Ha-ha, that's our pitch! Everyone alive loves a good sale!" Kudo thumped her chest, looking proud of herself. "I don't need to tell you this, but you won't even find prices this good online! You can't let this opportunity pass you by, lady!"


Ryoko Kudo



“……Yeah, no one else would be this cheap.”

Umidori seemed rather overwhelmed.

“Um, hang on. Kudo, was it? I’m very confused. Can I ask a few questions?”

“Questions? Like what?”

“First, I’ve never seen a vegetable oil cart before,” she ventured. “Kudo, is this cart actually making any money?”

“Mm? Nope!” Kudo said. “Lady, are you new to the world of finance? Think it through! Nobody could possibly make a living at a job so ridiculous as a vegetable oil hawker.

“I’m just a part-timer! I live in the area. I work six days a week at the XXX grocery store by the station. The same one whose bag you’ve got in your hand right now!”

“Oh?” Umidori blinked, then looked at the bag again. “Y-you do? Wow, that’s a coincidence. So I just happened to run into an employee of theirs on the way home from that store?”

“Yeah, exactly. When I saw that bag in your hand, I was pretty shocked myself! Last thing I wanna see on my day off.”

“……? S-so if you’re usually a grocery store employee, why are you dragging a vegetable oil cart around in the middle of the night?”

“Because I *want* to!” Kudo said, enthusiastically. “This is a hobby of mine! I always pull a vegetable oil cart around on my days off! That’s my idea of fun!”

“……Huh?”

Umidori blinked at her again.

“……? Fun? Selling discount oil is fun?”

“What, you got a problem with that? We all got our pastimes, lady. Mine just happens to involve a cart full of vegetable oil.”

“……No, I’m not objecting.” Umidori looked her over quizzically. “I-I’m not an expert, but is that even allowed? Aren’t there, like, legal concerns?”

“Oh, I’ve got my permits in order,” Kudo said, scoffing at the notion that she wouldn’t. “Right you are, lady—you pull a cart around without a permit, that’s a violation of the Road Traffic Act.”

“……And they gave you one?”

“Yep. Why wouldn’t they? No matter what I’m selling, if it’s not bothering people, I’m free to hawk my wares.”

“……”

“So, what’ll it be, lady? You gonna buy my vegetable oil? I can see your grocery bag is pretty full up, but don’t worry, I’ll throw in another bag to carry the oil.”

“……Ummmm…”

Kudo had just asked whether she would buy something a third time, but Umidori was still hesitating.

She’d now been thoroughly briefed on the matter at hand, but it was still a very odd cart. It was hard to just go, “It’s so cheap! I’ve gotta buy some!” In fact, the bewilderingly low price was making it seem extra sketchy.

Still, if she just bought some vegetable oil here, it would solve the problems she’d been worrying about—you know, how she’d forgotten to buy any oil in the first place.

Mm? Wait a minute, this oil…

Umidori blinked at the labels.

There were twenty-odd bottles on the cart, and the same label was stuck to each of them.

“Healthy! Perfect for Salads!” I’m pretty sure they sell that everywhere.

Umidori was the opposite of an avid cook, but even she vaguely recalled seeing this slogan before. She examined the fine print and found the company name at the bottom. It was one of the bigger food suppliers in Japan, famous enough to filter through her lack of interest.

So the cart itself may be weird, but the vegetable oil it sells is from a reputable source.

And every bottle still had the plastic wrap on it—they were *new*.

Odds were, Kudo had bought them at the grocery store, left the original packaging in place, and simply lined them up on her mystery cart. *No clue why anyone would do such a thing.* But at the very least, Umidori had no reason to be concerned about the contents of the product. It was no different from going back to the store and buying oil there. The price was simply 90 percent less, and she’d be purchasing it from a decrepit wooden cart instead of a proper store.

“……Very well.”

She spent a very long time working that all out, then made her choice.

"I'd just realized I'd forgotten to buy any oil and was wondering what to do. Can I get one of these?"

"—! What, really?! You're actually buying one?!" Kudo grinned from ear to ear. "You are the best, lady! Thanks so much! I'll stuff one in a bag for you, so you pull out three ten-yen coins!"

"……You're sure thirty yen is enough? I mean, I can pay the list price."

"It's all good! This cart's prices are as advertised!"

Kudo was cheerily stuffing a bottle of oil into a plastic bag.

"Ha-ha! I didn't think you'd actually buy some! Persistence pays off!"

"……."

Still mystified, Umidori watched Kudo's back as the girl worked.

"So why do you only sell vegetable oil?"

"……Mm?"

"I mean, if you're gonna run an oil cart, wouldn't it be fun to have other types? Like sesame oil, olive oil, or…you know, other kinds? Even with vegetable oil, you've only got one brand and size."

"……."

"……I mean, I'm not trying to criticize, Kudo. I was just curious."

"……Don't be silly, lady," Kudo said, shooting her a sullen look. "Sesame oil? Olive oil? Other brands? Why would I bother hauling a cart around to sell any of that crap?

"I want to sell oil that's 'Healthy! Perfect for Salads!' This kind, and only this kind!"

"……Right."

"Don't get me wrong, lady. Strictly speaking, I'm not running an oil cart. I'm running a 'Healthy! Perfect for Salads!' cart."

Kudo was quite firm on this, her eyes boring into Umidori's.

"Therefore, my cart will never deal in any other product. That would be as weird as a ramen cart selling oden, or an oden cart selling ramen! What you just asked me was *exactly* like accosting a ramen cart owner and demanding to know why they don't have any oden!"

"……??"

Naturally, this explanation was as clear as mud.

—Nevertheless, this chain of events *had* occurred shortly after Umidori started high school.



“Huh… Ryoko Kudo?”

Present day.

Umidori was talking to a lady at the supermarket, who looked baffled.

“A girl by that name does work here, yes…”

“……! Really?” Umidori said, brightening. “Uh, then, can I speak with her? I’ve got urgent business with Ryoko Kudo!”

They were inside said supermarket, a mid-sized grocery—the one closest to Umidori’s apartment.

Umidori was talking to a staff member in the vegetable section.

“……I’d like to help,” the woman said, scratching her head. “But it’s not happening right away. Kudo’s not here.”

“……Oh?”

“It’s her day off.”

The grocery lady gave Umidori a look of suspicion, her tone professional.

“If you have business with her, I’m afraid you’ll have to come back another day.”

“……! O-oh…her day off, right……!”

Umidori deflated, hanging her head.

“R-right, I guess that makes sense. Most part-time workers don’t exactly work 365 days a year…”

“Sorry I can’t be of more assistance,” the lady said, bowing. “Do come again.” With that, she turned to leave.

“—! H-hold on!” Umidori yelped, stopping her.

“……?” The woman turned back, clearly suspicious. “Something else?”

“……Um, I don’t suppose you could give me Ryoko Kudo’s address?”

“……Huh?” This clearly turned the woman against her entirely. “What did you say?”

“I-I mean, if Ryoko Kudo actually works here, then you must have an address on file. If you can tell me that, I can go see her

right now!”

“……Ma’am, I’m afraid I can’t do that,” the woman said frostily. “We love to help our customers, but that does not involve revealing personal information.”

“……!”

This was an entirely reasonable position, and it helped Umidori settle down.

“Erp,” she gulped. “F-fair. Sorry, I’m asking the impossible…”

“—Hmph, enough flim-flam.”

A new voice interrupted their discussion.

“Personal information? Who cares! Force it out of her!”

The speaker was wearing a tracksuit and glaring at the grocery store lady like a bug she was about to squish.

“……?! Uh, Hurt, what are you saying?!” Umidori squeaked, turning to the tracksuit girl—Hurt.

“Make it simple, Tougetsu Umidori,” Hurt growled. “I need merely break five or six of this woman’s bones, destroying her resolve in the process. Then you need merely repeat your question. That will sufficiently loosen the lips of a feeble grocery store employee. Fear not—this will all be over in a minute.”

“……?!” Umidori’s cheeks quivered in horror. “N-noo, Hurt, that’s insane! We can’t do that!”

“……? Why not? It’s efficient!”

Hurt seemed genuinely confused.

“……?” But the grocery lady was the most rattled by far. “B-break my bones? Five or six of them?!”

It didn’t seem like she’d fully processed the meaning of those words, but her animal instincts had kicked in ahead of her, provoking fear.

“……! Er, um…I really should be going!”

She turned and moved away, almost at a run, leaving Umidori and Hurt surrounded by vegetables.

“*Tch!* See, Tougetsu Umidori! Your dithering has let our target get away!”

“……”

Umidori just gave her a look.

Yeah, I just can’t with this lady.

Umidori’s mind was replaying all the awful things Hurt had said and done two weeks ago, especially the part where she had

ruptured Umidori's organs.

The previous incident had made it all too clear that Hurt was violent, immoral, and unfit for human society.

She was the absolute last person who should be tagging along on a shopping trip to the grocery store. Umidori would rather not be alone with her at all.

If only Bullshit-chan was here between us. That would at least help…

Suppressing a sigh, Umidori looked behind Hurt.

A white-haired girl in a cat-eared hoodie was resting on Hurt's back.

She was still sound asleep, her shallow breaths tickling the nape of Hurt's neck.

Bullshit-chan!

Umidori balled her fists at the sight of her like that.

Hang in there a little longer! I swear I'll find a way to save you!

"—Tougetsu," a new voice cried from the opposite direction. "Hurt's proposal is out of the question, but are we sure this Ryoko Kudo part-timer grocery girl is the same person you purchased vegetable oil from a year ago?"

"……Er, um, we are, Togari," Umidori said, turning toward the voice. "Ryoko Kudo's a standard enough name, but the specific kanji used are rather unique, so I find it hard to believe there are two people with that name living in the area. I think it's safe to say the girl I bought vegetable oil from is the same person who works here."

"Ah-ha. Then at present, this Ryoko Kudo is our strongest lead."

This voice was much more logical.

It came from a small-statured girl with bluish hair in pigtails that dangled down her chest. She was so baby-faced she looked to be in her first or second year of junior high. She wore a white blouse and a brown jumper dress. Her skin was so pale it was hard to believe she'd ever stepped foot in sunlight.

"In that case, we need to make contact with Ryoko Kudo as soon as possible. We're not yet certain that she's the Beliar who knocked Bullshit-chan out—but if she isn't, we should eliminate that possibility first."

"……Mm, you're right, Togari. We definitely can't just give up and go home." Umidori nodded. "We've got good reason to not try

again another day like that lady said. Resorting to violence is out of the question, but we've gotta figure out a way to learn Ryoko Kudo's address."

Only then did she realize anything was amiss.

"……Hmm?"

Frowning to herself, she turned back to the blue-haired girl she'd been talking to.

"……Bwuh?!" she yelped, alarmed. "……Huh? What? Who?!"

"……Who else?" the girl said, frowning back at her. "I'm Togari Tsukushigaoka."



Squeeeeeeeeze.

Squishy flesh on Umidori's palms.

Body temperature in the high nineties.

The exact warmth and feel of a flesh-and-blood human.

"……?!!?!"

Flabbergasted, Umidori stared at the girl's hand in hers, blinking furiously.

"……Huh? What? Back up, how?!"

"Heh-heh-heh, what of it, Tougetsu? You look like you've seen a ghost."

The blue-haired girl responded with a mischievous grin.

"……! Y-you're kidding!" Umidori gasped at length, still not quite believing it.

She might not have recognized this girl by sight, but the voice coming out of those thin lips was one she'd heard quite a lot today.

"Togari?! You're Togari?!"

"That I am, Tougetsu." The blue-haired girl nodded. "Didn't mean to startle you. Hoped it would be a nice surprise."

"……"

As the girl—Togari Tsukushigaoka—chattered away, Umidori just gaped at her.

"……H-hang on, how is this possible? Since when did you become human?"

“Oh, by the way, Tougetsu,” Togari said, as if she’d just remembered, “I get that it’s a shock, but you’d better not overreact.”

“……Why not?”

“Because only you can actually see me.”

“……Huh?”

“This, too, is a form of telepathy, Tougetsu.”

Togari shot her a beautiful smile.

“……? Telepathy?”

“I’d been wondering. I’m a sentient pencil, and I can beam my voice directly into people’s brains…but why did I acquire that ability in the first place?

“I mean, pencils developing consciousness is unrelated to telepathic powers. They’re two entirely separate mysterious phenomena! I felt like there was a disconnect, and it was bothering me.

“But I think I’ve finally figured out the solution! You see, Tougetsu, I’m not a pencil with telepathic powers—I *am* the pencils’ telepathy!”

“……Um.”

“Strictly speaking, my true identity is not a pile of a hundred pencils. I am the conscious mind those pencils generated, the thoughts they possess. That is the true nature of Togari Tsukushigaoka!





“In other words, I exist in the realm of thought—and I’ve succeeded in expanding that range to your mind, resulting in this pseudo-telepathy. At first, I contacted you through a telephone, but that wasn’t the result of any deep consideration, just a happy accident. In hindsight, it was the kind of stunt only a living thought could pull off!”

“……??”

“And once I worked that out, a thought occurred to me: If I am what I think I am, then my telepathy needn’t be sound only.”

Togari had long since lost Umidori, but the words just kept pouring out of her mouth.

“I figured there should be no reason why I can’t telepathically project a visual, too! With that in mind, I tried an experiment—directly writing my exterior appearance into your brain!”

“……Huh?” Umidori let out a weird squeak. “……? W-wait, honestly, Togari, I didn’t get the half of that, but you’re saying the body I’m looking at is an illusion?”

“A valid interpretation.”

“……No way.”

Umidori shook her head.

“H-how can it be? I’m holding your hand! Explain that! I’m not just seeing you; I can feel your hand on mine!”

“And that, too, is an illusion, Tougetsu.”

“……?”

“Human senses are just electric signals provided by the brain. As long as I can affect those signals, I can make you see things that aren’t there, hear things that make no sound, and believe you’re touching something you aren’t. Easy-peasy.”

Togari impishly stuck out her tongue.

“Tougetsu, right now you’re holding a plastic bag with a hundred pencils in it. But thanks to my telepathy, your brain thinks you’re holding a girl’s hand. I’m forcibly tricking your senses of sight, hearing, and touch.”

“……?!”

The meaning of Togari’s words finally sank in, and Umidori gulped.

“Wh-what in the…? Forcing?! You shouldn’t do that to people’s brains!”

“Heh-heh, it’s nothing to be concerned about. C’mon, you know you’d rather talk to a girl than a pile of pencils.”

“……Yeah, that’s not the problem.”

Even as she spoke, Umidori reached out, unconsciously toying with a lock of the girl’s hair. “Wow, how is this possible? It feels just like real hair! Not just the feel of it, either. I can also smell shampoo!”

“Heh-heh-heh! I know, right? That’s my doing! I obsessed over this body, every detail, every hair! Feel me as much as you like and marvel at the perfection! Tougetsu…I should ask, what do you think of my appearance?”

“……Mm?”

“I’m pretty cute, right?”

Togari grabbed the hem of her jumper, fluttering it.

“I’ve got a lot of confidence in the design. I specifically made this to reflect your tastes in women, Tougetsu.”

“……Oh?” Umidori blinked. “My tastes?”

“Yes, you adore girls that look like me, Tougetsu.”

“……??”

“Cutesy, childish, tiny all over—exactly the type of girl you most want to be close to, just like Yoshino and Bullshit-chan.”

“……! Wh-what? Why?!”

Umidori looked downright offended.

“Th-they just happen to be similar types! Pure coincidence! You make it sound like I wanna get all up on little girls! Like I’m a pedophile!”

“Heh-heh, there’s no need to be ashamed, Tougetsu. I know everything about you! Don’t hold back! You can scoop me up in your arms and cover me in kisses!”

“……?! Y-you’re just making fun of me!” Umidori wailed, shaking her head. “C-cover you in kisses? I’m not that weird! I’m not that deviant!”

“……? You don’t want to kiss me all over? But you did that to me all the time when I was a pencil.”

“……!” A brutal rejoinder. Umidori’s brow twitched. “R-right, I forgot, I’m a total freak……!”

“……”

Someone else had been silently watching this entire interaction.

Hurt.

“Tougetsu Umidori, what is *wrong* with you?” she asked, baffled. “Why have you started talking to empty air? Have you lost it?”

“……Huh?”

“See? I warned you, Tougetsu,” Togari said. “You’re the only one who can see me, so anyone watching thinks you’re a weirdo.”

“……! Th-that’s awful!” Umidori wailed. “T-Togari, can’t you fix that?”

“……? Fix it how?”

“At least make it so Hurt can see you! If you can write information directly into brains, then what’s stopping you from doing that to everyone else?”

“……Ugh, I guess I *could*,” Togari grumbled, glancing at Hurt. “But I’m really not into the idea. I mean—I *hate* her.”

“……You do?”

“Yes, I loathe her. Despise her. I haven’t forgotten all the violent acts she committed against your person two weeks back. It’s a very different kind of grudge than the one I’ve got against Bullshit-chan-san. I’d rather not speak to her at all.”

“……! D-don’t be like that, Togari!” Umidori pleaded, tugging at Togari’s pigtails. “Honestly, just being around Hurt is grating on me, too, but whatever the reason, right now she’s on our side, trying to help Bullshit-chan.”

“……Ah.”

Umidori’s desperate plea did get a nod from Togari.

“If you put it that way, Tougetsu, you leave me no choice. One second.”

An instant later, Togari vanished completely.

“……Huh?”

Umidori blinked down at her hand. She was now holding a convenience store bag filled with pencils.

“Huh? Why? Togari?”

“……Your condition may be critical,” Hurt sighed, giving her a look of pity. “Were you this bad around the kitty cat, too? For the first time in my life, I feel a pang of sympathy for her.”

“……”

Behind Hurt—

Stood a blue-haired girl in a brown jumper.

“……Ah!” Umidori cried, spotting her just as the blue-haired girl unleashed a powerful roundhouse kick on Hurt’s posterior.

“—Ow!”

Hurt yelped, leaping into the air with Bullshit-chan still on her back.

“……??” A mysterious pain on her backside left her rubbing her butt, completely dumbfounded. She scanned her surroundings for the cause. “……?! Aiiiiieeee?!”

And the moment she spotted Togari, she let out an even louder yell.

“Wh-who are you?! Where’d you come from?”

“……Hmph! Serves you right, Hurt!”

The roundhouse kicker—Togari—shot Hurt a look of unvarnished hostility.

“Who gave you permission to wear Tougetsu’s tracksuit? That garment was not meant for the likes of you!”



A few minutes later…

Umidori, Togari, and Hurt were making their way through the supermarket interior.

“Point is, Tougetsu, all we need to be thinking about now is how to get our hands on Ryoko Kudo’s contact info.”

Togari was holding Umidori’s hand.

“Like I said, we can’t leave here without *something*. I appreciate the staff’s excuse—they can’t just give strangers someone’s address—but if we let that logic deter us, we’ll never get anywhere with this fallicide.”

“……Mm. But that said, Togari, what *do* we do?” Umidori asked.

Togari was pulling her along—though in reality, Umidori was just holding the handles of the plastic bag.

“Their ‘excuse’ is a valid one, so it’s not like this is negotiable.”

“……Hmph, we *could* try telling that employee the whole story,” Hurt said, clearly not a fan of the idea. “The whole thing, including the truth about lies. Not that she’d believe a word of it until I broke a few bones.”

“……Silence, brute,” Togari snapped, glaring at her. “Nobody asked for your opinions. I’ve already come up with a brilliant and bloodless plan of action.”

“……? Brilliant and…bloodless?”

“Just wait and see, Tougetsu. In just a few minutes, your little Togari will effortlessly solve this entire thorny concern.”

“……?”

The prouder of herself Togari got, the more confused Umidori looked.

—Not long after, they reached their destination and drew to a halt.

Technically speaking, Togari did no such thing—only the illusionary depiction of her did—but functionally, none of them were moving.

The girls were all staring at the grocery lady from before.

She was probably in her twenties. Still plenty young, and busily slapping sale price stickers on the lunches on a shelf, sweat beading on her brow.

“Now then, let me get to work. You two stay put.”

Togari moved over to the grocery lady.

“Excuse me! Do you have a minute, miss?” she cried, her voice cheery.

“……Hm?” the woman looked up, surprised. “……!”

She spotted Umidori standing behind Togari and grimaced.

“Wh-what is it this time?”

“……”

Togari did not let that moment pass. While the employee was distracted by Umidori and Hurt, she slipped right up next to the woman and grabbed her hand.

“……Huh?”

Feeling a hand on hers, the woman jumped and looked down.

“What? When? Wh-who are you?”

“……”

The grocery lady had nearly jumped out of her skin, but Togari just stared silently up at her.

What in the hell is she doing?

Umidori could only watch, baffled.

The grocery lady could see Togari, which meant the girl was beaming her telepathy into the lady’s brain.

“Er, um…do you need something?” the lady asked.

The employee might not know what was happening, but Togari was very cute—and holding her hand, staring into her eyes at close range. The woman blushed despite herself, and Togari flashed a smile.

“I’m sorry, miss,” she said. “This might sting a bit.”

“Oh?”

An instant later…

“Abababababababaha?!”

The strangest noise came out of the lady’s mouth.

Not a noise that should ever come out of a young woman.

“……Um?” Umidori squeaked.

As she watched, the grocery lady convulsed a while and crumpled to the ground.

“Heh-heh, success!” Togari said, clearly pleased with herself. “Did you see that, Tougetsu?! I did it!”

“……Did what?” Umidori asked.

Togari was pointing, so she looked back at the grocery lady.

“……”

She was lying limp on the ground, staring vacantly.

“……?! T-Togari, what did you do?!” Umidori gasped, clapping a hand over her own mouth. “Th-this is awful! What’d you do to her?”

“……? Basic telepathy.”

“……Huh?”

“We needed this lady answering our questions, so I used my telepathic powers to poke the back of her brain.”

“……??”

“Really, I just gave her a slight startle. She’ll recover in due time. At the very least, right this instant, she will not be at all bothered about sharing personal information.”

Togari flashed a smug grin, then peered into the grocery lady’s face.

“Right, miss? Let’s ask that question again. What’s Ryoko Kudo’s address?”

“……Ah, ah, ahhhhhh,” the lady exhaled, eyes vacant. “I…I-I-I know…where Ryoko lives! I-I’ve been over there before… W-

we're friends……!"

"……! You are? What a stroke of good luck!" Togari said, beaming happily. She turned back toward Umidori, repeatedly closing one eyelid.

She was probably trying to wink.

"Heh! Well, Tougetsu? As you can see, I spilled no blood, left no evidence, and no lingering side effects! Togari delivers! I'm no violent lie like Hurt here! I'm a writing implement, and my approach is totally civilized!"

"……"

Umidori had no clue how to respond.

Face twitching, she turned to Hurt—who was in no better shape.

"……It sure *looks* like there'll be side effects…," Hurt remarked.

"……"

If even Hurt was horrified, this must be *really* bad. *We might have to call Hayakawa in on this one…* Umidori thought.

—Despite Umidori's concerns, however, the woman recovered a few minutes later. She shot Umidori a baffled look, but it had no recognition behind it. Some of her memories might be in disarray, but she soon went back to work. Nothing to worry about.

……Or at least, Umidori hoped not.

And so, they acquired Ryoko Kudo's address.

3
Togari's Feelings

"Oh? Asahikawa?" Umidori said, dazed. "They got any good food there?"

"Yeah, Asahikawa ramen," Nara said, equally disaffected. "Supposedly, it's just as good as Sapporo ramen. At least, that's what my d—father said."

"Gosh… So his family's from there? You said your mother's from Kagoshima, right?"

"Yep. Ibusuki, down at the southern end of it. And obviously, Nara Prefecture's at the median point between Asahikawa and Kagoshima!"

Nara's face never budged, but her tone made it clear this was supposed to be funny.

"So I'll be spending most of Golden Week out there. I won't be back to Kobe until late in the evening on May 4."

"Oh, okay. You sure are tight with your fam, Nara. You fly off to visit someone every long vacation, right? That's so different from *my* mom's family."

"……Oh? I think we're pretty typical," Nara said, nonplussed. "My parents just like to travel, and I get dragged along with them."

"—Excuse me!"

Their conversation was interrupted by the door slamming open, and a young woman's voice.

"Thanks for waiting! I brought your french fries!" she cried.

The young woman was wearing the uniform of the karaoke shop the two girls were in. A moment later, she froze up completely.

"……?"

Clutching the tray in her hand, she fixed her eyes on the karaoke room couch.

More specifically, at the two uniformed high-school girls sitting on it.

……No, that wasn't strictly accurate. Only the black-haired girl was actually sitting down.

The red-haired girl had her head resting on the other girl's lap.

Her shoes were off, and her legs stretched out on the couch—fully reclined into that lap pillow.

"……What?" Nara asked, her head firmly on Umidori's thighs.

She had one hand clasped around Umidori's wrist.

"Er, no, nothing! P-pardon me!"

Nara's blank stare made the karaoke girl jump. (That said, Umidori's hair was hanging in her eyes, and she didn't have a good view of Nara's face, so the karaoke girl couldn't see them well.) She took the basket of french fries off the tray and placed it on the glass table.

"P-please enjoy…!" the employee stammered, and fled the room.

Leaving Umidori and Nara alone together again.

……

"Umidori, remember why we were talking about this," Nara said, as if nothing had happened. "I'll be away for a while, so promise me you won't do anything dangerous while I'm gone."

"……Mm?"

"Absolutely do not commit another fallicide. During Golden Week, I won't be around to protect you."

She emphasized this point.

"No matter how much I want to be there for you, I can't do anything about the physical distance separating Asahikawa and Kobe. All I can do is forcibly alter the appearances of humankind, not warp seven hundred miles in the blink of an eye.

"So you have to wait to commit fallicide until after vacation. Got it?"

"……Mm, okay. I know that, Nara," Umidori said, unable to suppress a smile. "I don't think Bullshit-chan would try and start anything with you gone, either. I'll spend Golden Week picking up shifts at work, don't worry."

◇◇◇◇

Ryoko Kudo lived in an apartment within walking distance of the grocery store.

That worked in their favor, but it was hardly a surprise—most people worked near their homes. Few people thought like Umidori and intentionally searched for work miles away to avoid bumping into any coworkers.

But now that they had her address and it was only a few minutes away, there was absolutely nothing preventing them from tracking Ryoko Kudo down.

They were planning on heading straight to her home.

……

In the parking lot outside the supermarket, with shopping carts all around…

“Writing implement,” Hurt growled, glowering. “There’s one thing I want to make clear right now.”

“……? What?” Togari asked. She was maintaining her blue-haired girl form. “Do we have to? I’d rather not speak to you at all.”

It was just the two of them.

Technically speaking, Hurt was still hauling Bullshit-chan around, but since the girl was unconscious, she hardly counted.

Umidori was absent on account of still being in the store. More specifically, in the ladies’ room.

“Don’t sulk, writing implement. I merely want to confirm things.”

“……?”

“We’re headed to Ryoko Kudo’s house. If she proves to be the vegetable oil Beliar, we’ll be taking her out. Are you *sure* you’re okay with that?”

“……? Why wouldn’t I be?” Togari said, baffled. “If we don’t do anything about the oil Beliar, we can’t save Bullshit-chan-san.”

“……That is true,” Hurt said. It was rare for her to hesitate like this. “But you do understand the implications of that? If we kill the oil Beliar, then everything caused by her lie will cease to exist.

“Just as the fatal wounds I inflicted on Tougetsu Umidori disappeared last time, so will you—assuming you’re also a

byproduct of her lie. Not to repeat myself, but are you *really* on board with that?”

“……Hmm,” Togari said, after a momentary silence. “Astonishing. I did not anticipate you being concerned for me, Hurt. What brought this on?”

“……Don’t read too much into it. I just want to eliminate unpredictable factors. It’ll be a headache if you suddenly start begging us not to kill the Beliar so that you can keep your life.”

“You need not concern yourself about that, Hurt. I was *always* prepared for that outcome.”

“……!”

Hurt’s eyes went wide, and she was unable to believe her ears.

“You were? You’ve achieved sentience—a will of your own—and you’re ready to toss it aside?”

“I wouldn’t say *that*,” Togari said, with an exasperated sigh. “There’s just no point stewing about it. If the vegetable oil Beliar is our enemy, then my disappearance is unavoidable and set in stone. Or would you rather I betray Tougetsu out of a pathetic desire to cling to life?”

“……No, not really.”

“I’ll add this, Hurt: I never once felt the need to stay with Tougetsu like this.”

“……Oh?”

“I mean, she no longer needs me.”

“……What does that mean?”

“I’m being pretty literal. Don’t give me that look, Hurt. I’ve been watching Tougetsu for a full year, more closely than any one of you. I know her far better than Yoshino or Bullshit-chan-san.

“So I can say this with total confidence—Tougetsu has no business holding on to these pencils.”

“……”

“I was never more than a proxy. Being with me, eating me— All the happiness that I ever gave her was *fake*.

“Perhaps two weeks ago, I mattered more to Tougetsu than anything else, but that’s no longer true.”

Togari’s tone was forceful as she made herself very clear.

“She buried me this morning of her own free will, putting the past behind her. That’s all I need to know, Hurt.

“I know I told her getting buried made me sad—but even more than that, it made me happy. ‘Oh, Tougetsu’s finally stopped eating me. She’s cast me aside and is moving on.’”

“……”

“This is something Tougetsu could never have achieved on her own, no matter how much time passed. For better or worse, her pencil thieving had gone completely unnoticed. And she’s got a kind heart—she’d never have worked up the nerve to throw me out on her own. Not after all that time together.

“She needed that kitty cat to give a push.”

“……”

“……Now, to be fair—I am totally holding that against *Bullshit-chan-san*. Just seeing her lying there on your back with that phony sleeping face is giving me hives. If I had real hands, I would totally be writing rude words all over her face in permanent marker.

“But at the same time, part of me knows that Tougetsu needed a partner who could come right out and tell her, ‘Throw those pencils away.’”

“……”

“Bullshit-chan-san ended Tougetsu’s career as a pencil thief. Bullshit-chan-san urged her to throw me out. On those two points alone, I am genuinely grateful. Not that I would ever admit it where she or Tougetsu could hear me.”

“……I don’t get it,” Hurt said, breaking her silence. “Can’t relate to a word you’re saying. How can you be grateful to someone who wanted you discarded?”

“……Yeah, I admit it’s absurd. But oh well. That’s how I feel.”

Togari let out a weary sigh.

“That’s why I didn’t plan on ever telling Tougetsu that I was sentient. I know how nice she is, so I knew that would prevent her from ever getting rid of me. She’d finally made up her mind to move on, and I didn’t want to turn that back. I swore to hold my tongue, never see her again, and no longer be a burden to her.”

“……? So why the telepathy?” Hurt frowned. “That seems to contradict the story I heard earlier. Didn’t you tell her you couldn’t stand being buried and beg her to come rescue you?”

“……Heh-heh, well, you’re not wrong that I came crawling to her,” Togari said, shrugging. “But not because I couldn’t stand being buried. That *is* what I told Tougetsu, and it’s also a fact that I loathed the dark, cramped, lonely, worm-filled grossness down there.

“But the real reason was the powerful urge to sleep that hit me down there.”

“……You got sleepy?”

“Yes, for some inexplicable reason. Just a few minutes after Tougetsu buried me.”

“……??”

“I’m still unclear exactly what made me so drowsy, but it gave me a bad feeling. I knew if I fell asleep, I’d never wake up again. Letting Tougetsu bury me was cutting me off from something vital that was sustaining my sentience.”

“……”

“But it wasn’t like the sleepiness was scary—in fact, it felt rather comforting. Part of me was certain this was not a bad way to go, and I was ready to let myself fade away.”

“……”

“……I started to relinquish it, but…” There Togari broke off, her eyes swimming. “……Um, this is gonna sound so sad. Hurt, just before my mind cut out, at the very last second—I realized something. I still had unfinished business.”

“……? What?”

“I wanted to speak with Tougetsu. Even if it was only for a single night.”

Togari shook her head.

“I’d learned to talk—it seemed a shame to let that go without ever speaking to her. I’d been a silent pencil, unable to respond no matter how many times Tougetsu told me she loved me. I wanted to at least tell her I loved her, too, and let her know how happy I’d been with her. Express all my gratitude. Perhaps a very selfish motivation, I know.”

“……So you used your telepathy?” Hurt asked, gazing at Togari’s profile, her expression betraying no emotion. “You had her dig you up not to go on living, but to have a chat with her? Your sole motivation. And now that you’ve achieved that purpose, you’ve got no qualms about letting yourself be eliminated.

“……No, *qualms* isn’t the right word. You think it’s *for* Tougetsu Umidori—you want to disappear. You’re convinced you *should*.”

“……I know that’s presumptuous,” Togari said, wincing. “Now that she knows I exist, I’m sure Tougetsu will grieve once I vanish. She’s nice like that. If I had really been thinking about what’s best for her, I would have disappeared without her ever knowing about me.”

“……”

“I hope helping with this fallicide will make up for my failure. If I can make myself useful to Tougetsu tonight, just this once, then I can go out with a smile.

“Even if that makes her depressed for a while, I’m sure she’ll be okay. She’s not alone anymore; she has Yoshino and Bullshit-chan-san with her.”

“……I see,” Hurt said at length. She nodded slowly. “I get the gist of it, at least. I fundamentally don’t give a damn if you live or die, so suit yourself—but there is one thing bothering me.”

“……? What’s that?”

“Aren’t you scared?”

“……Huh?”

“Choosing to disappear for Tougetsu Umidori’s sake—that’s a choice entirely about *her*. You didn’t say one word about how *you* feel.”

“……”

This caught Togari off guard, and her eyes went wide.

“……! W-well, I…!”

It took her a moment, but when she did speak, she sounded rattled.

“Th-that’s not even worth responding to…! Whatever emotions I might have, they’re not gonna change my mind!”

“……”

“……None of that even matters, Hurt! Promise me you won’t ever breathe a word of it to Tougetsu!” she insisted. “Her head’s full of Bullshit-chan-san right now, so I doubt she’s worked out what’ll happen to me, and I’m not about to warn her. If she’s even slightly hesitant, the odds of this fallicide succeeding will drop like a stone.”

“……True, if I know Tougetsu Umidori, she’ll hardly be down with your plan.”

“Exactly! There you have it, Hurt. I figured you’d make the practical choice, which is the only reason I answered you at all. Promise me you won’t share a word of what we said here.”

“……”

With that, their conversation died off entirely.

And not long after, Umidori came back.

“S-sorry! That took ages,” she said, trotting out to the parking lot and bobbing her head. “There was a long line for the ladies’ room……!”

“You should be sorry, Tougetsu,” Togari said, shaking her head. “The call of nature must be answered, but leaving me alone with *her*? I thought the weighty silence would crush me.”

“……! Togari, I’m so, so sorry! But Hurt was nice enough to wait for me; we don’t need to be *mean*.”

“Hmph, Hurt would hardly be put out just because I allowed myself a little spite. She fundamentally doesn’t care about us at all.”

Togari turned to face Hurt.

“She’s back, Hurt. Give my body back to Tougetsu.”

“……”

“……? Hurt?”

But Hurt let Togari’s words go in one ear and out the other.

Point-blank ignoring her, eyes locked on Umidori.

“Tougetsu Umidori,” she said. “This writing implement is planning on dying along with the lie we aim to kill.”

Just put that right out there.

“……Huh?!” Togari yelped, after a stunned silence. “Wh-wh-wh-why…?!”

“……What?” Umidori squeaked, blinking furiously.

“While you were away, the writing implement spilled the beans,” Hurt said grumpily. “She has achieved sentience thanks to the vegetable oil woman’s lie. If we eliminate that Beliar, she’ll vanish along with everything she falsified. I asked the writing implement’s feelings on that matter, and she declared herself indifferent. She wants nothing more than to perish helping you.”

“……”

“She argued that you, Tougetsu Umidori, no longer need her.

“That she was never more than an object for proxy socialization and that you should no longer keep her around. If

her owner has decided to throw her out, then she has no right to argue against that. She contacted you telepathically not because she wanted you to save her from the grave, but because she wanted to speak to you before she was gone. Having achieved that goal, she has no reason to stick around. All of this twaddle was conveyed directly from the writing implement's mind to my own."

"……"

"…… ~~~ ! God damn it, Hurt!" Togari shrieked, erupting. "Stop! Why would you even consider telling Tougetsu any of this?! I just swore you to secrecy!"

"You tried," Hurt said, not batting an eye. "I ignored it."

"……Huh?!"

"To be clear, writing implement, I genuinely *do not* care if you live or die. But you're an unpredictable factor, and the success of this fallicide could hinge upon that. I needed to do something about it. The kitty cat's survival depends on it."

"……?"

"I know Tougetsu Umidori will not just accept what you've said—whether that comes up now or when we're about to murder this lie.

"Like I said, if we're about to put this enemy down and someone suddenly goes, 'Whoops, let's not!' then I will be most upset. And it's as plain as the nose on your face that either you or Tougetsu Umidori will do just that if we don't settle this issue here and now. Best you two duke it out before we go in."

Hurt let out an exasperated sigh.

"If you yourself were hell-bent on dying, that would be one thing, but from the way you acted earlier, you're legitimately frightened by the prospect and forcing yourself to avoid acknowledging that fear. Even a fool would know that feeble resistance will crumble in the moment of truth, and you'll start clutching at straws, desperate to prolong your existence. No lie would place their bets on a *fraud*."

"……?! Wha— Don't be ridiculous! Hurt, I swear I'm not about to change my mind, no matter what happens!"

"I didn't ask *you*. I can make my own judgment calls, thank you very much—and your self-sacrificial scheme has more holes in it than Swiss cheese.

“For that reason, you and Tougetsu Umidori need to hash this thing out now, writing implement. Proceed to reach a mutual agreement about what we are doing with you. If you genuinely wish to disappear, convince Tougetsu Umidori of that now. No matter what your ultimate fate, it is no skin off my teeth, so I’ll say no more.”

“…… ～～～ !!”

Hurt seemed deeply annoyed by this whole conversation, and Togari looked ready to kill her.

“You’ve really done it now, bitch! How am I supposed to convince Tougetsu—?”

But halfway through, Togari gasped and clammed up.

“……”

She’d sensed a glare boring into her back—far worse than her own.

“……”

“……T-Tougetsu,” she stammered, turning toward the source.

“……Togari,” Umidori said, after an ominous pause.

—Her voice was much, much lower than it had ever been, with an icy edge to it.

“Is what Hurt said true?”

“Mm?”

“Did you actually tell Hurt all the things she just said?”

“……Uh, um……”

Togari shifted uncomfortably, unable to meet Umidori’s eyes.

“……W-well, yeah. But hear me out, Tougetsu! I swear on the god of stationery, she’s wrong about me being scared to die—”

Crack!

Togari was interrupted by a slap.

“……Huh?”

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

And not just one.

A flurry of slaps.

With an earnest look on her face, Umidori swung her hand back and forth, connecting with Togari’s cheeks.

“……! S-stop, Tougetsu!” Togari wailed, staggering. “Wh-what’s this for? Don’t! It’s terrifying!”

“……”

That word finally ended the slapfest.

Umidori kept her hand held high and her expression frozen, eyes locked on Togari…

“—I’m sorry, Togari!”

…and clapped her palms together in front of her face.

“I’m really, really sorry!”

“……Huh?”

“I had no idea I’d backed you into a corner like that. I didn’t explain things properly, and that must have been so upsetting!”

“……Um?” Togari’s just dropped. “Explain…what?”

“Apologizing won’t help, I know! Bullshit-chan may have occupied the center of my brain, but whether *you* get to live or die is super important!

“I already thought of a way to save you, Togari! And I totally forgot to *tell* you about it! That’s just awful. Inexcusable!”

“……What?” Hands on her aching cheeks, Togari’s eyes wavered. “Wh-what are you talking about, Tougetsu? A way to save me?”

“Mm. Well, by ‘save you’ I mean…a way for us to be together even after we’ve solved the case of the vegetable oil Beliar.”

Umidori scratched her cheek.

“Though, it may not be the way you’d prefer, Togari. I mean, it means you’ll have to live inside the stomach of the person you hate most.”

“……Oh?”

“In other words, I’m gonna have Bullshit-chan *eat* you, Togari.”

“……?!”

A shock rippled through Togari, and her cheeks quivered.

“Y-you’re what?! You want Bullshit-chan-san to eat me?!”

“Yeah. I mean, that’ll solve everything! Without the vegetable oil Beliar’s falsification, you can’t stay alive, Togari. In which case, we just need to get Bullshit-chan to eat you with her lie! Just like she did with Hurt a couple of weeks ago.”

Umidori stole a quick look at Hurt.

“That would make it possible, right? Bullshit-chan ate you, but you seem to be doing just fine.”

“……I suspect it would work out,” Hurt said, disinterested. “Last time, the fatal wounds I inflicted on you disappeared

completely once the kitty cat ate me. But my ability to inflict such wounds remains, even though I'm part of her now.

"In other words, the kitty cat can choose whether to incorporate the side effects of a lie—including this falsified writing implement. Though, if you ask me, there's absolutely no upside or benefit to taking in a mysterious talking pencil."

"……I'd say there's a pretty clear advantage. I bet Togari's telepathy will be a very effective weapon against Beliars."

"……"

Togari was just gaping at Umidori.

"That's why I'm apologizing, Togari. I never once meant to force you to sacrifice yourself. From the very beginning, I always intended to save you. But with Bullshit-chan passing out, I clean forgot to tell you in all the rush."

"……Why?"

"……Huh?"

"Why would you save me, Tougetsu? You don't *need* me anymore."

There was a desperate edge to Togari's voice.

"True, if you make Bullshit-chan-san eat me, logically I might get to go on living. I get that. But don't forget, Tougetsu—you buried me out back this morning! You said your goodbyes!"

"……"

"In which case, Tougetsu, you don't need me anymore. We shouldn't be together! Why do you not see that? I'm just a pencil! So what if I have a personality now? That shouldn't ruin the decision you made this morn—"

"Why wouldn't it?" Umidori snapped, talking over her.

"……Huh?"

"What's wrong with changing my mind? I'm a very different person now than I was when I buried you this morning," Umidori insisted, looking Togari straight in the eyes. "You're right, Togari. Bullshit-chan talked me into throwing out the pencils. I agreed with her—I shouldn't hold on to them anymore. It was time to put an end to it. And I think I made the right choice at the time, no matter what anyone else says.

"—But I *don't* think like that now. I've changed my mind, so I'm not about to let go of you, Togari. Again, no matter what anyone else says."

“……!”

Togari glared up at Umidori, hands clutching the fabric of her jumper.

“Because I turned into a girl?! I’m not just a pencil now—you’d feel bad burying a pencil that can talk, so you don’t want to throw me out anymore?!”

“Yeah, to deny that was part of it, I’d have to lie,” Umidori said, wincing. “But I’d also be lying if I said that was the only reason. You *reminded* me.”

“……Of what?”

“Of how much I used to talk to you. Of all those kisses. Of how having you around saved me on a daily basis. I thought I remembered—but I’d forgotten something important. Something talking to you brought back to me.”

“……”

“No matter what Bullshit-chan says now, I’m not letting you go. It’s not like holding on to you would damage the bond between me and Nara.

“But more importantly, Togari, you’re really hung up on me burying you this morning—”

There, Umidori hung her head, sighing.

“That didn’t really mean anything. I’m pretty sure I’d have dug you up in a few days anyway.”

“……! Y-you what?!” Togari said, turning bright red. “That doesn’t even make sense! You’re just saying that! You know, and I know, and we all know that having me around is actively detrimental! Tougetsu, you’ve gotta get rid of me! You have to!”

“Togari, that is *my* decision,” Umidori said, her tone sweet as honey. “And stop talking about what’s right for me. Tell me what *you* want.”

“……Huh?”

“Togari, you want to be with me, right?”

“……!” Togari’s face crumpled. “……! O-of course I do! I want to be with you forever and ever!”

“See? Then that’s our answer.” Umidori smiled and nodded her head. “Don’t you ever ask me to throw you out again. I hate it when people tell silly lies, Togari.”

“……!”

That was the final blow. Togari shook like a leaf, her emotions swelling.

“T-T-Tougetsu!” she wailed, and tried to throw her arms around Umidori…

“Wait,” Umidori said, aiming a palm at her.

“……Huh?”

“……”

Umidori slowly shook her head, then snatched the plastic bag containing Togari’s real body from Hurt.

She pulled that bag to her chest, giving it a tender embrace.

Squeeeeeeze.

“……! A-aughhh! Tougetsu! Tougetsu!”

Big tears rolled down Togari’s (illusionary) cheeks, and the girl’s illusory body hugged Umidori, too, squeezing the (physical) body between them.

Umidori and Togari’s two bodies in a layer cake hug.

“……What a farce,” Hurt grumbled, watching it all play out.

4
Ryoko Kudo's Perfect Life

Not that long before Umidori's group reached the supermarket…

"……*Zzzz*, *zzzz*."

A girl was sound asleep on a futon on the floor of her apartment.

She had orange hair and a tiny body, barely 4'5", less than ninety pounds.

She was wearing a baggy sweatshirt over her underwear, blissfully power-napping.

"*Zzzz*, *zzzz*, *zzzz*…"

With each breath she took, her chest rose and fell, eliciting sloshing sounds.

Upon closer inspection, she was clutching a clear plastic bottle with a yellowish fluid inside.

The bottle's label bore the slogan, HEALTHY! PERFECT FOR SALADS!

"……Eh-heh-heh."

The girl giggled in her sleep, arms wrapped tightly around the bottle of vegetable oil like a small child sleeping with their favorite stuffed animal.

"Hey, Ryoko," someone called. "Ryoko! Wake up!"

The voice came from inside the bedding.

It was a girl's voice.

"Do you even know what time it is? How long is this nap gonna take?!"

"……Mmm?"

As the voice got louder, the girl's eyes blinked open.

"What is it? Saladette, getting yelled at is an awful way to wake up."

Ryoko ran her fingers through her messy hair, rolling over in bed and glaring down at the bottle of vegetable oil.

“Haven’t had a day off in ages… Let me enjoy a noon nap when I’m not working, at least.”

“Oh, please!” the vegetable oil said. She took a big breath and started yelling. “You are such a slob! It’s hardly noon anymore! It’s dark outside! Go on, get up, wash your face! I’m not letting you fall back to sleep!”

“……Put a lid on it. You’re always like this! You’re not my mom!”

The girl—Ryoko Kudo—grumbled a lot, but did get up and move to the sink.

The room was a mess, covered in cast-off clothes and empty drink bottles. By no means was it a safe place to walk, but Kudo was used to it and easily made it to the sink without tripping.

“Ugh, I’m hungry… What should I have for breakfast?” she muttered sleepily. She brushed her teeth, rinsed her face, and did her skincare routine. “I don’t wanna make anything… Instant ramen’s good enough.”

“Hey! Ryoko!” the vegetable oil cried. “Are you forgetting what comes between washing your face and eating? Downstairs?”

“……Mm?” Like she’d only just noticed, Kudo looked down, yawning. She was only in her underwear. “……? It doesn’t matter what I’m wearing. Nobody’s gonna see it but you.”

“……Huh? Are you stupid? Of course it matters!” the oil screeched. “Put some pants on! You’re twenty, you slob! You’re always like this, and it’s why this room never gets cleaned up! And you’ll catch a cold wandering around like that!”

“……! Sh-shut up! God, you’re such a nag!” Kudo puffed her cheeks. “Fine! I’ll put something on. Have it your way!”

She grabbed a pair of baggy sweatpants off the floor.

“God damn! Like I’m a delicate flower that gets sick from not wearing pants. Hate having a nag for a roommate,” she grumbled…but did put the pants on.

The vegetable oil sounded relieved. “Good, good. You really should listen the first time. I’m the one suffering here! Why do I have to fuss over you constantly?”

A human woman and a bottle of vegetable oil having a totally normal conversation.

That was anything but normal.

But to the vegetable oil seller—Ryoko Kudo—that was her every day.



Afterward…

Kudo changed out of her baggy sweats into outdoor clothes, put her hair up, and headed out into the night.

Not exactly into the nightlife, though, but to an ordinary residential area in Isuzunomiya.

It was just past seven. There were still scattered students and suits making their way home.

And Ryoko Kudo, stumping her way along, dragging that rattling cart behind her.

"……Huh? What in the…?" "A sales cart…?" "Look at that! A little girl's pulling it around!" "Wow, you don't see that every day."

Kudo was getting a lot of curious looks and whispers.

The cart behind her had a wooden awning, two big wheels, red lanterns, a sales rack—all the parts of an old-timey sales cart. But in an ordinary neighborhood, one such cart pulled by a girl her size would draw a lot of attention.

But once the passersby saw what the cart sold, their looks changed from curiosity to befuddlement.

"……Huh? What is *that*?" "Plastic bottles?" "……Vegetable oil?" "It's even written on the lanterns!" "Who ever heard of a vegetable oil cart?"

Everyone trained their eyes on her product; more specifically, the twenty-odd bottles of oil sloshing around as the cart rocked.

"Come up, come up, getcher oil right here!"

Ryoko Kudo was calling out, bright and cheery, to every face she passed.

The moment she did, they broke eye contact and scuttled away, clearly assuming she was nuts and they were better off not getting involved.

She walked all over the neighborhood, but no matter how many people she met, no one looked for long; they soon scattered in all directions.

After a lengthy trek, Kudo parked the cart on the side of the street.

"……Whew, it's been a while, but…sales aren't improving," she muttered. "You'd think this price would hook someone! It's a tenth of what retail offers! A tenth!"

"……I'd argue that price is just making you seem all the more shady," a girl's voice scoffed, behind her.

The vegetable oil's voice.

"I mean, put yourself in their shoes. 'Our product goes for 10 percent the real price!' Without any further explanation? How can you trust that? Traveling vegetable oil sales carts are weird enough to begin with."

"……Huh? What are you talking about, Saladette? You think I should charge *more*?" Kudo snarled. "Let me clear, I'm *never* changing my methods! Nothing in this world's better than a good sale! I learned that the hard way working in a grocery store."

On a quiet residential street, a girl with a wooden cart was chatting with a bottle of vegetable oil like they were old friends, a genuinely unnerving sight. But since everyone who'd spotted them had already run away, they were blessedly (?) free of any unwanted attention.

"That reminds me, Saladette. You remember the girl who bought a bottle from me a year ago?"

"……? What girl?"

"Black hair, super tall, weeping mole under her left eye."

"……?"

"You forgot her? The one with the tits! Gazongas! Like she stuffed her shirt with mochi! We talked about them for ages after she left!"

"……! Oh!"

That seemed to jog the vegetable oil's memory.

"I guess I remember that. She stopped by not long after you started pulling the cart around."

"Yeah…and that boob babe was absolutely the best customer we've ever had. She was only a little surprised by the cart, but she heard me out and actually bought a bottle!"

Kudo's voice took on a wistful tone.

"I wonder what those knockers are up to now… I bet they're as big as ever…"

What that was supposed to mean was anyone's guess. As she muttered, Kudo grabbed the cart handle, and was about to set off again, when—

"Hey there."

—a voice came from the side.

"Mm?" Kudo jumped, turning that way. "Oh, hi, mister! Interested in my vegetable oil?"

"……"

The man speaking to Kudo wore no expression.

He was in the prime of life and wore a blue uniform with a navy hat.

A metallic, star-shaped badge was pinned to his chest.

"I'm with the police," he said. "You the girl who's been dragging a vegetable oil cart around for the last year?"

"……Uh?" Kudo froze up, shocked.

The police officer looked her cart over.

"Don't really have to ask—the evidence is right in front of me."

"……"

"We've received several reports asking us to look into the suspicious girl selling oil on the side of the road."

"…… ?!!"

The color drained from Kudo's face.

"Bwuh? Y-y-you're a cop?! What do the police want with me?!"

"I just explained that. You can't just drag a cart around. Come with me to the station."

Kudo was in a blind panic, but the cop was just doing his job.

"As for the cart…well, just ditch it somewhere out of the way. Not like anyone would steal it."

"……! Wait! Back up! Why would I have to go with you?"

"……Mm?"

"There's no rule against pulling a cart around for fun! And I've got a permit for it!"

Kudo fixed the cop with a glare, making her standard argument.

"……"

The cop met her gaze for several seconds.

"……Yeah, that's not gonna work," he said, at last. "I mean—you're lying about that permit."

"……Huh?"

“We know you’ve been saying that to anyone who asks, but the government would never issue a permit for anything this ridiculous. We checked, and unsurprisingly, no such permit exists.”

“……”

“Obviously, you know full well you’re lying. And operating a sales cart without permission is, of course, a crime. Violates the Road Traffic Act.”

The cop’s tone was completely businesslike.

Kudo hung her head, unable to argue that at all.

“And…are you even for real? A vegetable oil cart?”

“……”

“I’ve been a cop for a long time, and this is by far the most incomprehensible thing I’ve ever looked into. Frankly, I didn’t believe it was real until I saw it with my own two eyes.”

“……”

“How old are you anyway? You’re clearly underage. Where are your guardians?”

“……I’m an orphan,” Kudo said, reluctantly answering. “Both parents died a while back—and I’m not underage! I know what I look like, but I’m twenty.”

“……Huh? Twenty?!”

The cop frowned.

“Really? You sure don’t look it…but if you’re a grown-up, you oughtta know the difference between right and wrong. Either way, you’re coming to the station.”

“……!”

Kudo’s shoulders shook at his cold pronouncement.

“I-I’m under arrest? Do I have to pay a fine?”

“Dunno. We’ll figure that out down at the station.”

“……! N-no!”

When the cop pressed her, Kudo started shaking her head, a panicky rejection.

“Th-there’s no reason to arrest me! I’m not hurting anyone!”

“……Huh?”

“Who does it bother if I pull a vegetable oil cart around?! The manufacturer? Small businesses? They don’t give a damn! I’m not even obstructing traffic—I’m specifically picking streets without traffic!

“And you, big-time policeman! If you’ve got time to deal with petty crap like this, go out and solve a real crime! You work for the people!”

“……Say what you like. The law is the law,” the cop sighed. “And are you *really* not bothering anyone?”

“……Huh?”

“Thing is, we’ve had several odd claims,” he said, scratching his head. “They’re a little *too* odd, so we’re not sure what to make of them—we put them down as pranks, officially. But the reports are a bit too similar, so it’s starting to bother us.

“Every single one of them says the same thing: ‘The vegetable oil from that cart *talks* to us.’”

“……”

“……You’re not dosing this oil with drugs, are you?”

He seemed unsure if this charge was a joke or legitimate.

“……D-drugs? Absolutely not,” Kudo said, her voice a strangled squeak. “I just want to make sure everyone in town has my vegetable oil.”

“……? Well, either way, I’m done arguing. We can talk this over at the station.”

The policeman gave her a look, clearly signaling it was time she did as she was told.

“……Fine!” Kudo said, bowing under his glare. “This is the last thing I wanted to do…”

“Mm?”

“One second, officer,” Kudo said, turning her back to him.

She picked up a bottle of vegetable oil and held it out to him.

“……Huh?”

He took it as a reflex, then froze up.

“……Uh, what?”

“Don’t suppose you can let me off with that today, mm?”

“……”

Clutching the bottle, the cop gave her a look of disbelief.

“……Are you insane?” he asked. “Who tries to bribe someone with vegetable—?”

But then—

“……Erp?!”

—a gurgle left his lips.

“……”

The cop's eyes went wide. Spasms ran through him, and he crumpled to the ground.

He did not move again.

Like a puppet with its strings cut.

"……Sorry 'bout that, officer," Kudo said, not sounding terribly apologetic. "I don't give a damn about the Road Traffic Act. I'm *never* gonna stop pulling this cart around."

She knelt, pulled the oil bottle from his hands, and put it back on the cart.

"……Ryoko," said the voice from the cart.

The oil's voice.

"Do you even know what you did to him?"

"……Don't get mad at me, Saladette," Kudo said, shifting uncomfortably. "He's just gonna sleep long enough for me to get outta here. I kept the power on the low side—he'll be up and about in half an hour."

"……Ryoko, that's not the problem." The vegetable oil sounded rather irate.

The talking vegetable oil looked slightly different from the other bottles on the cart. The others were sealed up, with plastic around the lids, in mint condition……but not this one.

The seal was broken, and there was less oil inside.

It should have been a full liter of vegetable oil, but this bottle only contained around three hundred milliliters and the oil was noticeably murkier than the fresh oil around it.

Kudo must have opened that bottle quite a long time ago.

"Ryoko, how long are you going to maintain this charade?" the unique oil bottle—Saladette—asked, like she was trying to talk sense into Kudo. "Hand to your heart—and *think* for a minute. What would your father in heaven say if he could see you now?"

"……Shaddup," Kudo snorted. "You keep quiet and do as I say, Saladette. That way everything'll work out exactly the way I want it to."

"God damn it, Ryoko!"

But even as Saladette's voice went up an octave—

Clap, clap, clap, clap.

A new sound echoed from the sidelines.

Applause.

“……?”

Kudo swung around to face the noise.

She found a blonde lady standing there.

“……Huh?”



“Tee-hee-hee, splendid!”

Clap, clap, clap, clap.

The blonde kept applauding as she spoke.

“I watched with bated breath, curious how you would handle the authorities! That was the last approach I ever anticipated. How very thrilling!”

“……”

Kudo clearly had no idea what to make of her.

“……Who are you?” she asked.

She really nailed the archetypical ‘blond lady’ look. Emphasis on *lady*. Glittering blond hair fell all the way down her back, curling slightly at the ends. She had blue eyes and an expensive-looking gray dress with what appeared to be a corset around the waist.

She was maybe in her late teens, approximately 5′3″, and full-figured.

She was all smiles, standing not that far from Kudo.

“……!”

And a moment later, Kudo spotted something nearby that took her breath away.

Huh? Is that…a limo?!

Behind the blond lady was a long black limousine.

You know, the luxury cars where the passenger section is all stretched out.

The engine was off, and the glossy black finish melted into the night.

……? How long has that been there? I’ve never even seen a limo in person!

Kudo had completely forgotten everything else, marveling at the sight of a vehicle for rich people parked in a thoroughly

middle-class neighborhood.

"……So it really does exist!"

The blond lady was no longer looking at Kudo.

Her gaze had turned to the wooden cart on the side of the road.

"Honestly, when I heard the stories, I wasn't convinced. But now I see the pile of vegetable oil with my own eyes, I'm forced to believe.

"A vegetable oil cart is exactly the sort of oddity that *would* get Mud Hat's attention."

"……Mm?"

"You bought the cart itself online, Ryoko Kudo?"

"……?!"

The blonde tossed that line off, but it made Kudo flinch.

"……Hold on, how do you know my name?"

"……That would be telling." The blonde smiled evasively. "Oh, I'm getting ahead of myself. This is who *I* am."

With that, she held a delicate hand out to the empty air.

And a moment later—

"Come out, Miser Clown."

—a whole person began sprouting from the blond's arm.

"……Hnk?!"

Kudo froze.

The wriggling person slithered on out of the blond lady and, once fully extracted, landed on the pavement.

"I am here, Lady Kirara," she said flatly.

A girl with black hair, in a maid uniform.

A classic, frilly uniform—every bit either black or white. Ivory gloves on her hands, a frilly headband on her head.

She was roughly the same height as the blond and approximately the same age, but while the blond maintained a ladylike smile, the maid had no expression at all, like an emotionless robot.

"……?! Wh…wh-wh-wh-what?!"

Kudo was silent for a moment. Then her legs gave out under her, and she landed on the ground.

"What the hell was that?! Where'd that girl come from?!"

"Hello, Ryoko Kudo. My name is Kirara Seiryoin," the blond said, oblivious to Kudo's consternation. "I just turned eighteen. I'm in my last year of high school. And this is my maid, Miser

Clown. As you saw for yourself, she is no ordinary human—she's my *lie*."

"……? Huh?"

Kudo gaped at the maid, not grasping what the blond lady meant at all.

"……? Not human? A lie? What are you talking about?"

"……Curious. You really don't know a thing. You haven't worked out the nature of your own power, or that you're a Beliar."

"……A Be-what-now?"

"Very well, I'll give you the full rundown. That is, in fact, the very reason I've shown myself before you."





Kirara Seiryoin brushed her hair back dramatically.

“Listen well, Kudo. We’ve been tasked with *scouting* you.”

“……??”

“I’ll get right to the point, Ryoko Kudo. We’d like you to become the newest member of The Mud Hat Faction. What do you say?”



“Make yourself at home, Kudo.”

Later…

Ryoko Kudo had been waved into the limousine.

It was quite spacious. She found it hard to believe she was inside an automobile. The vehicle had a curved seat made of glossy leather, mood lighting, and a bar counter to the right with expensive-looking glasses on it.

“I apologize for holding this discussion in such tight quarters,” the blond girl—Kirara Seiryoin—said, settling into the seat across from the bar. “But I thought it would be markedly superior to standing around outside in the night air.”

“……!”

Kudo had perched in the middle of the seat and was glowering silently at the girl to her left.

—*Clink*.

A teacup was placed before her, undermining the tension.

“……Huh?”

“Pardon me.”

Kudo turned to her right, toward the maid—Miser Clown.

“Darjeeling.”

“……”

The meaning of that word took a moment to sink in. Kudo’s gaze drifted to the cup.

“……Mm? Oh, uh…”

“Milk or sugar?”

“……No, that’s fine. I take it straight.”

“Certainly.”

With that minimalist exchange, Miser Clown bowed and moved away. She assumed a position by the bar, hands folded over her stomach, and did not budge again.

“……”

Kudo gave her a long look, rather unnerved, but soon turned back to Seiryoin.

“So? Who are you people?” she asked. “You said we’d talk in the car, so here I am. But I ain’t exactly ready to have a leisurely cuppa with someone who can grow a person out of their arm.”

“My, what a brusque turn of phrase, Kudo,” Seiryoin said, as gracious as Kudo was blunt. “I assure you, there’s no need to keep your hackles raised. You are a Beliar, like us—and one rare enough to catch Mud Hat’s eye. You’re one of the chosen few.”

“……Who or what is a Mud Hat?” Kudo asked, scratching her cheek. “And what’s a Beliar? I don’t have the first clue what you’re on about. You calling me a liar? We only just met!”

“Oh, Kudo, don’t get the terms confused. They only sound similar. A Beliar is so much better than an ordinary liar.”

“……?”

“Heh-heh, I realize this must be a bolt from the blue.” Seiryoin smiled. “I imagined you’d take it like this, so I brought a little something along. Miser Clown!”

“Right away.”

The maid broke her silence, springing into action.

Every movement polished to perfection, she approached the table, and pulled a pamphlet out of her pocket, holding it up for Kudo to see.

“……? What’s this?” Kudo asked, frowning at the cover.

MUD HAT INITIATION FOR DUMMIES!

The title was written in a bubbly font.

“……What the?”

“Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! Lovely, yes? I made it myself!”

Seiryoin pointed at the cover, clearly seeking blanket approval.

“I could go on and on trying to explain things out loud, but I thought it would be much faster if you could simply read a proper summary. I put everything you need to know in this one little pamphlet! Doesn’t it look like a breezy read?!”

“……”

At her urging, Kudo gave the cover another examination.

Below the title were a few illustrations, clearly royalty-free images.

Several girls with beatific smiles, beaming up at her.

"……So if I read this, I'll know what you're all about?" Kudo asked, nervously taking the pamphlet.

She opened it up and began to read.

……

"……Ah-ha."

A while later…

Kudo closed the book, let out a bone-weary sigh, and put the pamphlet down.

"Is everything clear now, Kudo?" Seiryoin asked.

"……I get the gist," she nodded.

She chugged the rest of the tea.

"So you're a Beliar, Seiryoin? And this maid you call Miser Clown is your manifest lie?" she asked. "And that's why she was inside you, I guess……"

"Heh-heh, you *are* quick on the uptake!" Seiryoin purred. "It was well worth creating that pamphlet, then. Still, even reading that wouldn't clear things up for most people. There's a lot of wild material in it—I mean, lies being alive? And having the power to make human desires come true?"

"……Yeah, that's pretty crazy, all right," Kudo shrugged. "Ordinary folks wouldn't believe it. But me? I kinda gotta. It all seems real familiar."

"……"

"One day, outta nowhere, I got this weird power. Didn't know what to make of it, always just assumed I was psychic or something. But now you tell me the source is a lie, and there are a lot of people like me—that clears things up, really."

"……I wouldn't say there are a *lot* of us. Like that pamphlet says, very few people's desires are strong enough to make a lie manifest," Seiryoin clarified, smiling pleasantly. "But that's exactly why our faction's core members move to scout those lucky few, Ryoko Kudo."

"……"

"What do you say? The pamphlet cleared everything up, right? Participation in the Mud Hat Faction is an invaluable asset to any

Beliar. Mutually beneficial. There's no downside to joining, especially for a Beliar with your potential."

"……So how much do you know about me?" Kudo asked. "You came to see me, so I assume you know exactly what mischief I'm up to with this power of mine."

"……No, not exactly," Seiryoin said, shaking her head. "We did look into you a bit, so let me reveal what I do know. You are Ryoko Kudo, twenty years of age—two years older than myself. You work part-time, earning enough to get by, manning cash registers or stocking shelves at the local supermarket, yes?"

"……"

"But it's not like you've lived like that ever since you came of age. A year ago, you were in a very different line of work……"

Seiryoin paused, one eye on Kudo's response.

"You were a chef, yes?"

"……"

"And not merely kitchen staff, but the owner and head chef of a Chinese restaurant.

"When I heard that news, I was genuinely impressed. Not many teenage girls manage to be entrepreneurs or chefs, much less both at once. Running your own business! That's hardly something you see every day. And the restaurant's reputation was quite high. A prime location in the shopping district, and at your peak, you had lines outside for days."

"……That was a long time ago," Kudo sighed. "And you clearly did your homework. I shuttered the place a while back, and it's a parking lot with monthly fees now."

"……Tee-hee, with the power of the Mud Hat Faction, it was easy to uncover that information," Seiryoin said, beaming. "That said, this is all we actually learned."

"……"

"Why would a teenage girl with a successful restaurant close up shop out of nowhere? Why abandon your career as a chef to slum it at the supermarket?

"And why spend your free time on something as eccentric as a wooden vegetable oil cart? We found no answers to those questions."

Seiryoin sighed.

“……Well, perhaps we did learn one more thing: The reason why we grew convinced you were a Beliar.

“There’s an odd rumor going around town. ‘Don’t buy vegetable oil from a street cart. No matter how much of a bargain it is, the oil you buy will *talk* to you.’”

“……”

“Heh-heh, I’ll admit I came here to see you primarily out of curiosity, Kudo. A desire for answers to this riddle.

“Well, would you care to clue me in? What exactly is it you’re trying to accomplish?”

“……”

It was a while before Kudo responded.

A long silence.

But after a few minutes, her lips parted.

“……First, I wanna correct a few things.”

“……Oh?”

“You said I’m slumming it at the supermarket, but I gotta take issue with that assessment.”

“……?”

“I got good reasons for working there. I want to sell vegetable oil,” Kudo said, sounding rather cross. “Hauling the oil cart around on my days off is just extra. The grocery store is my main gambit—I’m making it so nearly every household in the area’s bought vegetable oil from my register.

“So those rumors ain’t exactly accurate. It’s not just oil from my cart that talks! I put voices in all the oil at the supermarket, too, and all those bottles are sleeping quietly in kitchens all over this neighborhood. *For now.*”

“……Whatever for?” Seiryoin asked, genuinely curious.

“……All right, I’ll tell you, Seiryoin,” Kudo said, with a weary sigh. “The lie I’m telling—”

5
Seiryoin Pulse

“I see.”

A few minutes later…

Kudo’s speech concluded, and Seiryoin settled back in the limo, nodding to herself.

“I fully understand, Kudo,” she said. “Thank you so much for explaining things to us in such exhausting detail.”

“……Ain’t nobody exhausted yet,” Kudo growled. “It’s the first time I ever told anyone else, so my lips may have run away from me a bit. But what? You think my story’s gonna be good enough for this Mud Hat dude?”

“……That’d be telling,” Seiryoin said, with an evasive smile. “It’s hardly my place to say—the decision is his alone. All I can do is relay what you’ve told me to the man’s ears. But I will say this:

“If I may give *my* personal views, I believe you have what it takes to be a member of our faction. What you’ve told me is absolutely fascinating.”

“……Was it, now?”

“Yes. Not at all what I expected. Of all the reasons I imagined you’d be lugging a vegetable oil cart around— Well, I was certainly wildly off base.”

Seiryoin shook her head.

“And I imagine that will endear you to him. It may take a few days to get a reply, but I’m fairly certain we’ll be moving forward on our end. Do act accordingly.”

“……”

Just then—

“Hold up!”

—a new voice cut in. A girl’s voice from Kudo’s pocket.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Seiryoin,” she growled. “Ryoko, you aren’t seriously considering joining these people, are you?”

“……Saladette?” Kudo seemed taken aback. She looked down at the oil bottle in her pocket. “Er, um…don’t just start jabbering! You’ll startle people!”

“……My,” Seiryoin said, clearly tickled pink. “What a curious sensation! I hear her voice directly in my mind… Is that phrasing apt?”

She smiled at the bottle of vegetable oil.

“You must be the Saladette Kudo mentioned.”

“……Hmph,” the oil snorted, clearly quite cross. “I shouldn’t even have to say this, Ryoko, but I’m dead set against it.”

“……Oh?”

“These people are fishy. We can’t trust them farther than we can throw them.

“Did you not get any weird vibes from that pamphlet? Especially that bit on pages seven and eight: ‘Let’s all get along! Faction members are your friends!’”

“……? Which pages were those?”

“You just read it! Did you forget already? Look again! The bit about the world’s best surgeon and her lie!”

“……! Oh!”

Kudo let out a strangled grunt.

“The ones who go around hurting people and patching them up? Yeah, that was pretty gnarly.”

“Exactly my point. These people aren’t right,” Saladette insisted. “Think it through, Royko. If someone that nuts is in their ranks, they might not be the only one. Do you really want to be part of that? This Seiryoin lady *seems* normal enough, but is there any guarantee she’s not just as messed up as that surgical Beliar?”

“……Oof,” Seiryoin said, offended. “I can hardly let that pass, Saladette. Itami—the surgical Beliar you mentioned—is no longer part of our faction. She *was* when I made the pamphlet, but she quite recently ceased to be a Beliar.”

“……? You can just…stop?”

“Yes. She got mixed up in a bit of a predicament… Still, Itami is one thing, but I hardly expected to be put in the same category as Hurt. That’s just defamation! Tee-hee-hee.”

She took a deep breath, settling her irritation.

"But you do have a point, Saladette. I swear the Mud Hat Faction are not all brutes…but it's also true that we see nothing wrong with allowing a brute to join our ranks.

"Fundamentally speaking, none of us see much point in *rules*. Obedience is of no use whatsoever in manifesting our lies. The closest thing to a rule we have—and the only such candidate to become one—is that our actions should entertain our founder, Mud Hat himself."

"……! See?! They're a den of iniquity!" Saladette spat. "You can't join them, Ryoko. Stay away from that! They're all in it for themselves! They're anarchists!"

"……Saladette."

"—Well, it seems I've made a poor impression on you, Saladette. Such a pity."

Seiryoin let out a sad—clearly phony—sigh.

"But are *you* sure, Kudo? Will you listen to her and reject our offer?"

"……Mm?"

"I mean, you haven't achieved your goal."

Seiryoin caught Kudo's gaze and held it.

"You're working a register, hauling a cart around, toiling to sell vegetable oil to the whole town. You've been at this a year, so even after all that time, you're not ready for the next phase.

"Selling oil isn't your goal; your goal is what comes *after*. You've been unable to break that stalemate on your own."

"……"

"This is not an opportunity you can afford to pass up, Kudo. With the power of Mud Hat's hypnosis, you can get out of this deadlock. Easily.

"Don't you want to level up your Beliar powers and see what happens next? Naturally, you're free to join us or not. But if you let this chance slip through your fingers, I doubt you'll ever achieve your goal."

"……!"

Kudo bit her lip, hanging her head.

"Yeah. If I don't make up my mind, I'll never get anywhere."

"—! Ryoko, no!" Saladette gasped. "You can't listen to them!"

"But, Saladette…," Kudo wailed, turning to the bottle.

“……”

Seiryoin merely watched them with a smile. Until—

“Lady Kirara.” The maid broke her silence. “I do apologize, but a word?”

“……? What it is, Miser Clown?”

“We have company.”

“……Oh?”

“Eyes outside the car, on Kudo’s cart.”

“……?”

Seiryoin frowned but looked where the maid indicated.

“Mm?” Kudo did the same. “……Huh? What the?”

Three girls had the vegetable oil cart surrounded.

The first was tall, with long black hair.

The second had short purple hair and had a tracksuit on.

And the third girl was on the second girl’s back, wearing a white cat-eared hoodie.

“……Who the hell are they?”

The black-haired girl seemed especially nervous and kept scanning her surroundings, like she was looking for someone. Meanwhile, the girl with purple hair was just staring at the cart, not moving a muscle. The cat-eared hoodie girl appeared to be unconscious, sleeping soundly on the other girl’s back.

“……They better not be thieves,” Kudo growled, frowning.

Meanwhile, Seiryoin—

“……”

……was glaring at them, her smile gone. Her gaze was primarily on the purple-haired girl and the cat-eared girl on her back.

“……My, my,” she said, not taking her eyes from the window. “Speak of the devil. Still, I *am* surprised. I did not imagine we’d be reunited here.”

“What shall we do, Lady Kirara?” Miser Clown asked, emotionless.

“……Heh, isn’t it obvious?” Seiryoin’s smile was downright beguiling. “Time to work, Miser Clown. Prepare yourself.”



—A while earlier.

“Augh!” Togari spotted it first. She’d been in the lead. “Tougetsu! Look, there it is!”

She started tugging at Umidori’s sleeve, pointing ahead.

“……? Where’s what, Togari?” Umidori asked, following the girl’s finger. “Oh!” she cried, noticing it herself.

It was a cart, abandoned at the edge of the asphalt, the exact same construction as the one she’d encountered a year ago—a rundown roof, wobbly wheels, red lanterns with VEGETABLE OIL written on them, and a row of bottles on the cart itself.

“……The v-vegetable oil cart!” she murmured. “Th-that’s it! I’m sure that’s where I bought that oil last year!”

“Hmph. Curious,” Hurt said. “Then we won’t have to kick her door in. I doubt there are two carts this bizarre in the same town, but there’s no sign of the owner.”

“……Oh?” Umidori looked around. “N-now that you mention it, where *is* Ryoko Kudo? Why’d she leave her cart here? Bathroom break?”

“Dunno, but if we wait to ambush her here, we oughtta catch this Ryoko Kudo red-handed. Tougetsu Umidori, your prediction seems accurate.”

“……?”

“Now that we’ve found the thing, I can confirm. There’s a fauxroma all over this cart.”

Hurt sniffed the air a few times, like a dog.

“Hardly as powerful as Hayakawa once was, or even that red-haired Beliar, but the odor itself is clear enough to say for sure. This cart’s owner, Ryoko Kudo, is no ordinary human. She’s a Beliar.”

“……!”

Hurt spoke with such conviction that it made Umidori gasp. *I-I thought so! Ryoko Kudo’s one of them! I-if that’s true, we’ve gotta find her right away!*

With those thoughts running through her head, she nervously scanned their surroundings.

“……Hmm?”

And, not long after, she noticed a black vehicle parked nearby.

“……A limo?” she asked aloud.

Far too luxurious for this ordinary residential street. It was sitting on the side of the road, engines off.

Why a limo? Why would one be here?

The others were preoccupied by the vegetable oil cart and had yet to notice the limousine, but curiosity got the better of Umidori and she couldn't take her eyes off it.

"……Mm?"

That wasn't all she noticed.

There was a girl inside the limo, waving at her through the window.

"Who's that……?"

She had blonde hair and blue eyes.

Didn't look much older than Umidori herself.

She waved at Umidori with a pleasant smile.

"……!?!"

And an instant later—

—static ran across Umidori's mind.

……

"……Odd," Hurt said, eyes locked on the cart. "……What's *that* smell? Is it mingling?"

"……? Mingling? What do you mean?" Togari asked.

"It's very, very faint…but I think there's a second fauxroma underneath the cart's. Perhaps there was a second Beliar here—we may not be dealing with *just* Ryoko Kudo."

"……Huh? A second Beliar? What the—"

"It hardly matters. Whether we're up against one or two Beliars, I will crush them all," Hurt scoffed, shaking her head. "But be on the lookout, Tougetsu Umidori. The moment our target appears on the scene, I'll kill Ryoko Kudo's lie. You take the kitty cat and stand clear."

"……"

"……? Tougetsu Umidori?"

"……"

No answer came.

Umidori's head was down, like she'd gone limp.

"Er, um…Tougetsu? Do you feel sick?" Togari called, getting worried.

Only then did Umidori raise her head.

"Oh? Is her name Tougetsu Umidori?" she murmured.

"……Huh?" Togari stiffened up. "Tougetsu?"

"Tee-hee… What an odd name!"

Tougetsu Umidori repressed an elegant smile—the likes of which her lips had never before displayed.

“I wonder what the kanji are…I can’t begin to imagine them!”

◇◇◇◇

“……T-Tougetsu? What’s going on?” Togari asked gingerly.

It was *clearly* Tougetsu Umidori standing there. Her face, her voice—nearly everything about her was unchanged.

“Heh-heh… It’s been a while, Hurt. Same to Bullshit-chan.”

But the *way* she spoke and the expression on her face made her seem like someone else entirely.

“Glad to see you’re faring well…if that’s an apt turn of phrase. From the looks of things, Bullshit-chan is hardly in peak form.”

“……”

Hurt was gazing back at her, half-stunned.

“……Are you……Seiryoin?” she muttered, after a minute. “How…… Why are you here?”

“My! Don’t look so put out. We’re former comrades! This is a beautiful moment,” Umidori said, with a teasing lilt. She even put a hand to her lips.

“……??” Togari was gaping at this transformation, unable to process what she was seeing. “H-Hurt! What’s happening?! What’s wrong with Tougetsu?”

“……Oh? Who are you?”

Umidori—no, Hurt had called her “Seiryoin,” so this was clearly not Tougetsu Umidori at all—turned toward Togari, as if she’d only just noticed her.

“I didn’t see this blue girl from the car at all. A fresh face. But if you’re here, you must be a new friend of Bullshit-chan’s?”

“……!”

Seiryoin was clearly acting like they’d never met before, and that hit Togari hard.

“Wh-what’s got into you, Tougetsu?”

“……? Aren’t you an odd one? Are you human? Or a lie? Even seeing you for myself, I can’t tell.” Seiryoin appeared to be rather bewildered, but she soon lost interest, turning back to Hurt.

“Hurt, I’ll admit, this is a surprise. I heard you were defeated by Bullshit-chan two weeks ago. Didn’t she eat you?”

“……”

“No one asked you to, but you went after her, and were soundly defeated by someone you always held in contempt. Honestly, when I first heard about it, I laughed myself sick.”

There, Seiryoin broke off, glancing at the girl on Hurt’s shoulders.

“But I certainly didn’t imagine I’d stumble across something even more fascinating a fortnight later. Hurt herself, with Bullshit-chan around. If only the rest of the faction were here to see it! Imagine the looks on their faces.”

“……Seiryoin,” Hurt said, her eyes locked on Seiryoin. “Are you here to kill the kitty cat and me with her?”

“……Hmm?” Seiryoin’s jaw dropped. For a moment, she froze. Then— “Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! *Kill*? Don’t be absurd! Why should *I* have to stoop to *that*? That was *your* department.”

“……Meaning?”

“I’m here by a simple twist of fate—on a mission direct from Mud Hat himself, and acting as a core faction member.” Seiryoin fluttered a hand. “You were a core member, yet you were never capable of anything but mindless violence. Unlike you, I’m *productive*, and that means Mud Hat often makes requests of me. What’s a girl to do?”

“……”

“Though perhaps it isn’t *entirely* a coincidence. Bullshit-chan appears to be in a bad way…and I *did* hear you just threaten to murder Ryoko Kudo’s lie. Tell me, what brings you here? I admit, the situation alone speaks volumes.”

Seiryoin sighed dramatically.

“Whatever the reason, now that we’ve met, I can’t let you waltz away, Hurt.”

“……!”

“……I *am* sorry,” Seiryoin said, giving her a look of pity. “Honestly, no matter how much I personally loathed you, I’d rather not fight a former comrade.

“But now that you’ve threatened Ryoko Kudo’s lie, I cannot stand idly by. I’ve been given a job, and I must see it through. Miser Clown!”

Seiryoin snapped her fingers.

The door of the limo swung open, and a maid stepped out.

“……”

An almost entirely black and white uniform. A frilly headband, white gloves, black boots. Her gaze mechanically cold, the maid moved slowly in Hurt’s direction.

“……Miser Clown.”

“It’s been a while, Hurt,” the maid said, bowing her head. “It’s a pity it has come to this, but fate demands it. Prepare yourself.”

An instant later, a wad of bills appeared in Miser Clown’s hand —one hundred ten-thousand-yen bills, bound together. One, two, three appeared in her white-gloved palm, the contents spilling out on the ground below.

Naturally, these were no ordinary bills. They were soon defying the laws of physics, fluttering in the air around Miser Clown.

“…… ∿∿∿ !” Hurt bit her lip, scowling at the flurry of bills. “Pity my ass! You’ve always had it in for me, Miser Clown!”

“Heh-heh… I’ll add that resistance is futile, Hurt,” Seiryoin said, goading her further. “You know as well as anyone there are only two ways to kill a manifest lie. First, do something to the Beliar and weaken the lie itself. Second, have the lies face off, and let the stronger one win.

“And my Miser Clown is far stronger than you. I’ll give you one chance to surrender, Hurt. You have no chance of winning here, so it’s a waste of everyone’s time to test that in a fight.”

“……Wish I had that option,” Hurt spat. “If you’d free me from this kitty cat, I’d accept it. Unfortunately, I’m currently incapable of doing anything that doesn’t benefit her. As unpleasant as that is, my only option is to fight to the bitter end.”

“……You don’t say? Oh, dear.” Seiryoin clearly did not care in the slightest. Her tone grew steely. “Then I suppose we’ll just demonstrate our superior might. Goodbye, Hurt.”

“……!”

Hurt tensed up.

“—Would you mind not acting like I’m not here?” a sulky voice echoed. “Don’t resort to fisticuffs like you’ve got the place to yourselves.”

“……! Writing implement?” Hurt said, giving the blue-haired girl a look that suggested she’d entirely forgotten about her.

“Hurt, who the hell are these people? Old friends of yours?” Togari had her arms crossed, scowling at Seiryoin and Miser Clown.

“Oh, I suppose we were neglecting you,” Seiryoin said, her eyes half-lidded. “What, do you wish to join Hurt on the receiving end of this drubbing?”

She sounded exasperated.

“Who and what are you, anyway? You didn’t bat an eye at Miser Clown, so you clearly know a thing or two about lies… I was wondering about that. Are you human? Or a lie?”

“……”

“If you’re human, behave yourself, and we’ll let you go home unharmed. If you’re a lie, then I’m afraid we’ll have to eliminate you alongside Bullshit-chan and Hurt. Which one are you?”

“……Clearly, you *aren’t* Tougetsu at all,” Togari said, studying Seiryoin’s face. She nodded. “Your expressions, tone, gestures—every part of you is miles from the girl I know and love. This was all so unexpected, it took me a minute to catch up, but you can’t rattle me now. You’re an impostor who’s taken over Tougetsu’s body!”

“……Hah, an impostor, am I?” Seiryoin twirled her hair around her fingers, bored. “So what if I am?”

“Simple. Get out of Tougetsu this instant, before your vile essence corrupts her body further.”

“……Huh?”

“What you want doesn’t matter. I can force the issue. Allow me to answer your previous question.”

Togari held a palm out in Seiryoin’s direction.

“Am I human? Or a lie? The answer is—neither.

“I am Togari Tsukushigaoka, the product of Tougetsu’s love. The world’s one and only fighting pencil!”

“……?”

Seiryoin’s jaw dropped.

“……? Huh? What did you say? A fighting pencil?!”

An instant later—

“Abababababa!” A bizarre noise issued from Umidori’s lips. “Ba…ba…ba……!”

“Lady Kirara?!” Miser Clown yelped. “Wh-what’s wrong?”

“……! Wh-what…?! What is this……?!” Seiryoin stumbled back, clutching her head in agony. “M-my heart’s about to split open! I feel sick……? What are you doing to me?!”

“Oh? You’re still sane after soaking in my telepathic attack? I’m holding back to avoid harming Tougetsu, but you’re certainly one tough cookie.”

Togari had a triumphant smirk on her lips.

“A dose like that knocked the supermarket lady out cold…… I suppose different people have different levels of mental fortitude, then?”

“……! M-Miser Clown!” Seiryoin screamed. “That girl’s not human! Attack, all out!”

“—Yes, ma’am!”

The instant she heard the order, Miser Clown plucked a bill from the air and hurled it at Togari, like a pitcher on the mound.

The ten-thousand-yen bill became a brutal fastball, howling through the air toward Togari’s diminutive form.

And yet—

“Hmph. You can’t hit me.”

—the note passed right through Togari.

“Wha?!”

“Heh-heh. Too bad, maid lady. I’m not one of those girls with corporeal forms. No matter how you attack me, it won’t do a thing.”

“……??”

Miser Clown’s face twisted in confusion while Seiryoin let out a groan. Togari’s attack had clearly hit hard, and Seiryoin wasn’t getting up.

—And Hurt wasn’t about to let that opportunity go to waste.

“……Nice one, writing implement!” she yelled, snatching up the plastic bag full of pencils. With Bullshit-chan still on her back, she turned and ran off.

“—?! W-wait, Hurt?!” Togari yelped. “What’s going on?! Where are you going?! We haven’t taken them out yet!”

“……! Just fall in line! Retreat!”

“……Huuuh?!” Togari roared. “R-retreat?! Are you out of your mind? Tougetsu’s in enemy hands! Have you forgotten that?!”

“……She is. But suck it up! The chips are against us!”

“……! S-suck it up?! I can’t do that! Turn back this instant! Or I’ll punch you in the brain! Hear me?!”

“…….We *can* go back, but then this kitty cat will almost certainly wind up dead.”

“……Huh?” That got through Togari’s anger. “……What?”

“Seiryoin and Miser Clown are nasty customers,” Hurt said, never once slowing down. “And they’re well aware this kitty cat is our sore spot. If we have to fight, the first thing they’ll do is target her, and in my state, I can’t keep her safe.”

“…… ! B-but we can’t just leave Tougetsu—”

“It’s only temporary! Seiryoin isn’t the type of Beliar to harm a civilian. If she wanted to, Tougetsu Umidori would already be dead. We can afford to leave her a moment.”

“…….! B-but! But!”

“Arghhhh, shut up! Why do I have to do all this for a kitty cat?!” Hurt yelled. “I just want to free myself from her, but my legs move on their own! My body automatically acts to protect her! What a vexing restriction! I’d rather be dead than trapped like this!”

Even as she howled, Hurt fled across the Isuzunomiya night.

Leaving only Tougetsu Umidori behind.

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“……Th-they actually did it! They pulled a fast one on *me*!”

Not long after Hurt and Togari disappeared…

Seiryoin—still in Tougetsu Umidori’s body—managed to right herself, her breathing ragged.

“……Should we have let them get away, Lady Kirara?” Miser Clown asked, supporting Seiryoin. “Despite the unexpected damage, letting Hurt retreat may have consequences.”

“……That may be the case, but it’s fine, Miser Clown,” Seiryoin said, dusting off her skirt. “I regret failing to eliminate her, but letting Hurt and Bullshit-chan roam free is hardly a real concern.

“We can finish them off at our leisure later. First, let’s handle this evaluation.”

“……? Evaluation?” Miser Clown deadpanned, crooking her head.

On the receiving end of her gaze, Seiryoin—

“Gosh, this girl has rather large breasts!”

—was looking down at the body she wore, giving Umidori’s boobs a squeeze.

“I was aware the moment I entered her, but they really are absurd! I wonder what her cup size is?”

“……Lady Kirara?”

“……Tee-hee, only kidding, Miser Clown,” Seiryoin said, catching an arctic note in her lie’s tone. She shook her head. “You know, there’s something I’ve been wondering since I first spotted Bullshit-chan……”

“……?”

“First I should say it’s no surprise Hurt is cooperating with her. I have no idea what’s going on with the blue-haired girl, but the attack she used on me was certainly nothing human. Still……”

Seiryoin looked down at Umidori’s magnificent bosom.

“If none of them are human, why is *this* girl hanging out with them?” she asked, clearly curious. “Get some ropes ready, Miser Clown. I want to have a nice long chat with this Tougetsu Umidori character.”

6
Kudo and Saladette

“Disgusting!”

The man took one bite of the gyoza and spat it out.

“……Mm?” A girl in white chef’s clothes froze up, shocked by this display.

“Absolutely disgusting! Inedible! I’d be better off making gyoza at home!” the man ranted, turning on her. “I know what I’m talking about. Give it up, Ryoko. Shut this place down.”

They were inside a Chinese restaurant.

The man was seated at a table with one of those lazy Susans so common at this type of restaurant.

On the table was a plate of fresh fried gyoza and a small dish for sauce.

“……! S-sorry,” the girl said, bowing in genuine shame. It was Ryoko Kudo, once upon a time. “I blew it again…? I’ll make another batch!”

“No. Forget it. They’re not literally inedible. I’ll eat what you made.”

“……B-but—”

“It’s fine. Ryoko—hear me out,” he said, grumpily laying his chopsticks down and turning to face her. “It’s not like I *want* to be the monster here. I’ve known you since you were a kid, and your father’s cooked no end of incredible meals for me.”

“……”

“But this just isn’t possible. You don’t have the training. A normal girl can’t drop out of high school and just start running her own shop.

“Look around us—the proof is right here. It’s past eight, and I’m the only customer. Why is that? It’s not just today, either. It’s

always like this. But when your dad was alive, there was rarely an empty seat in the house."

"……!"

"……Perhaps it would have been better for you if I hadn't shown up, either." He sighed. "I swear, Ryoko. What happened to your father shocked me, and I grieved for him."

"……"

"He was a good man before the incurable illness took him. And since you lost your mother a long time back, he was your only family. I get why you can't accept his untimely death. But Ryoko, if he was looking down at you now from heaven, do you really think he'd be happy?"

"……"

"Your surviving relatives were staunchly opposed to you dropping out of high school and taking over the restaurant, right? If I was one of them, I'd have tried to stop you, too. Some things just aren't feasible."

"……So you want me to close down the place?" Kudo said, finally raising her head, her voice quivering. "You think there's no way I can keep it going, so I should give up now? Put the nail in the coffin of the shop my father spent his life building? Is that your point?"

"……Well, the ultimate decision is yours, Ryoko," the man said, unable to meet her eye. "I just think if you're serious about keeping it open, the last thing you should do is serve food even you aren't happy with."

"……Huh?"

"Tell me the truth, Ryoko. Do you *really* think this gyoza is good enough for your restaurant?"

……

"*Sniff*…urgh…augh…!"

A while later…

Ryoko Kudo was washing dishes, sobbing.

"……Damn it! Damn him! Damn it all! That old fart! I made you the damn gyoza set you asked for!"

She was scrubbing that dish like it had killed her parents.

"And you called it disgusting?! If it's inedible, don't eat it! Don't sit there ordering more things and choking them all down, too! Being all nice and shit!"

Tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"……To hell with everything! I'm such a mess. The ideal regular, and all I can serve is those lousy-ass gyoza……!"

Unable to keep going, she gave up on washing dishes, burying her face in her hands.

There was no one else in the kitchen.

"Why are they so bad?! I'm following the recipe my dad left me!"

She pulled out a handkerchief, dabbing the tears, glaring at empty air.

"I guess he was right. I just don't have the training. I'm an amateur chef. If anyone could make great food following a recipe, there'd be no such thing as a struggling cook.

"I wish like hell I'd made Dad teach me more—I mean, I did help out here sometimes, but the whole idea was that he'd start training me for real *after* high school."

Even as she spoke, memories of him came flooding back, and she drooped her head in anguish.

"Dad……"

Her father's words ran through her mind.

"Listen, Ryoko, if you want to be a great chef, you've got to listen to your ingredients."

He would say that all the time.

"Food is about the ingredients, not the cook."

"Mediocre ingredients prepared by a first-class chef can't begin to match first-rate ingredients prepared by an average cook."

"We cooks have to hear our ingredients' voices and do what they say."

"Sure, developing an ear for them is hardly easy."

"But if you train hard enough, Ryoko, you'll learn how to hear them someday."

"After all, you're my *daughter."*

"……Voice, shmoice. I can't hear shit, Dad," Ryoko muttered. "Gimme a hint! How can I learn to hear them?! If I could do that, I wouldn't be here, killing your restaurant."

……

"—Damn it!"

The fury building up within Ryoko exploded, and she kicked the counter in front of her.

……The impact knocked a bottle off the condiment shelf above. It bounced off Ryoko's head.

—*Plop*!

"Ow?!" The unexpected blow to the back of her head left Kudo groaning. "Wh-what was that……?"

She looked down and saw a bottle of vegetable oil at her feet.

Already open, half used up. The label bore the slogan, HEALTHY! PERFECT FOR SALADS!

"……! That's the last thing I need! Can't I get one damn thing to go right?"

Rubbing her head with one hand, she let out a howl of fury.

"Too much! Everything sucks! I'm going home and taking a nap! No point cleaning up—not like I'll have any customers tomorrow!"

She shook herself like a wet dog and abandoned the dirty dishes, turning to storm out of the kitchen.

There was no one there to reprimand her for it. No one else in the kitchen at all. Kudo was the only person working at this restaurant.

"……Ha-ha, I'm headed straight for rock bottom. Not cleaning up, taking my rage out on inanimate objects— Forget how my food tastes, I'm not even meeting the baseline standard for a cook."

Even as she reached for the light switch, Kudo's fury turned on her.

"Maybe this isn't feasible. A kid like me, trying to keep a shop open out of pure stubbornness… Maybe my father is looking down from heaven and weeping at the sight of me.

"Perhaps I really am better off just throwing in the towel."

A moment of weakness, words for no one else, words she'd never want anyone else to hear. Except…

"—Don't you dare say that, little lady. It's too soon to give up!"

"……Huh?"

A girl's voice, from behind her. Kudo stopped dead in her tracks.

"……?" She slowly turned around. "……Mm?"

“Don’t give up, little lady. Never surrender! Hold fast! You’re not doing anything wrong!”

The voice was still there.

Kudo could tell it had come from *below* the cupboards.

“True, what you’re attempting? By human standards—by grown-up logic—maybe it isn’t the best course of action. Perhaps it isn’t the smartest move. The people telling you to give up and move on aren’t, in that sense, entirely wrong.

“But just because they aren’t wrong doesn’t mean *you* are, human girl.”

This voice was not coming from any human.

Obviously.

Ryoko Kudo was the only human being in this kitchen.

“You might still be a child, but you thought for yourself. You made the choice to become a chef and keep your father’s restaurant going! Stay the course. Do not raise the white flag until the bitter end! Take pride in your decision, pay no heed to anything others say, and follow this path to its natural conclusion!

“I know this to be true—no one can know if this was the right call until the chips have fallen where they may.”

This voice alone rang out.

From the floor—where the bottle of vegetable oil lay.

“And know this, little lady. I do not believe what you’re attempting is a child’s folly. I know you’re all grown up!

“You bought me at the local supermarket a week ago. I’ve been in that cupboard, watching you work your butt off each and every day! I *know* what I’m talking about.”

“……”

Kudo couldn’t tear her eyes off the oil.

After a long silence—

“—Aiiiiiieeeeeee! The oil is talkiiiiiiiiiing!”

She toppled over backward, her screech echoing through the kitchen.

◇◇◇◇

“Will you wake up already?”

Someone was shaking Umidori on the seat in the limousine. Her eyes fluttered open.

“Mm……?” she grunted blearily, flitting around her unfocused eyes. “Uh…where am I?”

She soon realized she was not where she belonged.

Umidori tried to rub her eyes and discovered she couldn’t move her arms—they were bound behind her.

“……Bwuh?! What?!”

Her last shred of grogginess was instantly banished, and she started to panic.

“Wh-what’s going on? Why am I tied up……?!”

“……Calm yourself,” a placid voice said. “We mean you no harm. At least, not as long as you behave, Tougetsu Umidori.”

“……Huh?” She snapped her head up, turning to the source of the voice.

There sat a blond lady in a gray dress.

“……Huh?”

Umidori’s jaw dropped, and she gaped at the lady

“……? Wh-who are you? How do you know my name?”


?!
HEALTHY!
Perfect
for
Salads



“Heh-heh, I do apologize. While you were asleep, I took a look at the student ID in your pocket.” The blond offered her an elegant smile. “Not that I needed to—I was simply curious what the kanji were.”

“……??”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Tougetsu Umidori. I am Kirara Seiryoin. ‘Kira’ as in twinkling stars, with the iteration mark afterward. Seiryo as in ‘soft drink’ with the ‘drink’ part chopped off, and ‘in’ like the one in ‘graduate school.’ Kirara Seiryoin. I’m eighteen and in my final year of high school. That makes me one year older than you, Umidori. And this…”

The blond turned her gaze to the side…

“……”

…where a silent maid sat.

“And this maid is Miser Clown. My lie.”

“……Hurk?”

At that moment, Umidori remembered the events leading up to her fainting spell.

……! R-right! We’d just found the oil cart! D-did I just pass out…?!

Who are these people? Where are Togari and Hurt? Where am I? Why am I tied up?

Seeing Umidori’s eyes spin, Seiryoin giggled. “Tee-hee. You don’t need to be afraid, Umidori. I’ll begin by saying the girls you were with managed to flee unharmed. Only you remain stuck here. As for who I am—I suspect this would be the easiest way of putting it…”

Her smile grew even more pleasant.

“I am a core member of the Mud Hat Faction.”

“……Bwuh?!”

A further shock. Umidori’s eyes went wide, and she stiffened.

“……Huh? What?! Mud Hat?!”

“I see you know *everything*,” Seiryoin said, studying the girl’s expression. “And everything you think shows on your face. But rest assured, unlike your friend Hurt, I have no intention of harming an ordinary human girl. Whatever fate may lie in store for Bullshit-chan and company, I fully intend to drop you off at home at the end of the day. I swear on Mud Hat himself.”

“……”

As those words flowed from Seiryoin's lips, Umidori studied her face intently.

"Wh-what's going on? Why would the Mud Hat Faction be here?"

"……Hmm, I could ask you the same thing," Seiryoin scoffed. "I'm on a mission from Mud Hat himself, and you showed up to ruin things."

"……?"

"I heard it directly from Hurt herself! You're after this girl—Ryoko Kudo."

"……Mm?" Umidori jumped and turned to look.

And found a fourth girl sitting there.

"……What? Why me?" she said, giving Umidori a baffled look.

Orange hair, 4'5", less than ninety pounds. Sitting back on the limo seat, swinging her feet—which barely reached the floor.

"—Oh!" Umidori cried. "K-Kudo! Ryoko Kudo!"

"……Huh?" the girl said, her frown deepening. "Who are you?"

"……! You don't remember me?! We've met before! A year ago!"

"……?" Kudo tilted her head, looking baffled. Then—

"……Ryoko, weren't you just talking about the titty monster from last year?"

This voice came from Kudo's pocket.

From the bottle of vegetable oil.

"……Huh? The titty monster?" Kudo flinched, then looked Umidori over. "……"

Her eyes were soon glued to the curve of Umidori's chest.

"—Oh!" she said, as if connecting the dots. "Wow, those boobs brought it all back! Those marshmallow pillow puffs sure didn't get any smaller!"

"……?" On the receiving end of her gaze, Umidori recoiled in horror.

Her eyes were no longer on Kudo—but on the bottle of oil.

"Wh-why is the oil talking?!"

This was so unprecedented that it took her several seconds to process, successfully distracting her from the more tangible horror of being remembered solely for the size of her bust.

At long last, Umidori recovered, wincing.

"I-I *thought* you weren't an ordinary girl, Kudo! You and the oil you sold me a year ago!" She scowled at her. "What did you do to

that oil, anyway? My roommate tried to make tempura with it and is all messed up now! Why would you do that?”

“……” Kudo was just staring back at her, looking stunned. After a long moment, she muttered, “Okay, so a bomb from a year ago just went off? It takes that long to blow? Might as well be a dud.”

“……Huh?”

“And the blast caused you some problems, so you tracked me down. That’s why you were waiting outside my cart? It all makes sense now.”

Kudo nodded to herself and turned to the blond.

“Sorry, Seiryoin. Mind if I have a chat with this one before settling our discussion?”

“……Oh?”

“She came to see me in the middle of the night a full year after our last meeting. I figure she at least deserves an explanation.”

With that, Kudo turned back to Umidori.

“Uh… Umidori, right? Don’t wanna just call you names, so I’m gonna go with that.

“Sounds like my vegetable oil messed stuff up on your end. Afraid I can’t exactly say I’m sorry.”

“……Oh?”

“You’ll get no apologies from me, Umidori. I knew exactly what I was doing from the get-go.”

Umidori’s face reflected in Kudo’s eyes—which never even wavered.

“I knew it was wrong, but I hauled that cart around anyway. I ain’t sorry. I ain’t trying to own it, either; it’s just a statement of fact. Go on, Umidori, blame me all you like.

“What I’m about to say next is just an excuse. No defense, no justification—just my perspective. Go on, Umidori, scoff at it as much as you want, but hear me out.”

“……”

“This might take a while, Umidori. It all started when I was still a teenager. I’d just lost my father, and dropped out of high school __”



A while after the talking vegetable oil had made Kudo lose her shit…

A weekday evening.

That same Chinese restaurant…was packed.

“Wow, these gyoza are *so* good!” “Best mapo tofu ever!” “This *tenshindon*’s to die for!” “Most Chinese places, you gotta know what to order—here, it doesn’t matter!” “No wonder it’s so hard to get a reservation!”

Happy voices rose from every table.

Not a single empty seat—a full house, and several servers weaving through the gaps between those tables.

“Thanks for waiting! Your shrimp fried rice!” “Shaoxing wine? Coming right up!” “Sorry, I’ll be right there to take your order! Just one more minute!”

The floor was bustling, and every one of them looked exhausted, but it wasn’t just the servers who were run ragged.

“Chef! More fried gyoza! Keep it coming!” “Fried rice set!” “Taiwan-style chow mein, please!” “Chef!” “Chef!” “Chef!”

The kitchen was bombarded with orders.

A tiny orange-haired girl was standing by the wok in the center of the kitchen, nodding, and yelling back, “Got it!” over and over, her voice bright and cheery. “Got it!” “Got it!” “Got it!”

—And as she responded, the rest of the staff took their turns.

Once, Kudo had run this kitchen solo, but now there were three other cooks working with her.

“Sorry, people, we’re working you hard tonight! Peak’s come and gone, so this oughtta be our last spurt!”

Even as she spoke, Kudo’s hands were hard at work, whipping up the dish before her with practiced ease.

Gyoza were frying before her very eyes, the color and smell completely different from what she’d served up previously.

“……”

One staff member watched her work, touched. “Man, those look so good!”

“……? Mm, what’s up, Yano?”

Kudo caught him watching and shot him a half-lidded glare.

“Your hands ain’t moving! Snap out of it, we’re too busy!”

“……! Augh! Sorry, Chef!” He hastily got back to work. “Your gyoza just look too good! Reminded me of my first visit. The

flavor of them blew me away, and I knew I had to work here!”

“……Yeah? Well, when the day’s over, I’ll whip you up a batch. Hang on till then.”

“—! Legit? Hot damn!”

Ecstatic, he threw himself back into his own work.

“Your gyoza really are the best in the world, Chef! Nothing like what they serve elsewhere. How are they so good?! Doesn’t seem like you’re putting anything special into ’em.”

“……Huh?” Kudo said, glaring back at the speaker. “Simple, Yano. I ain’t like other chefs—I’m *cheating*.”

“Hmm?”

“Only one thing I’m doing different,” Kudo said, with a hint of self-derision. “I’m putting a *voice* in the ingredients. With gyoza, I put that in the pork and cabbage. Nothing hard about it. Just gotta put my hand on ’em, push a bit…and my job is done.”

“……?”

“The tricky bit is *not* to turn the ingredients human. Can’t exactly serve *that* up to our customers—morally speaking, that’s a line I ain’t gonna cross.

“I’m really just giving them a voice, then letting the ingredients talk to me. How do I handle what and when? Chefs like us gotta know how to listen and do what we’re told.”

“……” The other cook studied her face, baffled. “Uh, Chef? What are you even talking about?”

“……Good question. Ain’t really something you’d understand, Yano,” Kudo said, scratching her cheek. She opened her mouth to elaborate—

“Ryoko! You’re distracting Yano! He’s getting nothing done!”

—and a new voice called out to her from the cupboard above.

“You just said you’re too busy for that! You’re the chef, so you’ve gotta work harder than anyone! You know that!”

“……! Shush, Saladette,” Kudo hissed, glaring up at the vegetable oil. “Yeah, I’m well aware! Don’t you go distracting *me*! I’ll kick you outta the kitchen!”

“Huh? You’ll what now? I can’t believe this! You’re the only one who has been here longer than me!”

“So what? Seniority ain’t shit! You don’t actually help, do you? You just sit there!”

“……” “……” “……” “……”

Kudo and the oil were really getting into it—and the other cooks and passing servers all gave her looks of pity.

"……The chef's back at it." "Who is Saladette?" "She's a great boss otherwise…" "She's nice, helps out, and she's a great cook…" "If it weren't for this…" "Running a restaurant at her age has *gotta* be stressful." "We've gotta have her back!"

Kudo was too busy arguing with Saladette and frying gyoza to hear a word her staff were whispering.

They stayed busy until closing time.

That same evening…

Ryoko Kudo was in her apartment living room, basking in the afterglow, a bottle of cola in her hand.

"Ah! Nothing beats a cold cola after work!"

She chugged some more soda and let out a blissful sigh. The TV in front of her was playing a show she'd recorded.

"Quick bath, throw down some grub, get the cola ready, kill my brain with a crap TV show! The highlight of my day!"

"……Can't say I appreciate it much." The vegetable oil—Saladette—sounded miffed. She was being forced to watch this show with Kudo. "Putting the rest of that aside, drinking soda every day is bad for you! I know it tastes good, but at least cut back to every other day! You're the head chef. If your body fails you, you'll be letting your whole staff down."

"……Huh? God, you never give me a moment's peace," Kudo growled, brushing her off. She tapped a finger on the bottle. "And do you really get that it tastes good? You can't even taste it! How would vegetable oil know how good cola is?"

"……Hmph! I don't have to drink it myself, I can see how blissfully stupid you look when you're drinking it."

Kudo had been teasing her, but Saladette just got grumpier.

But even as they bickered, it was clear they were at ease with one another. Like how sisters argue all the time because that's how close they are.

When she first started talking to me, I nearly lost my shit. Couldn't just leave her in the shop all night, so I brought her home with me…and in no time flat, I got used to having her around. I just pulled that name out of my ass, but now I can't imagine calling her anything else.

Kudo took another swig of her soda, eyes misting up.

Man, if I told the old me I'd be watching TV after work with a bottle of vegetable oil, she'd never have believed it.

"Augh! Wait!" Saladette shrieked. "Turn the volume up, Ryoko! Quick!"

"……Mm?" Kudo turned her eyes back to the screen, frowning.

There was a commercial playing between episodes of the TV show.

"Oh," Kudo said, the moment she spotted it. "This again…"

The commercial had just hit the company slogan. "Healthy! Perfect for Salads!"

"Aughhh! What do we do?! All the bowling pins are bottles of vegetable oil!"

On the screen, a young actress was holding a bowling ball, looking confused. Clearly, it was a bowling alley, but there were ten bottles of oil where the pins should be.

"I've got no choice!" the actress said, making up her mind. She sent the ball rolling toward the oil.

Tracing a flawless arc, it rolled down the lane and struck the oil formation dead center.

Crash!

Not a noise vegetable oil should ever make—but all ten bottles went down. A strike!

"Woo! I did it!" The young actress was writhing. "I'm about to get healthy! Help! I can't!"

At that cry, she was wreathed in light—and vanished.

There was a series of pops, and a bunch of dishes—tempura, fried chicken, etc.—appeared in her place.

"All of me's becoming perfectly delicious! So healthy, too! You've gotta buy it—it's Healthy! Perfect for Salads!"

"……The hell is wrong with this commercial?" Kudo said the moment it ended. "Why are they even doing commercials for oil? Who needs an ad campaign? Has that company lost its marbles?"

"Aiiiiieeee!" Saladette squealed, as excited as Kudo wasn't. "G-gosh! That was such a great commercial! No wonder they're the biggest food supplier in Japan! The vegetable oil that sells the best! I-I'm…so proud……!"

"……Where is this coming from?"

Saladette was clearly far too worked up.

“You really get way too excited every time we see this kind of thing. Is this like, when Japanese teams do well in some sporting event, we all celebrate even though we didn’t help at all?”

Everything Kudo was muttering was lost on Saladette.

“Eeeek! Eeek!” She was in a world of her own, shrieking like a giddy child—the exact opposite of her usual maternal vibe.

She always keeps me guessing. Spends most of her time nagging me like I’m a wayward child, then turns around and acts like a kid herself.

Kudo scratched her cheek, eyes on the oil.

Well, I guess that’s part of her charm.

“Oh, that reminds me. Ryoko,” Saladette said, recovering from her elation. “I meant to ask—why’d you lie?”

“……? Lie?”

“To Yano. You said you’re only a good cook because you’re ‘cheating.’”

Saladette did not seem pleased by that.

“I couldn’t believe my ears! Why would you lie like that? You’re not cheating at all!”

“……Uh,” Kudo said, baffled. “I’m the lost one, Saladette. I’m totally cheating,” she insisted. “Other chefs can’t put a voice in their ingredients. It’s not a skill I worked to obtain. I totally vaulted ahead of the crowd. Using that trick to turn the shop around is hardly fair.

“…But at the time, all that mattered to me was keeping Dad’s shop going. I didn’t even hesitate to cheat and use this unexpected power to its fullest, but that ain’t something I can be proud of. This don’t mean I’m actually a good cook.”

“……Huh?” Saladette said, clearly rattled. “Wait, wait, you’ve lost me. Ryoko, the restaurant’s a huge success because of *you*. You made this happen.

“You’re the only one with a power like this. You should be proud, not kicking yourself for using it. And it’s not like you’ve used it lately!”

“……!”

This made Kudo flinch, shocked.

“What? Saladette, you noticed?”

“Ha! You thought I wouldn’t? Please. You know how long I’ve been in that kitchen, watching you work!”

Saladette sounded extra smug.

“I know everything! At first, you couldn’t please any customers without resorting to this power, but the more dishes you turned around, the less you needed to rely on it. You can hear the ingredients talking without it! You’ve reached the same league as your father! Right?”

“……I dunno about *that*,” Kudo said, mussing up her hair. “But it is true I can *feel* it now. I don’t need to *think* about evaluating my ingredients or how to use ’em right. Lately I’ve been dishing up the same quality grub without using the power at all.”

“Mm, I see. So you always had the talent within you,” Saladette purred. “Back in the day, you’d done no specialized training, so you couldn’t have taken advantage of it. But after actually hearing the ingredients talk for a while— Well, that may have been a unique way to train, but it totally counted. You made a huge leap forward as a chef, and your talent blossomed.”

“……But that still means I cheated my way there, Saladette.” Kudo winced. “Normally I’d need ten, twenty years in the trenches, but this trick got me there way faster. I find that hard to brag about, especially if I’m talking to people who *didn’t* cheat.”

“……Ryoko,” Saladette said, dismayed. “Do you have to complicate it? Didn’t you suffer in ways other cooks never have to?

“But I suppose you’re right. You no longer *need* the power to give ingredients voices.”

“……Mm?”

“You said it yourself. You can make great food on your own. Having this weird power no longer serves any purpose.”

“……What are you talking about?” Kudo hissed. “So maybe I ain’t using it when I cook, but this power still means the world to me.”

“……?”

“I mean, if I lost it, there would be someone I’d never get to talk to again.” Kudo tore her eyes off Saladette, increasingly embarrassed by her own words. “And I don’t ever wanna lose her. I can’t go back to living alone.”

“……Ryoko.”

“—Point is! Don’t make me get all sappy, Saladette! C’mon, there’s a TV show on!”

“……”

Kudo grabbed the remote…

…and Saladette got very quiet.

“……”



As Kudo was explaining her past to Umidori in the limo…

Outside a public toilet in a park pretty far away…

“All right, we’re good to go,” Hurt said, shouldering a rucksack and turning around. “Time we head back to the cart. Ready on your end, writing implement?”

“Ha, who do you think you’re talking to?”

The voice came from inside the rucksack.

“Honestly, ready or not, this is the pits. Getting stuffed in a rucksack and hauled around by *you*.”

“Pfft, spare me your foolish gripes. I spent actual money buying this so I could haul you around.”

Neither Hurt nor Togari sounded the least bit pleased with this arrangement.

Hurt had been carrying Bullshit-chan around, and the girl was still unconscious, so they’d stashed her in a stall in the ladies’ room.

“Do your part, writing implement. Whether I can beat Miser Clown rides on how much your telepathy can damage Seiryoin.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice. That Seiryoin lady had the nerve to enter my Tougetsu’s body without permission! She’s as awful as you are. I’m gonna poke her in the back of the brain till it damn near kills her.”

“……But even with your backup, my odds of victory are slim,” Hurt muttered, soft enough that Togari couldn’t hear. “And the real choke point is that the writing implement only exists because of Ryoko Kudo’s lie. If she’s fully on Seiryoin’s side and decides to steal this power back, then our loss is set in stone.

“That might be better for me. If the kitty cat dies, I’ll be free, back to drifting in the air like dust, the way lies should. These restrictions mean I can’t *intentionally* lose, but that doesn’t factor in against insurmountable odds. Heh-heh-heh.”

“……?”

“What are you muttering to yourself about, Hurt?”

“Nothing! Never mind. Personal thoughts.”

Hurt hid her twisted smile with one hand, adjusted the rucksack, and headed toward the park’s exit.

“Let’s get back…”

“—Wait.”

Just then…

A girl’s voice called out from behind them.

“Hold on, Hurt.”

“……Huh?” Hurt jumped and spun around. “……? Who are you?”



“……What?”

One night…

Ryoko Kudo was in front of the TV again—but Saladette had just told her something shocking.

“……Hang on, say that again?”

“……”

Saladette was propped up on the cushion next to Kudo, silent.

“You don’t have much time left? We can’t be together? What do you mean?!” Kudo’s voice was rising to a shriek. “Break it down so I can understand! You’re kidding, right? I’ll punch you!”

“……This is no laughing matter,” Saladette said, sounding pretty upset herself. “Truth is, Ryoko, I’ve been reluctant to tell you, but I’ve been getting very sleepy.”

“……Um?”

“Or rather, I can feel my mind fading out. It’s not that many times a day yet, but as time goes on, the intervals between these spells are getting shorter.”

“……??”

“Ryoko, here’s what I think: If I stop fighting them off and fall asleep completely, I’ll probably never wake up again.”

“……!” Kudo visibly flinched. “Huh? Never?! What the hell?! My powers haven’t caused any issues—”

“……I can imagine why,” Saladette said flatly. “Oxidation.”

“……What?”

“Vegetable oil *has* an expiration date. There’s no water in it, so it doesn’t *rot*, but once you open the lid and it makes contact with air, it starts to oxidize.

“I mean, you’re a chef. Telling you like this is like lecturing the Buddha on enlightenment.”

“……?”

But Kudo was giving her a look that betrayed no comprehension.

“So what if the oil inside you oxidizes? That shouldn’t affect your mind! Your personality is a side effect of my power—”

“What are you talking about Ryoko? That’s *why*.” Saladette talked over her. “We may not know what your power is, but we do know you give ingredients voices.

“In which case, if the ingredients you’ve given voices no longer count as food, how are they gonna keep talking?”

“…… ?!” Kudo gasped. “Y-you’re kidding?! What?! I mean, logically, I get your point, but……!”

“It makes sense, Ryoko. You only got this power because you wanted to protect your father’s shop so bad, not to make some half-used vegetable oil into a surrogate family member and play at having a sister.”

“……!”

Kudo bit her lip, hard.

“D-don’t be mean, Saladette. This was a game to you? I can only speak for myself, but I really do think of you as—”

“And I’m saying you *shouldn’t*.”

“……Huh?”

“It’s messed up. You and me both. A human girl and a bottle of vegetable oil—we’re not meant to be living together like this.”

Saladette sounded disappointed in herself.

“Yeah, let me come right out and admit it, Ryoko. Living with you—well, it’s been nice. Watching you happily buzz about the kitchen, kicking back on the couch watching dumb TV shows with you—I enjoyed it all. I fussed over you like you were my

handful of a kid sister, even though I'm just a bottle of oil and have no right to treat a human that way."

"……! Saladette, stop! I don't—"

"It's time for us to part ways, Ryoko," Saladette said, clearly putting a lid on her sorrow. "How we feel doesn't matter here. Destiny's calling, and my expiration date isn't a fate we can avoid. It may not be today or tomorrow, but in the near future my mind will succumb, and I'll be gone. And you'll be all alone."

"……!"

"……I brought this up now so you can prepare yourself for when that moment arrives. When I go, I don't want you ending up back where you were right after your father passed.

"But this time, you've got the restaurant. You've got all those people working with you. I'm not that worried. If you really need a 'family,' then find yourself someone. Not that you've shown any interest in that…"

"……"

"Ryoko, my point is, even if we have to part, if you're living your life and having fun, that's all I need. I can fly off to heaven without any regrets. You see what I mean?"

"……"

Kudo was just staring back at Saladette, as if she was chewing something vital over inside. Like she was making her mind up about something important.

"……I get it, Saladette," she whispered, after a long pause.

She opened up the work laptop lying on the coffee table.

"Gimme a minute. I'll get things ready."

"……Huh?"

Saladette had no idea where Kudo was going with this.

"……? What's gotten into you?"

"Can't you tell? Work stuff," Kudo grunted, studying the screen. "Gotta find new employers for all my staff."

"……What?"

"Not like I got no connections, and they all know their stuff—it oughtta work out.

"And once I've placed them all, I'm shutting the restaurant down."

"……Why?!" Saladette shrieked. "W-wait, what are you even talking about?!"

“This is no time to be running a shop,” Kudo said, fingers pounding on the keys. “I’ve gotta find a way to save you. I’m gonna make you human! Don’t ever say we have to part again.”



“……Uh, h-hang on a second. How does that lead to you dragging around a cart full of vegetable oil?”

Kudo’s story had just left Umidori even more confused.

“I’m really not seeing any connections here!”

“Huh? What do you mean, Umidori? It’s a direct lead-in!” Kudo said wearily. “I’m running a vegetable oil cart to turn Saladette into a human.”

“……Um?”

“That’s right, all I care about is saving Saladette. Since she told me her life was running out, I’ve lived for nothing else.” The words were pouring out of her. “No matter what anyone else says, I’m not about to let her oxidize to death! If I can stop that, shutting down my father’s shop is nothing! My dad’s already dead—but Saladette’s still alive! She’s a thousand times more important!”

“But I don’t even want that! How many times do I have to say it, Ryoko?!” Saladette wailed, cutting her off. “When did I ever ask for an extension on life? When did I ever ask to be made human? You’re just forcing your views onto me! Do you even know how hard I cried when you shut the shop down?!”

“Shush, Saladette. I *know* all that. You’ve said it enough times.” Kudo waved a hand dismissively. “I made up my mind to save her anyway, but the first wall I hit was that there *is* no way to make oil human.

“No surprise there. Vegetable oil and humans are too different! No matter how much I care about Saladette, no matter what I sacrifice, I can’t change the nature of the world. At least…not via any *ordinary* means.”

“……”

“But, Umidori—you already know this, right? I ain’t ordinary. I *already* knew about an extraordinary power, one that could change *anything*.”

Kudo's gaze fell to her hands.

"I can grant voices to ingredients… I only just learned that's the power of lies. But even at the time, I had my own ideas as to what this power could do.

"I figured the reason I could hear food talk was because I'd *really* wanted it. It was a miracle that came about because I made a wish, one I'd gladly give my life to see come true."

"……"

"Naturally, making more ingredients talk ain't gonna save Saladette, but knowing that was possible led me to my next step."

"……? What was that?"

"Simple—if I got my hands on this magic just by *thinking* it, there must be more people like me."

Kudo flashed a nasty smile.

"In other words, Umidori, I thought if *I* can't save Saladette, then maybe someone else out there can."

"……Someone else."

"Someone with a *different* power. A Beliar who can turn vegetable oil into a person! I just gotta *find* them, then ask them to hook Saladette up and save her life. Simplistic kid logic, right?"

"……"

Umidori was just gaping at Ryoko, jaw hanging open.

"……?? I'm so lost, Kudo," she said at length. "I-I do follow the logic, but a Beliar who can turn oil human? Are you kidding? How are you going to find the one person whose power is exactly what you need?"

"You got me there," Kudo admitted. "They probably don't exist, so I'm gonna *make* them."

"……Huh?"

"That's why I became an oil cart vendor," Kudo said, balling up her hands. "Umidori, I started working part-time at the grocery store and hauling a cart around on my days off, selling oil to as many people as I could for a full year. None of that vegetable oil was ordinary. My lie put a voice into each and every bottle. That oil *talks*. People bought it unawares, and what do you think happens to them?"

"……?"

"If your oil suddenly starts talking to you, you're gonna be creeped out. Maybe you think you've lost your marbles and go

see a shrink. Or maybe—”

Kudo’s gaze dropped to Saladette.

“—maybe you make *friends* with it, the way we did. Do you get where I’m going with this now, Umidori?

“Their oil will eventually oxidize. They’ll face that death in the face. And if they made friends with their oil—what will they think? The same thing I did!”

“……!”

At this point, realization dawned on Umidori, and she stared hard at Kudo.

“Y-you’re kidding, Kudo! You’re cultivating the Belied?!

“Using the power of your lie to intentionally create an environment that’ll create Beliars, in the hopes that one will have the power you need? That’s the whole reason you’re selling vegetable oil?!”

“Glad you caught up.” Kudo nodded, emotion draining from her face. “That’s why I’m only selling ‘Healthy! Perfect for Salads.’ No use saving oil that ain’t related to Saladette herself.

“In other words, Umidori, you got yourself mixed up in my cultivation plan a year ago. Tough luck on that front. I always meant to deceive you, Umidori, so I can’t go around saying sorry.”

“……Kudo.”

“……! This is too much, Ryoko!” Saladette exploded. “Are you even listening to yourself?! Do you not realize how wrong this is? Creating countless new lives to save one—that goes against the natural order! It’s not right!

“And for all your boasting, you’ve spent a year with nothing to show for it!”

“……”

“You’ve mass-produced talking vegetable oil, but they’re all defective! None of them are anything as human as me. At best they repeat the same phrases like a broken record! You keep trying to force a bigger voice into the oil, but your control’s gone haywire—”

Saladette took a long, painful breath.

“And how many people have you knocked out like that policeman? Do you even remember how many people you’ve sent to the hospital this year? Eight! Eight people!”

“……”

“The one silver lining is they were all discharged a few days later with no side effects, but that doesn’t mean you didn’t hurt them! And what you did could easily have been fatal! Why do you still not get how horrifying that is?!”

“*Sigh*… Saladette, you sure know how to poke my sore spots,” Kudo grumbled. “Yeah, you got a point. I really don’t have control over my own power for one simple reason: I quit being a chef and shut down my dad’s shop, so my lie is far weaker now.

“When I became a Beliar, I never meant to turn vegetable oil into a person. I got this power to protect my dad’s shop—but then I chose Saladette over the restaurant. From what Seiryoin tells me, the strength of a Beliar’s power comes from the strength of their convictions. No wonder I’m no good. I’ve strayed from my initial path, and I’m all over the place.

“But that ends tonight.”

Kudo glanced back at Seiryoin.

“Right, Seiryoin? This Mud Hat dude’s hypnosis can strengthen even a crap Beliar like me. That’ll let me make vegetable oil that can talk as well as Saladette. You said as much earlier.”

“……Yes, I did,” Seiryoin nodded, smiling pleasantly. “But I might venture an opinion on what you’ve just shared—I hardly think you need to be so harsh on yourself, Kudo.”

“……? Why not?”

“Certainly, you’ve abandoned your initial goal. You’re all over the place and can’t give food voices like you could when you were a chef. You’re a weaker Beliar, but that’s what’s good about you.”

“……??”

“Using your lie to try and cultivate more Beliars—that’s a fresh concept. Very roundabout, but every bit as fascinating. I’ve never met a Beliar like you.”

She chuckled under her breath.

“That’s exactly why I said I was sure Mud Hat would take a liking to you. I can’t wait to see it: Every bottle of vegetable oil in Japan talking just like Saladette does. What effect will that have on the world?”

“……Ryoko, please. Think this through,” Saladette said, her voice almost inaudible. “I can’t bear seeing you go any further awry, not for my sake.”

“……Saladette,” Umidori breathed, giving her a look.

She knew full well there was nothing *she* could do now.

After all, they were holding her captive.

"Well," Seiryoin said, turning to Umidori. "That about does it for Kudo's story."

She'd clearly been waiting for this.

"Umidori, it's high time the two of us spoke."



"……? Who are you?" Hurt said, frowning.

A girl stood in front of her.

"Sorry to stop here," the girl said. "It's nice to meet you both, Hurt, Togari."

She was wearing a kimono.

Physically, she appeared to be maybe twelve or thirteen—much like Bullshit-chan or Togari. All three were roughly the same height. She had dark green hair in a bob cut. The kimono she wore was a matching shade of green, but the obi was very red.

A very traditional Japanese look.

"Please call me Saladette Canola."

"……Hng?" Hurt let out a confused grunt. "No idea who you are, bitch. Why are you here? How do you know my name?"

"Hmph, I suppose you wouldn't have heard the name before," the girl said, shaking her head. "But, Hurt, think twice about this reckless assault. If Seiryoin defeats you, it'll upend all *my* plans."

"……? Plans?"

"Hang on, Hurt!" Togari's voice echoed from the rucksack. "I-I think this girl's just like me!"

"……Huh?"

"I-I don't how to describe it, but we're the same! I can feel it off her when she talks! Augh, this is such a weird sensation!"

As Togari's voice rose in pitch, the mystery girl—Saladette—smiled faintly.

"You're very perceptive, Togari," she said, sounding impressed. "I actually used you as reference for my appearance. It never occurred to me to beam a visual simulation of myself directly into someone's brain before. Hats off to your creativity, or was this simply a byproduct of your love for Umidori?"

“……Okay, you gotta speak in words I can understand. Who the hell are you?” Hurt growled.

Saladette turned to her and took a deep breath.

“Listen close, Hurt,” she said, speaking softly. “I’m the one who knocked Bullshit-chan out.”

“Huh?!” Hurt let out a gasp, staggered. “Wh-what?!”

“I really must apologize. I chose to pull the trigger and set off the events of tonight. Several unexpected wrinkles have cropped up, but I certainly didn’t expect things to get *this* out of hand.

“For that reason, well aware of how presumptuous this is, I am here to bow before you. Hurt, Togari—I have no one else to turn to.”

Saladette looked Hurt right in the eye.

“Please, help me stop my stupid sister, Ryoko Kudo, from making a terrible mistake.”





7
Showdown in the Limousine

“I have but one question for you, Tougetsu Umidori,” Seiryoin said, leaning back on the limo seat. “What exactly *are* you?”

“……!”

Hands bound behind her back, Umidori met Seiryoin’s gaze, unflinching.

“……I-I have nothing to say to you!”

“Heh-heh, no need to be so frightened, Umidori. No matter who you are, I swear I would never hurt a normal girl. Though I can’t say the same for Hurt or Bullshit-chan.”

“……!”

“Hang on, Seiryoin,” Kudo said. “That’s been bugging me. You keep mentioning those names…but who are they?”

“Oh, right… I hadn’t explained that yet.” Seiryoin glanced her way. “First, Bullshit-chan is a former member of our faction…”

……

“……Does that answer all your questions, Kudo?”

“……Yeah, basically,” Kudo grunted. “So the tracksuit lady outside my cart is Hurt, and the kid in the cat-eared hoodie is Bullshit-chan, who lives with Umidori? But it didn’t feel like you expected to bump into these traitors here, Seiryoin.”

“It certainly came as a surprise,” the blond answered, folding her arms. “I don’t particularly care about her one way or the other. I was taken aback when she suddenly betrayed us, but she’s hardly a viable threat—it matters not whether she’s with us or against us.

“What I’m concerned about is *you*, Umidori.”

“……!” Umidori flinched.

“Why would Bullshit-chan go to the trouble of aligning herself with a totally normal girl? Who are you? That’s what’s piqued my curiosity.”

As she spoke, Seiryoin reached out and placed her palm on Umidori’s cheek.

“……!”

“Tee-hee, don’t be so scared, Umidori. The sooner you share what you know, the sooner you’ll be home again, safe and sound. As long as I know what’s up your sleeve, I’ll have no further business with you—”

She flashed that pleasant smile again…

“—Abababababa?!”

Then shrieked.

“—Lady Kirara?” Miser Clown yelped.

“Ba! Bababababa……!”

All her composure gone, Seiryoin clutched her head, curling up in her seat.

“Baaaaah!”

“……Mm?” Umidori blinked, more surprised than anyone by this transformation. “Wh-what’s wrong, Seiryoin? Are you feeling sick?”

Completely forgetting she’d been kidnapped, Umidori was *just* concerned.

Still clutching her head, Seiryoin glared out the window.

“Pain directly in my brain! So unpleasant! Just like last time! Th-that weakling learned nothing—she’s back for more!”

The sheer agony of it clearly meant Seiryoin had taken leave of her wherewithal, and her voice had totally lost that elegant charm. She grabbed for the door handle.

“Ha! You fools! You’ve come here to meet your dooms? Very well! If you want a fight, I’ll give you one! Come, Miser Clown!”

◇◇◇◇

“……They’re out,” Hurt muttered, seeing Seiryoin and Miser Clown’s heads emerge from the limo door. “’Sup! We meet again, Seiryoin.”

“……Hurt,” Seiryoin said, scowling most indignantly. “Must you be so violent? Can’t you even say hello before launching an attack?”

“Ha, don’t be stupid. Count yourself lucky I didn’t flip your car over.”

“……!” Clearly too furious to speak, Seiryoin merely turned to the lie next to her. “Miser Clown, get her!”

“Certainly, Lady Kirara.” The maid nodded.

A pile of bills appeared in her hand, floating around her.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! Once again, I am almost impressed by what a simplistic idiot you are, Hurt!” Seiryoin cried, her smile already triumphant. “I only *just* explained that you cannot possibly defeat my Miser Clown…but you come back to tackle us head-on, not even a trick up your sleeve!”

“……You don’t say.”

Hurt put both arms up and thrust them out in front of her.

Bandages began slithering out from her sleeves.

“Perhaps this isn’t as simplistic as it looks, Seiryoin.”

A moment later, her bandages stretched all the way out, winding themselves around Miser Clown’s body.

“Ack?!” Miser Clown let out a squeak, bandages around her arms, legs, and throat.

“Well, Miser Clown? Not like you to just *let* me attack you.”

“……!”

“Confused? Looking for answers? Turn to your master, then.”

“……?” Miser Clown’s eyes shifted—and she gasped. “L-Lady Kirara?!”

“……Abyabyabyabyabyabya?!” Seiryoin was crumpled up, making weird noises again. “A-aughhhhh! Ow, ow, ow! I really hate this! Urgh, I feel sick…”

“Hmph, that’s a much better look for you, Seiryoin,” Hurt said, reveling in it. “Just going to take it, are you? In that condition, your precious Miser Clown can’t even begin to fight properly.”

“……! Oh. I see you’ve managed to wring *an* idea out of that husk of a brain, Hurt!” Seiryoin swore…but she was soon smiling again. “However, your plan won’t work. Too bad! I’ve already worked it out.”

“……What?”

“Kudo!” Seiryoin yelled, ignoring Hurt and turning to the limo. “Kudo, can you hear me?!”

“……Mm?” A moment later, Ryoko Kudo leaned out the window, confused. “Wh-what’s up, Seiryoin?”

“Kudo! I need a favor from you! Just the one! Do something about the source of this awful headache!”

“……Um?”

“It’s created by *your lie*, Kudo!”

“……? Kudo’s brow furrowed further. “……It’s what?”

“Hmph! One attack on my mind after another; of course I noticed! It feels *exactly* like when Saladette projects her voice into my brain!

“The logic behind it escapes me, but a being exactly like Saladette is on *their* side! Sense anything from where you stand, Kudo?”

“……”

Kudo said nothing, but turned her gaze at Hurt.

Or more accurately…the rucksack she had on her back.

“……Hot damn,” she muttered, stunned. “Y-you’re right, I can sense a strong wavelength of my power from the tracksuit lady’s backpack. Uh… But what does that mean? I’m clueless here!”

“I don’t know the reason, and I don’t really care. What matters is that this headache is caused by a lie. That makes dealing with it easy. All you have to do is steal the voice from whatever she’s got in that rucksack.”

“……Yeah?”

“Then I need no longer be troubled by this splitting headache. You may be new to the Beliar game, Kudo, but I’m sure you can manage that task.”

Seiryoin was sweating profusely.

“Heh-heh… I wasn’t sure if that blue-haired girl was a lie or a human—turns out, she was a living ingredient all along! Either way, it’s time for her to pay the piper.”

……

“……Wait, what?”

Kudo sounded utterly defeated.

“I-I’m so lost, Seiryoin! Steal her voice…?” She mussed up her hair, mind spinning. “……Okay, yeah, I think I *could* do that. I’ll give it a shot.”

She reached out the window, aiming her hand at Hurt's backpack and bracing herself.

But before she could do anything—

"—Wait! Don't!" A yelp went up from next to her. "D-don't do that, Kudo! You can't steal her voice!"

It was Tougetsu Umidori, still trussed up on the limo seat, her desperation evident.

"Huh? What do you mean, Umidori?" Kudo said, blinking at her. "Her voice? Umidori, do you know who's in that rucksack?"

"……! You bet I do!" Umidori declared. "That's Togari Tsukushigaoka! A pencil girl born just two weeks ago, but she's already part of my family!"

"……Huh?"

"Kudo, when you told me about your lie, everything clicked," Umidori said, getting more and more worked up. "Togari was deep-fried in your vegetable oil—so she became a living ingredient, just like Saladette! I used to eat pencils all the time, you see."

"……"

"O-of course, most people wouldn't go around deep-frying pencils or consider them edible in the first place, so I admit Togari's birth was a series of unusual choices. Nara got pissed off at me and decided to fry all the pencils, and I'd spent a full year eating pencil over rice every night—a cavalcade of coincidences just happened to align and give Togari her voice."

"……What in the hell are you talking about, Umidori?"

Kudo was clearly more confused than ever before.

"You're all like, 'I knew,' but I don't even know what you know! Did you say pencils over rice?!"

"If you steal her voice, Togari will die!" Umidori wailed, increasingly overwrought. "She'll go back to being ordinary pencils! She was *so* overjoyed to finally be able to talk to me—I refuse to just let her life end like this!"

"……"

Kudo was studying Umidori's face like it was a wonder to behold.

"Um, so," she said, after a minute. "I don't get the details, but you genuinely care about whoever's inside that rucksack? Just like I care about Saladette."

“……! E-exactly! That’s my point!” Umidori nodded vigorously. “Togari and I get along almost precisely exactly like you and Saladette! I can’t lose her! You get where I’m coming from, right Kudo?”

“……”

There was a pleading look in her eyes, and Kudo shifted uncomfortably.

“Yeah, but even so—I gotta save Seiryoin…”

Despite her words, Kudo’s expression seemed far less convinced.

“If I don’t help Seiryoin, I’ve got no way of saving Saladette.”

“……! K-Kudo!”

“……! D-don’t give me that look! I’m not your savior! I can’t do everything! I can’t even save Saladette on my own!”

Kudo was yelling now, flailing her arms.

“God damn it! I don’t even know! Why does everything have to be so complicated?! I don’t even know which way is up anymore!” she shrieked. “I don’t know shit about lies or Beliars! I *just* want to save Saladette’s life! That’s the only thing I need! Why does that have to be such a roundabout, complicated, arduous task?!”

“—Then how about you just *stop*, Ryoko?”

That’s when the vegetable oil’s voice cut through the commotion in the limo interior.

“If worrying and working for me is taking that much out of you, just *give up*. Everything would be instantly easier for you.”

“……Huh?” Kudo yelped, gaping at the oil bottle. “What are you saying, Saladette? Another lecture? Too bad, I’ve got my hands full right now. I ain’t got time for this.”

“No, Ryoko. This isn’t a lecture—it’s an ultimatum.”

“……?”

“You’ve been lost in the woods since we first met, Ryoko,” Saladette said, like she was taking a trip down memory lane. “You took over the restaurant for your dad’s sake, then closed it for mine. Everything you’ve done is for someone *else*, and each step you took led you further astray. Your kind heart got you lost—and so I couldn’t bring myself to resent it.”

“……Saladette?”

"……That's *why* I can't stand to see you lose track of your conscience. I don't want Mud Hat's hypnosis to steal your kindness away. That's a line I cannot bear to see you cross, no matter *what* I have to do to stop it."

"……" Kudo was looking grim. "Saladette, what's gotten into you?"

"I *am* sorry, Ryoko," the oil said. She took a deep breath. "This isn't the best time or place, but it's time we said goodbye."

"……Huh?"

"From now on, you'll have to fend for yourself. Like your mother and father, I'll be watching over you from heaven."

And with that one-sided declaration, Saladette changed her tune.

"I've said my piece! Go for it!"

"Roger that," said a new voice, from the corner of the limo.

There sat a girl.

Neither Umidori nor Kudo, but a third girl.

A girl in a cat-eared hoodie.

"……Huh?" Kudo said, blinking at her. "Wh-who are you?! Where'd you come from?!"

"……"

The cat-eared girl paid her no attention. She just reached out—and swiped Saladette's bottle.

Then threw it away.

"Hi-yaaahhhhhhhhhh!"

With a guttural yowl, she added a roundhouse kick.

And a second later, Saladette's bottle was *pulverized*.

◇◇◇◇

Ker-splatt!

The limo interior was coated in vegetable oil.

Viscous fluid sprayed from the broken bottle, succumbed to gravity's pull, and fell to the floor.

In mere moments, a huge puddle formed.

"……"

Kudo could only gape, eyes locked on the spreading pool of oil, flabbergasted.

“……Ah-aughhhhhhhh!” At long last, a scream escaped her. “Saladette?! You’re kidding! Saladette!”

“Shush, Ryoko. Don’t scream in my ear like that.”

The voice from the floor was feeble, clearly weakening.

“It’s time we make a clean break. There’s no saving me now.”

“……What?!”

“I can feel myself fading fast,” Saladette said, as if it didn’t matter. “It stands to reason that the second oil leaves its bottle and spatters on the floor—well, nobody’s cooking with *that*.”

“……?!”

“In other words, I’m no longer *food*. Heh-heh… It took so long. My expiration date came and went, but at last I can leave this world behind.”

Even as she spoke, Saladette’s voice grew faint, like she had only moments left to live.

“……?? What? Why?!” Umidori yelped, equally rattled. “Wh-what are you doing here, Bullshit-chan?!”

“……”

The cat-eared hoodie shook and turned to Umidori.

“Sorry,” she said. “It was the only way, Tougetsu.”

“……Mm?”

That name alone clued her in.

This girl looked, sounded, and was dressed exactly like Bullshit-chan, but something about the expression on her face, the details of her body language… Both were subtly different from the real one.

No ordinary human would be able to tell the difference.

No one but Tougetsu Umidori—she alone in all the world *knew*.

“……No way?! Togari?!” she gasped in disbelief. “W-wait, seriously, what’s going on? Why are you inside Bullshit-chan’s body, Togari?”

“……”

But in the face of this question, the cat-eared girl—Togari Tsukushigaoka—merely pushed her hands deep into the pockets of the hoodie, saying nothing.

“……! No, wait… Saladette!” Kudo yelled, totally ignoring both of them. “Seriously, explain yourself! Why would you do this?

What'd you get up to behind my back?!"

"*Sigh*... I *am* sorry, Ryoko. You're really bad at using your power, and I turned that against you," Saladette said, her voice increasingly weary. "The girl who just kicked me is Togari. I sent her a telepathic message, and we became friends. I asked her to finish me off."

"……?! Wh-what are you talking about?!"

"I mean what I said, Ryoko. My goal was to stop you from doing anything else stupid—to make you quit being a Beliar—and to do that I had to no longer exist. If I'm not around, there's nothing you can do to save me."

"……!"

"I've been wanting to do just this for a long time now," Saladette said wistfully. "But I'm *your* creation. I might be able to scheme a bit behind your back, but I can't go directly against your wishes. As long as you wanted to save me, I had to go along with that.

"I'd nearly given up, but I've spent the last year constantly searching for a loophole in that rule."

Saladette paused a beat.

"Then, two weeks ago, the winds changed."

"……Huh?"

"Ryoko, I didn't say a word to you. But the range of my telepathy isn't just five, ten yards.

"I'm the most popular brand of vegetable oil in the country, manufactured by the top food supply company in Japan. It's no issue at all for my telepathy to cover this entire district. There's not a single place in town I can't spy on.

"And while I was peeping, I happened to witness something—the fallicide that took place two weeks ago, unbeknownst to anyone."

"……? Two weeks…? Fallicide?"

"To you, I'm sure it makes no sense, Ryoko. It freaked me out a bit myself!

"A pencil thief, a borrowed toilet, a betrayal, grappling on the floor, Bullshit-chan desperately begging for her life, and then Umidori's reckless plan in that children's park. No part of that was ordinary. It was a series of wild twists. At first, I was just

curious, but by the time Umidori wrapped things up, I was watching with bated breath."

Saladette sounded deeply sincere.

"Ryoko, when I saw that fallicide play out, I had only one thought on my mind: These girls can free *you*."

"……Free me?"

"I needed only to get them to learn about your lie and make you their next target," Saladette intoned. "That's why I attacked Bullshit-chan this evening. It was for the sole purpose of making sure Umidori knew there was a vegetable oil Beliar out there. I must apologize for that, Umidori. I know I've dragged you into our mess."

Saladette's tone shifted a bit.

"Oh, and the reason I went after her instead of you? She's immortal. I figured if I poked her brain a bit, she'd be fine."

"……!"

Umidori flinched, staring down at the oil.

"Then…you were behind this entire incident, Saladette?!"

"You make it sound cool. But basically, yes. My one miscalculation was Seiryoin. This should have been a simple fallicide—Hurt vs. Ryoko's lie—but then this lady showed up and complicated matters.

"She took Umidori hostage, and Hurt ran away. And because of me, Bullshit-chan's still asleep. I thought there was no way you could murder Ryoko's lie like this, so I had to adjust my plans. Specifically, when Hurt and Togari were hiding Bullshit-chan's body in the park bathroom stall, I made contact with them and asked them to take advantage of the chaos to assassinate me."

Saladette chuckled.

"I owe you a tremendous debt, Togari. No one else could have finished me off like this."

"……"

But Togari was just sitting with her hands deep in her pockets, looking down at Saladette.

"Oh, one other thing I mentioned in the park: I am *not* about to let you follow after me. You have to stay alive, Togari!"

"……"

"Like Umidori said, your birth was incredibly unlikely. Umidori's pencils on rice, Nara's revenge, and Ryoko's slapdash

control over her own lie: If any one of those elements were missing, you'd never have been born. Your existence is nigh miraculous, and we can't let it end like this.

"In the parking lot, you said if Bullshit-chan eats the lie, then she can save you? That's wonderful. That way you and your beloved Umidori can be together forever. Unlike me, who's not long for this world."

"……You really spied on everything, Saladette," Togari said gravely. The oil's voice was barely a whisper now. "This outcome was all part of your plan? Now you just need Bullshit-chan to eat Kudo's lie so she can gain the power of telepathy, which is Seiryoin's weakness. That'll let us turn the tables on her.

"Seiryoin is only here to scout Kudo, after all. If her lie dies, and the fight turns against her, she won't stand her ground. She'll likely turn and run. Saladette, I'll admit—it's a pretty good ending for an improvised plan."

"Heh, don't flatter me, Togari. They're just desperate measures. And if you hadn't heard me out in the park, none of this would have been possible.

"I'm really grateful you agreed so readily. If you hadn't nodded I'd have had to persuade Hurt instead."

"……You don't owe me anything," Togari said. "If this will let me save Tougetsu, then I'm not afraid to dirty my hands."

"Heh, so be it. I was right to turn to you, Togari. We're both *useful tools*. I knew you'd get where I was coming from: why I can't stand to see my master lose her way on my account."

"……"

"Even as we talk, my mind's fading," Saladette said, her voice getting even softer. "I suppose it's time for the final farewell."

"……?! W-Wait, Saladette!" Kudo shrieked, snapping out of her stunned silence. "Please, don't go! I can't stand this! I don't want to lose you!"

"……Ryoko," Saladette whispered, sounding genuinely distraught. "I'm sorry, Royko. I wish we could have said a proper goodbye, but we never had the right to want that. To my mind, this is the punishment I deserve."

"……Huh?! You don't—"

"Whatever the reason, I have sinned—and I must pay the price."

"……?"

"Ryoko, let me be clear. I've *always* regretted what happened a year ago. Why did I tell you my life was running out?

"With your kind heart, I knew you'd never abandon me to that fate. I didn't even have to wonder; the answer was all too clear. For your sake, I should have held my tongue and let myself die. If you have sinned to stop that, then those sins are all mine to bear."

"……!"

"You've done nothing wrong, Ryoko. All blame lies with me. I will shoulder the cross for all of that and leave this world behind, putting an end to this sad tale."

"……No, that's not right, Saladette!" Kudo wailed, shaking her head. "You're not the only one in the wrong! I'm the one who should be punished! Why are you so hell-bent on dying?!"

"……It's too late for that, Ryoko," Saladette said softly. "There's no stopping it now. No use crying over spilled milk—or oil. Our farewell is set in stone. All that's left is for you to accept what's happening."

"…… ! Saladette!"

Kudo's voice was choked with tears.

"N-no! Don't go! Saladette! Saladette!"

"……Be good, Ryoko. To the bitter end, you've been a handful of a sister…

"But I'm glad you were. I'm nothing but…vegetable oil…yet you gave me……two wonderful years."

……

And with that, Saladette's voice went quiet.

All that remained was the now silent puddle of oil.

"Aughhhhhh! Saladette!" Kudo sobbed, tears streaming down her face. "Saladette! Saladette! Saladette!"

But no matter how many times she called her name, no answer came.

She no longer spoke.

She no longer existed.

"……! *S-sniff*…… Say it isn't so, Saladette……!" Kudo was tearing her hair out. "……Why?! What for?! Damn it all! You were my only family! All I had left in the world! Mom died, Dad died, and now you?! I've got nothing left!"

Her shoulders shaking, her whisper hollow.

“……Nothing else matters. There’s no point. No matter what I do, it won’t make a difference,” she hissed, beside herself. “No matter how I live my life, no matter what I achieve, I can never have Saladette back……!”

“Oh, that’s not true, Kudo.”

But then—

Togari broke her silence. She’d been studying Kudo this whole time.

“You can still get her back.”

“……Huh?” Kudo’s head shot up.

—And she could not believe her eyes.

“……Wut?”

“……*Hah…hah…*”

Tougetsu Umidori.

On her hands and knees, lapping up the oil on the limo’s floor.



“……Huh?”

For a moment, Kudo was so stunned, she forgot everything else.

She absently rubbed her eyes—and not to wipe away her tears.

“……What are you *doing*, Umidori?”

“……!”

No answer came.

She didn’t even *look* at Kudo.

Umidori had only one thought on her mind. Wriggling like a caterpillar, she lapped the oil up from the floor…

“……*Hah*, *hah*, *hah*, *hah*.”

…oblivious to all else.

She didn’t even notice how her beautiful black hair was dragging through the oil.

Slurp, *slurp*… For a while, the only sound was that of Umidori lapping up the oil.

……And then…

“*Gasp*!”

A noise from the vegetable oil, like Saladette was breathing again.

“……Huh? Er, wh-what happened?”

A beat later, she started making confused noises.

“Wh-why am I still alive…?”

“Saladette!” Kudo yelled, her face brightening like someone had flipped a switch. “Aughhhhhh! Saladette! Saladette!”



Kudo clapped her hands over her face, big tears rolling down her cheeks again.

Clearly, she had no idea what had happened, but just hearing that voice alone was too much for her.

"……I-I'm lost," Saladette muttered. "What happened to me? I'm sure I just died—"

"If you're confused, allow me to explain," Togari said, her voice flat. "The reason your plan failed? You underestimated Tougetsu."

"……Huh?!"

"If you were no longer *food*, then you would soon die. Saladette, that was the logic behind your request. If your bottle broke, and you were spattered on the floor, then no one would eat you.

"But consider it this way, Saladette. If we flip that notion—even if you're a puddle on the floor, if you still count as food—then you *can't* die. Get it now?"

"……??"

"That's why Tougetsu started lapping you up."

Togari sounded weirdly triumphant.

"Because *that* proved you're still edible, Saladette!"

"……Huh?!" Her mind caught up and Saladette let out a shocked gasp. "Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh……?"

"Heh-heh, my Tougetsu is not bested *that* easily, Saladette! We're talking about the girl who *ate pencils!* Saving some oil off the floor is as easy as cracking eggs!"

"…… ~~~ ! Damn it, Togari!" Saladette wailed, her voice shaking. "You knew?! From the very start, you knew how this would turn out?!"

"……? Well, yeah." Togari crooked her head, baffled. "If I didn't see this coming, why would I go along with your stupid-ass plan?"

"……?!"

"We're both living foods, Saladette, so let me be very clear: Self-sacrifice is *not* in vogue," Togari scoffed. "Killing yourself is just ridiculous on the face of it. That doesn't make anyone happy but *you*. Saladette, don't think about what you want to do *for* someone! Ask yourself what *you* want to do."

"……?! H-how dare you…?" Saladette roared. "Just two hours ago, in the grocery store parking lot, you said the exact same thing!"

"……Did I? That was a long time ago. My memory grows faint."

“…… ~~~~~~~~ !”

“My point stands, Saladette. I wasn’t planning on assisting with your suicide for a single, solitary second.

“But I knew that if Tougetsu was in my position, she’d act to snap you out of it. I figured it would be best to hurt you once, and then help. I simply acted accordingly. Get it now?”

“……!”

“……Mm. Thank you, Togari,” Umidori said. She was still on the floor beneath Togari’s smug smile. “You said everything I had to say. I’ll admit I was pretty shocked when you smashed Saladette’s bottle, though.”

She managed an awkward smile. She’d thrown herself on the floor to lap up Saladette, but her arms were still bound behind her, so she couldn’t right herself.

“But I kinda knew what you were going for, so I wasn’t that upset. Also, nobody’s really questioning it, but I think someone should: Why are you Bullshit-chan, Togari?”

“—! Mwa-ha-ha! An excellent question, Tougetsu!” Togari said, puffing herself up. “I took notes on what that Seiryoin lady did! It’s basically remote control! Like a toy car!”

“……Um.”

“In other words, the real me is still in Hurt’s rucksack. I’m using my telepathy to stimulate Bullshit-chan’s brain and manipulate her flesh! I’m remote-controlling her body!”

“……Uhhh…?” Umidori looked appalled. “Okay, I get the logic of that, but…are you sure that won’t mess her brain up?”

“Um, it’s probably not great,” Togari said, folding her arms. “It’s sort of an experiment—but it sure feels like it’s taking quite a toll on her. If I tried this on a regular human, I bet I’d make their brain dissolve immediately.”

“……”

“Fortunately, Bullshit-chan is an immortal lie, so we cool!”

As she spoke, Togari reached for the rope on Tougetsu’s wrists, and without putting any real strength into it, easily sliced through them.

“Come, Tougetsu! Rest on my shoulder!”

“Oh, thanks, Togari.”

She managed to get up and dust herself off.

“Uh, Kudo, we should probably talk,” Umidori said.

“Huh?” Kudo was still on the floor, and her gaze drifted upward, staring at Umidori through her tears. “……What about?”

“Well, long story short, I’d like you to leave Saladette’s body with me.”

“……Why?”

“Do you object?” Umidori asked, looking her right in the eye. “The idea is that Bullshit-chan *eats* Saladette. If we do that, I’m pretty sure we can keep her around.”

“……”

“I mean, if she can eat Togari, there’s no reason why she can’t eat Saladette. And once she’s inside Bullshit-chan’s stomach, there’s no risk of oxidation. You get to stop being a Beliar, but you’ll still have Saladette around, and there’s no need to join the Mud Hat faction.”

“……”

“……Just,” Umidori hesitated. “Kudo, I know Seiryoin told you this. Bullshit-chan’s risking her life going up against the Mud Hat faction, so if the worst happens, and they manage to kill her—well, since Saladette would be part of her, she’d be lost, too.”

“……”

“Naturally, if you choose to go with Seiryoin instead, you won’t have to take that risk…”

“……So you want *me* to choose?” Kudo said, meeting her gaze. “I’ve gotta leave Saladette with you or with the Mut Hat faction?”

“……Basically, yes. That’s something only you can decide.”

“……”

“Hold up!” Saladette said. “Umidori, you’re getting ahead of yourself!”

“……Oh?”

“There’s no choice here! Ryoko doesn’t have to leave me with anyone! I’m going to fade out right here, Ryoko will be free of me, and that’s the end of the story! I won’t accept any other outcome!”

“……?” Umidori looked down at her, utterly baffled. “But why? There’s not a single reason why you should have to die, Saladette.”

“……?!”

“If Kudo does go with Bullshit-chan, then you get to live, and Kudo won’t be a Beliar. Kudo won’t be lost on your account, and

won't cause any more problems. Am I wrong?"

"……! Well, no, but……" Saladette reeled a moment. "B-but, Umidori! Maybe you won't get this, but I *have* to die!

"My sins are too great to go on living. I have to pay the price for them, or…it's just not right! I'm Ryoko's sister; the last and only thing I can do for her is pay the ultimate price for both our sins!"

"……"

For a long moment, Umidori sat in silence, gazing down at her.

At long last, she said, "But Saladette, you already blew that."

"……Huh?"

"I mean, I already saved you." She shrugged. "You've already paid the price, and still get to live. Isn't that enough? Insisting you still need to be punished isn't a matter of atonement—it's just self-satisfaction."

"…… ~~~~~~~~ !" Saladette let out a squeak, like Umidori had hit a sore spot. "A-and why didn't you even hesitate? Who licks oil off the floor?!"

"……Hmm?"

"Even if the idea occurred to you, most people would think twice! Weren't you at all reluctant? Didn't the dirt bother you? My body was already so oxidized and filthy, nobody would want to eat me!"

"……?" Umidori just looked baffled. "Saladette, you're not *dirty*."

"……What?"

"I mean it! I don't care if you're oxidized or on the floor. I wasn't the least bit grossed out or reluctant to lick you up."

"……"

Umidori seemed so certain that Saladette didn't know what to say.

"……Wh-what are you talking about?" she said after a long silence. "How am I not filthy? Can you not see how cloudy my coloring is?"

"……? It's a very pretty color!" Umidori said, puzzled. "I mean, I guess it's not quite the same color as other vegetable oils, but I think it's actually pretty cool. It's like…I can see the measure of all the time you and Kudo spent together."

"……! ~~~~~~~~ ! Y-you must be lying!" Saladette shrieked. "Y-you can't mean that!"

"……Why do you think I'm lying, Saladette?"

“……I-I mean, I’m *expired*?!” Saladette’s voice had taken on the tone of a child on the verge of tears. “M-my vegetable oil lifespan has come and gone! I’m good for nothing, sustained only by Ryoko’s kindness! And yet all I’m actually doing is ruining her life!

“I can’t take that! I’m so ashamed. I hate myself! All this time, I’ve known I had to go away……! I’m a disgusting monster, and she’s better off without me!”

“……Saladette,” Kudo gasped, gaping at her.

Likely the first time she’d heard what her oil *really* felt.

“……”

“That must have been so hard, Saladette,” Umidori said, gently. “But no matter what you say, I don’t think you’re gross. You’re a normal girl, beautiful inside and out. And that fact won’t change no matter what you say, Saladette. You see—I can’t lie.”

“……!” That phrase proved the final blow, and Saladette just started sobbing. “W-wahhhhh! Wahhhhhhhhhhhh〰〰〰〰〰〰〰〰〰”

For a while, that was the only sound.

She was vegetable oil and could not actually shed tears.

But every girl knew these sobs were genuine.

8
Bullshit-chan Feasts

“……Hngg?”

Umidori’s room.

Bullshit-chan was laid out in bed when her eyes snapped open.

“……Um?” she sat up, looking around. “……? When did I fall asleep?”

“Ah, she’s up,” said a voice to one side.

Bullshit-chan jumped and turned to look. A blue-haired girl was standing next to the bed.

“……Huh?” Bullshit-chan squeaked, looking her over. “……? Wh-who are you?!”

“……I suppose this *is* the first time we’ve spoken, Bullshit-chan-san,” the girl said, fixing Bullshit-chan with her fiercest glare. “Let me begin with this: We may be living together, but that doesn’t mean I’m about to get all chummy! In your dreams, toots!”

“……?”

“Oh, Bullshit-chan!” Umidori said, popping her head out of the washroom. “Good, you’re up! Well? You feeling all right?”

“……Umidori?” Bullshit-chan wailed, turning to her. “……! H-help me out here! Who is this blue girl?! A friend from work?!”

“Ohhh,” Umidori said, like she really didn’t want to explain. “Uh… I’ll give you the long version eventually! Bullshit-chan, for now, just move to the table.”

“……The table?”

“Yep. If you’re not ready, we’ll never get this show on the road.”

“……??”

Bullshit-chan was only getting more lost, but armed with a clear directive, she got out of bed and moved to the round table.

—On which was a clock, indicating 2 AM.

“T-two AM?!” she yelped, horrified. “Wh-why is it so late?! Where did the time go?!”

“Uh, I am sorry about that, Bullshit-chan.”

Yet another girl’s voice came from right beside her.

“Raising a huge commotion at this late hour is hardly civil, but the situation being what it is, we had to get it done with. Bear with us.”

“……Hng?”

“And I should say this now: What you’re about to do for me is a debt I’ll spend the rest of my life repaying. I hope we can be firm friends, Bullshit-chan.”

“……”

Bullshit-chan was staring back at her, even more confused.

On the receiving end of her gaze—a bob cut kimono girl.

“……Uh, huh? Who are *you*?”

“……Um, Bullshit-chan, I’d love to introduce them both,” Umidori said, smiling awkwardly, “but it’s very late, so can we get down to business?”

“……? What business?” Bullshit-chan asked, tilting her head.

An oversized soup bowl was placed before her, filled with a viscous fluid.

Vegetable oil.

“Drink up, Bullshit-chan!”

“……Wut?”

◇◇◇◇

“……Hmph.”

Seeing Kudo, Umidori, and Togari (in Bullshit-chan) emerge from the limo, Seiryoin snorted once.

“I see. I’ve been rejected then, Kudo?”

Hurt lay at her feet, wrung out like a dishrag. Seiryoin stomped on her head once more, for good measure.

“……”

While Umidori had been talking Kudo and Saladette, Miser Clown had thoroughly trounced Hurt. She didn’t even try to get up—presumably out like a light.

“Yeah, sorry, Seiryoin,” Kudo said, scratching her cheek. “I decided to leave Saladette with them. Gonna need you to forget about that offer.”

“……Might I ask the reason?”

“Ain’t got one. Just felt right.”

“……”

“If I have to— The last few minutes made me fall head over heels for this Umidori lady. That’s why I’m going with her, really.

“But I do mean sorry, Seiryoin. You didn’t do a damn thing wrong, so I hate to be mean about it, but I got no business with you. Get on home.”

“……I suppose I should,” Seiryoin said, her smile not fading. “The mission I was given was simply to scout prospective talent. If that offer is refused, then my task is complete. Taking out Hurt and Bullshit-chan was never part of my job here.”

“……”

“……But remember this, Kudo: as long as that kitten remains our enemy, I may do *this* to Saladette the next time we meet. And I will not hear one word of rancor from you on the matter.”

“……Fair enough,” Kudo said, nodding.

“……” Seiryoin’s gaze slid away from Kudo. “One thing, Umidori.”

“……Mm?” Umidori said, blinking back at her.

“Out of pure curiosity—are you the one who seduced Kudo?” she asked, looking Umidori right in the eye. “If you so, you’re quite a woman. I’m even more keen to know just *who* you really are.”

“……Um.”

“Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee! Don’t give me that look, Umidori. I won’t say one word about you to Mud Hat. For now, I’ll be leaving—but sometime soon, the two of us should have a nice long chat.”



I never did figure out that Seiryoin lady’s deal, Umidori thought, remembering the events that had taken place mere hours ago. *We didn’t even uncover what lie she was telling. Let’s hope this didn’t earn me unwarranted attention…*

"……*Hah, hah, hah.*"

—Next to Umidori…

Bullshit-chan was plowing through her meal, sweat running down her brow.

"……*Hoo, hee, haa!*"

"……Um, you doing all right, Bullshit-chan?" Umidori asked, concerned. "You don't need to force it all down at once. You can rest and drink some water!"

The soup bowl full of vegetable oil was *not* the only thing on the table.

The vast majority of the space was filled with Chinese food.

Gyoza, *tenshindon*, sweet and sour pork, pepper steak…any and every dish you'd find in any Japanese–Chinese restaurant. The smell was to die for.

"……*Hoo, hah.*"

But despite the scrumptious buffet, Bullshit-chan's breathing was ragged. The hand that held her spoon was quivering.

"Heads up! More incoming!"

Thnk!

Yet another dish landed in front of Bullshit-chan.

Ground pork, diced tofu, leeks—a mouthwatering heap of mapo tofu.

"Let me add the spice!" Ryoko Kudo said, holding her palms out to the dish she'd just brought. "Here goes!"

As she spoke, she scattered pencil shavings on top of the dish.

"…… ~~~~~~~~ !!"

Bullshit-chan had been on the verge of death already, yet somehow managed to turn a shade paler.

"Ha-ha-ha! What a wide world! Pencil toppings?! Whatever for? I'd rather die than eat this myself! Umidori, you're seriously fucked in the head!"

Kudo went back into the kitchen laughing merrily, humming happily to herself, ready to cook another dish. She was pleased as punch to be cooking for someone again.

"……!" Bullshit-chan steeled herself and began shoveling the pencil-laden mapo tofu into her mouth. "……"

"……B-Bullshit-chan."

"……Not another word, Umidori," she managed, sounding ready to cry. "You've filled me in! I know what happened today. I'm well

aware this ‘Pencilrific Chinese full-course dinner with a side of vegetable oil’ trial in front of me is neither bullying nor hazing, but a necessary procedure to save both Togari and Saladette.”

“……”

“Heh, I still can’t believe it. One minute I was getting ready to cook tempura and felt dizzy, then the world faded before my eyes. And the next thing I know, our second fallicide is complete.”

She choked down some more mapo tofu, as if refusing to let it defeat her.

“Heh-heh…heh-heh-heh-heh! All I did was sleep! Hurt had to carry me around! I was useless! Bullshit-chan didn’t even spew bullshit!”

Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Was she crying at her own inadequacies? Or was she just that opposed to eating this dish? Probably both, Umidori thought.

“Bullshit-chan, um, don’t blame yourself.”

“Pray, offer no comfort. No matter how useless I am, I’m still capable of *eating*. Arguably I should be thanking you for giving your most worthless player a chance to contribute with the cleanup!”

She seemed so despondent that Umidori resolved to offer no more half-hearted consolation.



It took a solid two hours before Bullshit-chan managed to consume all the vegetable oil and every one of the hundred pencils.



More time passed.

Soon enough, the sun would rise. Togari Tsukushigaoka was in the washroom of Umidori's apartment, staring at herself in the mirror.

"……Golly, I actually *am* real!" she muttered, patting her body all over. "Like a normal human girl! I mean, technically I'm part of Bullshit-chan-san's body, which is hardly normal…"

She was clearly pretty worked up, avidly inspecting herself, when an anxious look stole over her face.

"But are you sure about this? Do you really want to turn me into a flesh-and-blood girl? Was this really the right way for us to end things?

"I bet Umidori would be furious if I asked her any of those questions."

……

"Oh, Togari!" someone said. "There you are! I've been looking all over."

"……? Tougetsu?" Togari said. Umidori had joined her in the washroom. "Um? What? Weren't you asleep? It's almost sunrise!"

"I could say the same thing. But, Togari, do you have a minute?"

"……?"

"Of course you do. This won't take long. Stand right here by the mirror."

As she rattled this off, Umidori pulled her phone out of her pocket and pulled up the camera app, pointing the lens at the mirror.

"Huh? Wait, Tougetsu, why are you…?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm making a video letter! To send to Nara in Asahikawa."

"……? To Yoshino?"

"Exactly. Nara, are you watching?" Umidori suddenly got extra bright and cheery, waving at the mirror. "Well? Having fun with

the fam in Asahikawa? I got big news! A girl I want to introduce you to, Nara!”

Here, she grabbed Togari and pulled her in close.

“This girl’s a personification of those pencils!”

“—?!” Togari gaped up at Umidori, stunned stupid. “W-wait, you’re just gonna lay that out there, Tougetsu?!”

“……? I mean, it’s the truth,” Umidori said, giving her a quizzical look. “Um, wait, did you want to keep that secret from Nara?”

“……No, that’s not the problem.”

“Then what is? Nara’s gonna find out sooner or later. C’mon, Togari! Wave at the mirror!”

“……?”

But Togari stayed frozen to the spot, her head spinning.

“Um, seriously! Wait, Tougetsu—what is this about?”

“……? What’s what about?”

“You don’t have to send her this video letter *now*!” Togari wailed, eyes on Umidori’s reflection. “I mean, imagine how Yoshino will feel when she gets it. She wakes up in the morning in a hotel and gets this nonsense video—all you’ll do is make her head spin.”

“……Uh, well, that’s true.”

“Right? This is something she’s better off learning face-to-face. It doesn’t matter *when* you tell Yoshino about me. No need to take care of it right away.”

“……I gotta disagree.”

“……Mm?”

“This is about whether we tell her. I’ve gotta send Nara a video letter right now,” Umidori said, suddenly very intense. “There’s no point doing it tomorrow! I need to have it on record I told her *today*. Even if you object, I can’t bend on this.”

“……??”

“Uh, so there you have it, Nara!” Umidori said, looking back at the mirror. “Togari’s still fretting, so we’ll have to fill you in on the details of this incident tomorrow. Let me just say this right here.

“I’ve decided to bring *her* along, too.”

“……Huh?”

“No matter what anyone says to me, I’m not letting her go,” Umidori said, looking straight at the mirror. “Any future happiness I might have will have *both* of you in it. Nara—you’ll

just have to accept that. You’re gonna have to embrace Togari’s existence like I did.”





“……!”

Umidori pulled Togari in tight as she spoke, and Togari stiffened in shock.

“……T-Tougetsu!”

She’d never imagined anything like this.

After a moment, she put on her best serious face.

“I’m sorry, Tougetsu. We should start this video letter over.”

“……Huh?”

“I want to greet Yoshino properly, from my own two lips. Tell her I’m going to be living with you from now on.

“Tell her that I’m never letting you go, Tougetsu.”

And thus, people and things settled into their rightful places.

Tougetsu Umidori had pulled off her second fallicide.

AFTERWORD

This is the most I have ever typed the phrase “vegetable oil” into my computer in my life. I’m Kaeru Ryouseirui, and I’m back! Thank you very much for reading.

The Road Traffic Act gets brought up in this volume, but I’m actually a terrible driver. More like I just hate it. I got my license years ago but haven’t touched a steering wheel in two or three years. I tried the other day and couldn’t even get out of the parking lot of my home.

Why do I hate it so much? Mostly because you can’t afford a single mistake. It’s the polar opposite of writing novels. Writing is essentially a series of mistakes! All the blunders you make one day can be corrected the next (naturally, this is while you’re still working; you can’t allow any errors to make it into the final product). That makes it relaxing in a way driving will never be. You only need to cause one accident, and it’s all over! That alone makes me too reluctant to even try. I’m opposed to the very notion.

Sometimes you see people who claim to drive for *fun*. I cannot fathom that state of mind. Are they not scared of crashing?! Everyone says you’ve gotta pay attention to traffic around you while focusing on controlling your own vehicle, but is that not a tall order?! Even while I was attending driving school, I could not persuade myself to have a positive outlook on the process. It took me a full ten months to complete the course. I’m convinced I’m better off staying away from cars for the rest of my life. And since I’ve avoided driving so thoroughly, my license record is squeaky clean!

Now for some salutations. To my editor, I once more caused you no end of headaches.

Natsuki Amashiro, I’m sure the schedule this time was even more brutal than the first, but you designed five new characters, and they’re all exquisite. My personal favorite has got to be Kudo. This is a work utterly devoid of anything resembling the current vogue, so your art alone is our lifeline—please keep reeling us in.

Finally, a hearty thanks to everyone involved in printing and sales.

That will be all! Hoping we’ll meet again, I bid you all farewell.

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